

Michelle Obama's Legacy

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“When they go low, we go high”

— Michelle Obama, 2016 Democratic National Convention

Heralded by some as the “forever first lady,” Michelle Obama represents myriad things for Americans in the era of Donald Trump. For some, she is the epitome of grace, elegance, and courage. For others, Michelle Obama is an angry black woman who hates America. How can one woman embody different reactions from Americans? One simple response would be the intense partisan nature of contemporary politics. However, a deeper analysis would reveal that an intersectional approach is necessary to understand how Michelle Obama is perceived by Americans as well as how she sees herself. Her legacy is complicated, and therefore it requires political scientists to untangle the messy roles of race, class, gender, motherhood, presidential politics, public opinion, and (black) feminism in their analysis of Michelle Obama.

This special issue of *Politics & Gender* undertakes such an analysis. Within these pages, authors pay particular attention to the intersectional intricacies that have marked Michelle Obama's years in the White House and beyond. To set the stage for this issue, this introduction provides some context to Michelle Obama and why she is a worthwhile subject for political analysis and discussion.

The unelected position of first lady has evolved over the years to become one of leadership and decision-making (Scharer and Bissell 2000). As an institution, the role of the first lady is based on accumulated precedents and audience perceptions, and it is dependent on elite and popular expectations (Wekkin 2000). Furthermore, the first ladyship wields a form of soft power that is significant for conveying policy preferences, international affairs, and public opinion (Zhang 2017). How the first lady's identity is constructed is instrumental in how she is able to leverage this soft power. As the first black first lady, Michelle Obama's

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race/gender identity — among other politically salient identities — has influenced every aspect of the traditional measures of how scholars assess the first lady's influence and power.

The current role of the first lady as “activist political partner” (Watson 1997) is relatively remarkable given the foundational institution of the role, which dates back to Martha Washington's inaugural position as first lady in 1789. Women were not permitted to vote until 1920, and African Americans were effectively barred from the franchise until 1965. Thus, the formal political influence of black women in general and of Michelle Obama in particular is noteworthy given the *de jure* and *de facto* limitations placed on this group. As first lady, Michelle Obama had an influence on the institution of the first lady cannot be diminished. In a time when black women's political power is being acknowledged, it is also necessary to recognize the historical and present-day constraints placed on black women as political actors (Brown 2014). While the role of the first lady in the modern era has been marked by increasing influence and activism, largely as a result of the professionalization and integration of the first lady's office with the Office of the President, Michelle Obama's identity as a black woman has attracted attention perhaps more so than her initiatives as first lady (Williams 2009).

Some may be familiar with Michelle Obama's background. She is a descendant of slaves, grew up on the South Side of Chicago raised by working-class parents, earned two degrees from Ivy League institutions, and served as an associate in a white shoe law firm as well as an executive at a premier hospital. Although she has challenged depictions of the stereotypical black woman, Michelle Obama has been painted as angry, sassy, unpatriotic, and uppity by her critics (Williams 2009). Indeed, these prevailing stereotypes of black womanhood are anything but ladylike (Collins 2000). Michelle Obama's accomplishments in her own right make her exceptional for many. For most, she was overqualified to hold an unelected position that does not have a constitutionally defined job description. Yet for others, she was unworthy and posed a threat to the institution of the first lady (Kantor 2008).

Much of the consternation around Michelle Obama occupying the White House emanates from the shifting views of womanhood and the changing status of (black) women in society that she embodied. While some celebrated this change and signal of hope in a society that could overcome racist, white supremacist ideologies, practices, and sexism, others saw Michelle Obama's role of first lady as a challenge to the current white heteropatriarchal social order as something to be feared

(Williams 2009). As such, Michelle Obama's legacy is complicated, messy, and uneasy.

Indeed, Michelle Obama struggles with aspects of her legacy as well. She notes in her recent memoir, *Becoming*, that she is deeply uncomfortable with politics. Yet she is a political force. She took on issues that were important to her — often related to her role as “mom-in-chief” — by focusing on the needs of children, particularly girls. Michelle Obama's Let's Move! Campaign targeted childhood obesity, while the Reach Higher Initiative and Let Girls Learn programs largely impacted needy families and minorities. She invited a 15-year-old girl who was shot in Chicago to perform at Barack Obama's second inauguration, which was largely seen as a political acknowledgment of the devastation that gun violence causes to America's youth.

These initiatives recognize the enduring role of race, class, and gender in American society, yet Michelle Obama and the White House did not publicly celebrate these programs as a way to tackle racism, sexism, or classism. These “isms” are things that Michelle Obama has confronted throughout her life as well as in the White House, but they do not define her. Michelle Obama's legacy may be her graceful and tactful manner in addressing the manifestations of America's undying prejudices.

As the quote in the epigraph notes, Michelle Obama aims to “go high” and stay above the political fray. Perhaps she will be best remembered for attempting to challenge America's restrictive conceptualizations of black womanhood and the institution of the first lady by being elegant in the face of adversity. In a November 2018 interview with *Good Morning America's* Robin Roberts, Michelle Obama responded to a question about what she would tell her pre-White House self: “There were people who didn't know what a black woman was and sounded like. . . . I knew that I'd have to earn my grace.”¹ This “earned” grace is part of Michelle Obama's legacy. A black woman, the “forever first lady,” has (re)defined the first ladyship in a way that epitomizes style, elegance, and, perhaps most importantly, grace.

I am grateful to Mary Caputi and the authors in this volume who believed that *Politics & Gender* should devote an entire symposium to a black woman. As remarkable as Michelle Obama is, this issue also moves beyond the singular view of one woman to show how black feminism and intersectionality are useful theoretical and/or methodological tools

1. The interview transcript can be found at <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/culture/story/transcript-gma-anchor-robin-roberts-interviews-lady-michelle-59127771> (accessed June 4, 2019).

for *all* gender and politics scholars. Centering a black woman in the pages of the flagship journal of our subfield signals the importance and legitimacy of black women's politics. It is my sincere desire that other scholars will follow the lead of *Politics & Gender* and find ways to include understudied and undertheorized subgroups as a subject worthy of in-depth political analysis in their own work.

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