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The Cult of First Ladyhood: Controlling Images of White Womanhood in the Role of the First Lady

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In recent decades, scholars have begun to analyze the role of the first lady in American society. Though the relationship between gender ideologies and this identity has been analyzed, little attention has been paid to how other aspects of the first ladies' identities could shape the way the public and the first ladies themselves view their role. In this article, we offer an intersectional analysis that considers historical notions of hegemonic femininity in relation to race. We assert that the role of the first lady is a raced-gendered institution that produces a controlling image of white womanhood that simultaneously privileges white femininity and subordinates black womanhood. We conduct an analysis of the autobiographies of six first ladies: Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, "Lady Bird" Johnson, Rosalynn Carter, Hillary Clinton, and Michelle Obama.

Keywords: Intersectionality, first ladies, Michelle Obama, hegemonic femininity, gender roles, white womanhood

The role of the first lady in American politics has changed over time, from being primarily the nation's hostess and loyal, supportive wife to becoming a political partner who pursues her own charitable, social, and civic initiatives. It is fairly uncontroversial to assert that the role of the first lady is gendered, as evidenced by her public image. Studies show that while presidential wives have public identities that exist

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independent of their husbands, Americans respond most favorably to those first ladies who best conform to hegemonic femininity and engage in domestic sphere activities (Burrell, Elder, and Frederick 2011). The notion of being a "wife" carries with it assumptions about behavior, and those assumptions are amplified by the power and public exposure of the office of the president. What has gone largely unrecognized, however, is that the expectations of a "wife," particularly the wife of the president of the United States, and the expectations of a "lady" are influenced by another axis of identity — in this case, a racial identity. Michelle Obama's assumption of the first ladyship brought to the forefront the intersection of race and gender, as well as the political contexts in which first ladies comment on their role and through which spectators come to understand them.

First ladies today are partisan and ideological symbols who can take on unusually active roles on the campaign trail, as they appear in advertisements, travel with their spouses, deliver introductions at major events, and speak on their spouse's behalf. Take, for example, Michelle Obama's 2008 stump speech. She asserted, "I shouldn't be here" (Mundy 2009, 13). This statement cannot refer to the fact that she is a woman, as every occupant of the first lady role (whether the president's actual wife or not) has been a woman. Although she was one of the most highly educated first ladies in U.S. history, with two Ivy League degrees, several of the first ladies who came before her had master's or professional degrees from other Ivy League and elite institutions. The differentiating factor for Obama was that her first ladyship was historic on account of her blackness. Each woman who occupied the role of first lady before her was a white woman. Being outside the norm in this way, Obama occupied a state of "otherness" or outsider status by her own admission (Obama 2018, 284). While her statement suggests that whiteness is a prerequisite for the post, it simultaneously reinforces and resists other identity constraints imposed by the position — for example, benchmarks for defining white privilege, such as wealth and higher education (to which the vast majority of African Americans have been denied equal access).

To illustrate the function of this role as a raced-gendered institution, we move the discussion of first ladies beyond a single axis of identity — gender — and adopt an intersectional approach for the purpose of understanding the capacity in which they serve. We assert that the role of the first lady is a raced-gendered institution that reinforces hegemonic femininity and yields a controlling image of white womanhood that subordinates black

womanhood. We further contend that the institution is raced-gendered not merely as a result of societal expectations and traditional beliefs but because the white women who occupy the role of first lady conform to hegemonic femininity and reinforce racial stereotypes that intersect with other identity categories, such as class and sexual orientation.

It is imperative that we investigate whether the first ladies (until Michelle Obama) benefited from their whiteness, given there are standards that only some women may achieve — for example, being middle class, heterosexual, and white is the normative yardstick by which all women who occupy the White House are measured. This article is organized by the role of the first lady, advancing a typology derived from the literature. Using autobiographies, Mary Anne Borrelli (2002) identifies several roles in which first ladies serve: nation's hostess, presidential protector, public symbol, and political partner. This typology is central to the present study. We provide illustrative examples of these roles as described by the first ladies in their autobiographies. Along the way, we offer an intersectional analysis for the purpose of determining whether certain notions of race and gender inform the first lady's framing of her role, as do class and heterosexuality. We use autobiographical data to assess whether this framing is congruent or incongruent with raced-gendered stereotypes that intersect with a matrix of oppression and whether they reify a controlling image of white womanhood.

INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS: A FRAMEWORK FOR RACIALIZING THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST LADY

Race has been introduced as a consideration in much of the scholarship on gendered institutions — see, for example, the work of Mary Hawkesworth (2003) on Congress and legislative policy outcomes. Theorists of gendered institutions have shown how institutional and organizational practices propagate and reproduce discriminatory cultural practices, images, and norms (Hawkesworth 2003). Hawkesworth uses the term "racing-gendering" to "foreground the intricate interactions of racialization and gendering in the political production of distinctive groups of men and women" (2003, 531). Using this framework, the role of the first lady can be seen as a raced-gendered institution that reproduces and reinforces images of idealized white womanhood in America. The entrenched methods by which those images manifest become visible through the enforcement and performance of the roles

that each first lady must fulfill to satisfy the expectations of the position. Each of these roles can be seen as an essential attribute of the "controlling image" of white womanhood, which is juxtaposed with and against controlling images of black womanhood (Collins 1990). Controlling images are socially constructed symbols that have come to represent marginalized groups, particularly women of color in the United States (Collins 1990; Jewell 1993).

In this article, we recognize the roles performed by the first ladies as essential to reinforcing a controlling image specific to white womanhood while also maintaining hierarchies of femininity across other social categories such as race, class, and sexual orientation. There are many examples of controlling images of white women throughout American history. For example, Barbara Welter (1966, 151) in her essay "The Cult of True Womanhood" delineates four characteristics that defined the image of the "true woman" between 1820 and 1860: purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness. Without satisfying these requirements, Welter asserts, one was not considered a true woman, and because this image of the true woman served to reinforce racial privilege and gendered oppression, it can be seen as a controlling image. Although this controlling image was created to keep white women subordinate to men in the white supremacist–patriarchal hierarchy, the image of the true woman was also constructed to subordinate black women to white women. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham analyzes the ways in which race, gender, and class precluded black women from this ideal. She states,

> The interplay of the race-class conflation with gender evoked very different social perceptions of black and white women's work roles . . . In contrast to the domestic ideal for white women of all classes, the larger society deemed it "unnatural," in fact an "evil" for black married women to "play the lady" while their husbands supported them . . . the role of menial worker outside their homes was demanded of black women, even at the cost of physical coercion. (1992, 259–50)

As the literature hints, ties can be made between hegemonic femininity and the first lady as an institution with an explicit focus on race *and* gender, especially with the tenure of Michelle Obama, the first black first lady (Brown 2013; Harris-Perry 2011; McAlister 2009; Meyers and Gorman 2017; Persuit and Brunson 2015; Tate 2012; Williams 2009). An appraisal of the literature on Michelle Obama as both a presidential candidate's spouse and a first lady suggests that she was held to two standards for maintaining an appropriately feminine demeanor, one

physical and the other behavioral, which were consistent with the normative yardstick by which all women who occupy the office are measured — white, middle class, and heterosexual, without career ambitions or political agendas, as well as avoidant of controversies. As Michelle Obama received a level of criticism — bordering on hostility — from political opponents, several examples before and after the 2008 presidential election warrant mention: the patriotism gaffe; the July 28, 2008, *New Yorker* and March 2009 *Vogue* magazine covers; the "mom-in-chief" moniker (to the chagrin of white feminists); and Obama's "Let's Move!" initiative.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON MICHELLE OBAMA

While scholarship on Michelle Obama is still developing, one productive line of inquiry has emerged for those studying visual imagery and public relations. Marian Meyers and Carmen Gorman (2017) focus on the ways in which mainstream news and entertainment outlets have portrayed Michelle Obama with the goal of creating a more acceptable public persona, including communication strategies employed by the White House to undermine conservative efforts to label her an unpatriotic, stereotypical "Angry Black Woman" (Brown 2013; Mortenson 2015; Persuit and Brunson 2015). The varied reactions of conservative news pundits to Obama's public statements regarding patriotism, and the *New Yorker* and *Vogue* magazine covers, signal the extent to which white racial attitudes have shaped American public opinion toward Michelle Obama, as scholars have observed a pattern of coverage that contrasts with traditional expectations of first ladies (Brown 2013; Harris-Perry 2011; Hayden 2017; Knuckey and Kim 2016; McAlister 2009; Tate 2012; Williams 2009).

Shirley Tate (2012) argues that the fetishizing of Michelle Obama's body parts (arms and bottom) in photographic images magnifies her physical difference and that those attributes correlate with the aesthetics valued during slavery — for example, her muscular, well-sculpted biceps connote strength versus fragility or genteel femininity, which is associated with white womanhood. Others, such as Sara Hayden (2017), contend that the white feminist criticism leveled against Michelle Obama for claiming the moniker "mom-in-chief" fails to consider how Obama's choice to prioritize motherhood over career is consistent with a black feminist perspective, which advocates a more complex

understanding of reproductive rights that includes the right to intensive mothering on account of the ways in which black women's reproductive lives were regulated during slavery.

Additionally, Michelle Obama was criticized by feminists for her Let's Move! initiative to combat childhood obesity because the standards for feminine beauty correlate with the ability to achieve a body that meets societal approval through a regime of diet and exercise. Given that women in the United States are judged by their physical appearance more so than men, female bodies and the way women work them are important criteria for evaluating femininity in accordance with a normative standard that only some women and girls may achieve. Such a health initiative serves to reinforce a standard of beauty that correlates with whether women are physically attractive or not on account of body size — for example, a slim versus a full-figured woman is considered the most attractive and, by virtue of this attribute, also the most feminine.

Still, a gap in the literature remains. Assuming that we are correct in our estimation that the role of the first lady is a raced-gendered institution, we offer a rich comparative analysis aimed at theory building with race and gender as well as other axes of identity at the fore that advances our understanding of the first lady as a controlling image of white womanhood. Herein lies our innovation: if racial and gendered images of black womanhood influenced the way in which the American public perceived Michelle Obama, would it not then follow that racial and gendered images of white womanhood and hegemonic femininity influenced the way in which every first lady before her was received? Since all first ladies until Michelle Obama were white women who stood to benefit from conforming to these images, did they have a hand in perpetuating racist and gendered images of idealized white womanhood, given the way their differentiated roles opposite the president were generally defined and acted on by themselves? That said, we recognize the ways prevailing gender norms that assign some attributes to men and others to women, at best, are stifling and reflect conformity on the part of first ladies and, at worst, reflect complicity on their part. In both instances, however, the president benefits most directly from their performance in respective roles, while at the same time, first ladies are subject to the constraints imposed by the office (Wertheimer 2015).

While this article examines the function of racial privilege within the role of the first lady, it does not aim to discount the gendered oppression faced by each woman who has held this office. It has been repeatedly

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demonstrated that white first ladies have had to contend with misogyny, dismissal, sexualization, and demonization for their perceived incongruence with established white heterosexual, patriarchal norms (Anderson 1999; Anthony 1990–91; Campbell 1996; Gutin 1989; Jamieson 1995; Wekkin 2000). Rather, we recognize that the autobiographies studied serve as pieces of rhetoric in which each first lady both conforms and protests the societal confines imposed on her by the white supremacist–patriarchal structure. This article examines these protests and confirmations and theorizes how they fit within the continued perpetuation of a raced-gendered institution.

We recognize that much is intentionally left out of these autobiographies that could be captured in news media, diaries, and the like, and we encourage scholars to build on this work. This article fills a gap in the literature that fails to consider the first lady as an institution that upholds interlocking systems of oppression through the social construction of a controlling image that establishes white womanhood as the norm by which women of color are judged and found lacking the attributes of a "lady."

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SYSTEMATIC INQUIRY

In this article, we explore whether the role of the first lady is a raced-gendered institution that produces a controlling image of white womanhood and whether the first ladies act as agents who reinforce this institution over time despite ongoing contestation. We answer this question inductively by analyzing the autobiographies of selected Democratic first ladies, demonstrating the extent and consequences of whiteness for the first ladyship generally. Along the way, we offer an important corrective to the presumption that Democratic first ladies are most progressive. Several well-researched and useful accounts of first ladies have been anecdotal and based on interviews and personal autobiographies as well as collections of letters. It is the former rather than the latter that constitutes the source material used here to analyze first ladies' framing of their duties and roles within the executive branch. Arguably the most advanced area of research on first ladyship has focused on first ladies' roles generally and the typology advanced here specifically.

Like past researchers, we selected first ladies who have written and published autobiographies about their time as first lady. The first ladies analyzed are Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, "Lady Bird" Johnson, Rosalynn Carter, Hillary Clinton, and Michelle Obama. We limited our

selection to first ladies of Democratic presidents to curtail partisan influence. Although first ladies from the nineteenth century could also prove interesting case studies, none of those first ladies released autobiographies. The fact that these women represent tenures in office spanning the twentieth century also affords us an extensive period of time in which to analyze the public identity of the first lady.

Autobiographies were chosen because they are direct, firsthand accounts from the first ladies in which they discuss justifications for the choices they made, as well as their "perspectives and interpretations" on the events of their lives, which are inherent in the autobiographical genre (Borrelli 2002, 356). A rich source of information, the words of first ladies can be found in their autobiographies. These are an invaluable resource for analysis of whether the first ladies are reproducing ideas consistent or inconsistent with racial and gendered ideologies in the context of their roles as first ladies.

The rhetorical elements of these autobiographies cannot be discounted. Although these are not statements contemporary to the events they discuss or the perceptions of news media, these autobiographies are carefully crafted firsthand accounts from the first ladies that represent the ways in which they navigated the symbolic roles of femininity and the traditionally white male political sphere (Campbell 1998; Muir and Benitez 1996). These autobiographies are "public, discursive performances" that "are targeted to specific and mass audiences and are restricted and/or empowered by gender ideology and institutional prescriptions" (Parry-Giles and Blair 2002, 567).

Given that these are political autobiographies, it is common that these accounts will be curated and polished to a degree that contemporary public statements are not. However, this curation represents how the first ladies conceived of a favorable view of the first ladyship as a role and image. Since the first ladyship is "a function of which established precedents the first lady chooses to adopt and follow" (Wekkin 2000, 602), identifying the ways in which the autobiographies are curated to idealize each first lady's persona could illuminate the ways in which the image of the first lady is constructed to reinforce racial and gendered ideologies to the public and future first ladies.

We used four categorical types identified by Borrelli (2002) to define the roles of the first lady: nation's hostess, president's protector, public symbol, and political partner. Borrelli arrives at these attributes through empirical tests of a coding schema taken from the secondary literature on first ladies' autobiographies, showing that these attributes represent not only

what scholars have deemed relevant to the role of the first lady but also what the first ladies themselves deemed relevant (Borrelli 2002, 359). The first author closely read each autobiography from start to finish for instances in which each first lady recounts her experience in any one of these roles. As she found statements discussing one of these roles, the first author excerpted the quotation for later analysis.

For *nation's hostess*, the first author extracted any text that references the first lady tending to the White House, hosting social events, or otherwise overseeing the upkeep and entertainment that takes place in the White House. For *president's protector*, she located any text that references the first lady acting "from a concern for the person of the president" (Borrelli 2002, 362) regarding things such as his health, his work-life balance, his well-being, his reputation, and her perceived duties as his wife. For *public symbol*, the first author selected any text in which the first lady recognizes her own reputation; discusses her role as one of the nation's leading women, wives, and mothers; or asserts that she is a representative of the president's administration or her own agenda. The first author identified references made by the first ladies to their own political activities and considered how the first lady in question frames them in reference to her status as a public symbol and her place in the administration. For *political partner*, the first author analyzed any text in which the first lady discusses her "engagement and consultation" (Borrelli 2002, 365) with the president on political matters regarding speeches, campaigning, and legislation. The first author captured text in which the first lady confirms or denies any of these roles.

After identifying the text in which the first lady discusses these attributes of her public identity, we analyzed the text through an intersectional lens, paying close attention to the interaction of racial and gendered expectations. The use of frameworks such as the "cult of true womanhood" (Welter 1966) and hegemonic femininity (Collins 2004) to analyze whether the first ladies upheld notions of white womanhood was essential to the project. Patricia Hill Collins's (2004) delineation of hegemonic femininity — middle class, heterosexual, white, weak, not like men (in appearance and in behavior), beautiful, submissive, and married mother (or aiming to be) — is an explicit definition of white womanhood, as she denotes whiteness as one of the tenets. However, Welter's (1966) framework of womanhood — purity, piety, domesticity, and submissiveness — is presented as a framework for analyzing all women. Welter's classification has also been recognized as exclusive to white women, given the legacies of black women's enslavement. During

slavery and after emancipation, black women were deemed impious, impure, dominant, and unable to be domestic in their own homes (Giddings 1996; Glymph 2008; Higginbotham 1992; Welke 1995). We adapted the established scholarship on existing images of white womanhood and black womanhood to assess whether the first ladies' framing of their roles reinforced controlling images of white womanhood that privileged or subordinated black womanhood.

Here we do not aim to posit the sole reasoning behind the way each first lady, and the first ladies as a group, chose to fulfill their roles. We instead aim to explore the idea that the role of the first lady is a raced-gendered institution constructed by the repeated fulfillment and public framing of established roles, which produce a controlling image of white womanhood. By examining the first ladies' autobiographies, we attempt to tease out their level of compliance or the degree to which they act as agents by virtue of their own conformity in upholding a cultural tradition that privileges whiteness and maleness.

In the next sections, we focus on the roles drawn from Borrelli's (2002) work: nation's hostess, president's protector, political partner, and public symbol. In each section, each role is shown to reflect historical constructions of racism and hegemonic femininity. A series of direct quotations show how the first ladies frame their fulfillment of the role. We analyze the differences between the first five first ladies' framing of their roles and Michelle Obama, as she is set apart.

NATION'S HOSTESS

Hostessing has long been an integral component of idealized white womanhood and hegemonic femininity. The ability to hostess in the manner indicated by the first five first ladies falls in line with the domesticity tenet of the "cult of true womanhood" during the Victorian era (Welter 1966). Domesticity mandates that women's role is central to the home, where they are "the highest adornment of civilization … supposed to keep busy at morally uplifting tasks" (Welter 1966, 164). By this definition, properly domestic women are charged with the aesthetic maintenance of the home and tending to the children. Excess education or labor outside the home is considered untenable for proper domesticity, as it detracts from domestic duties (Welter 1966).

Hostessing is the public-facing manifestation of domesticity (Glymph 2008). Additionally, the ability to hostess successfully contributes to the

perceived wealth and power of the family. The higher the status of a woman, the less likely she is to work outside the home, and the more likely she is to be a mother who is economically secure. This translates to the role of nation's hostess — that is, the ability of the first lady to hostess effectively contributes to the president's ability to engage in appropriately masculine behaviors of work and leadership in the public sphere, such as maintaining relationships with American officials and foreign dignitaries and furthering the administration's policy agenda.

This definition of domesticity, and its public-facing manifestation as the nation's hostess, was long achievable only by white women with the assistance and unacknowledged labor of women of color. From the slavery era through (at least) the first half of the twentieth century, women of color supported white women in the domestic sphere. In their role as domestic workers, black women performed such tasks as cooking, cleaning, and child care to support the white household, and they were exposed to sexual violence by male family members (Glymph 2008). Black women performed this labor to support their families economically, while many (but not all) white women relied on the income of their spouses to sustain them and their families. Such a role has definite class dimensions. Black women were deemed less feminine because they worked outside the home. Black women who performed domestic labor were caricatured as the "Mammy," a controlling image that depicts black women as servile laborers who are obedient to their white employers and aggressively defend the white family (Harris-Perry 2011; Jewell 1993; Jordan-Zachery 2009). Their life's work was to take care of a white family's children and tend to their home (Jewell 1993; Jordan-Zachery 2009). This is fundamentally incongruent with the depiction of the nation's hostess.

The other controlling image rooted in domestic labor for black women is the "Matriarch." While black women's nurturing of white families was romanticized, the nurturing of their own families was demonized, for example, by the Moynihan Report (Moynihan 1965). Black mothers were blamed for the emasculation of black men, the inability to care for their own children, and the poverty in which they lived (Jordan-Zachery 1991, 42–43). The image depicts black women as needing a "guiding white hand" to create a stable family and home (Jordan-Zachery 1991, 42). This image is also inherently incongruent with the depiction of the nation's hostess as described by the first five first ladies. To be the nation's hostess, the home must be presentable and beautiful, unlike the home of the Matriarch, and it has to be reassuringly familiar in a way

that essentially creates a disadvantage for homosexuals, divorced and single people, or anyone who does not fit the nuclear family mold. Such a role has definite heteronormative dimensions. The events held at the White House are intended to make the administration, which comes to represent a traditional nuclear "family," appear orderly and admirable. We now turn to the first lady's framing of the nation's hostess role.

Nation's Hostess: Exclusionary Ideal versus Opportunity for Inclusion

Every first lady in this study endorsed the role of the nation's hostess as part of the role of the first lady to some degree. The first five (white) first ladies (Wilson, Roosevelt, Johnson, Carter, Clinton) portray the act of hostessing within this framework of hegemonic femininity as a means of benefiting the administration and endorse it to some extent. Several express full acceptance of the role (Wilson, Johnson). Johnson, for example, explains that hostessing was not just her priority in her specific interpretation of the first lady's role but the priority of *all* women (Johnson 1970). In speaking about her preparations to come to the White House with Lyndon B. Johnson, she states,

> Mrs. Kennedy had asked me to come to the White House to discuss the house-keeping details, which any women moving out would talk over with any woman moving in. (Johnson 1970, 10)

The assertion that "any woman" would discuss details pertaining to the home implies that to be a woman, in Lady Bird's eyes, one must pay attention to the upkeep of the house. This is consistent with a traditional view of the role of a hostess. Although she does not express the idea in the same way as Johnson, Wilson displays a deep commitment to the role of hostessing as inherent in the role as first lady through tacit acceptance and a heavy emphasis on such activities.

The other first ladies, however, express qualified acceptance of the role, along with some frustration (Roosevelt, Carter, Clinton). Clinton exemplifies this tenuous relationship with the role of hostessing in her autobiography. Although she took on the hostessing duties, and publicly claimed that she did so, she expresses deep frustration that she would be viewed as only a hostess.

> It seemed that people could perceive me only as one thing or the other — either a hardworking professional woman or a conscientious and caring hostess . . . it was becoming clear to me that people who wanted me to fit

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> into a certain box, traditionalist or feminist, would never be entirely satisfied with me as me. (Clinton 2003, 130)

Although this is an expression of frustration, she recognizes and does not reject her role as the nation's hostess. Rather, she rejects that this role precludes her from influencing policy. She further explores this frustration, stating that she "was traditional in some ways and not in others . . . [she] never expected that the way [she] defined [her] role . . . would generate so much controversy" and goes on to assert that there was "nothing incongruous about [her] interests and activities" (Clinton 2003, 132).

These assertions and frustrations reflect white womanhood and racial privilege in two ways. Whereas Clinton believes that she was recognized as a "hardworking professional woman" and a "conscientious and caring hostess," she equates being a "hardworking professional woman" with being a "feminist." Although her frustration with being placed in a binary is palpable, this binary is accessible to white women alone. Although black women have worked to support their families for centuries in America, they are not stereotyped as the "hardworking professional woman" or "feminist" but rather as the Mammy or the Matriarch. The historical role of the nation's hostess is part of a naturalized social script constructed for the achievement of white women with the help of black women whose counterimages — the Mammy and the Matriarch — are diametrically opposed to this feminine ideal.

By performing this role, first ladies inhabit a position of power and privilege while they legitimate and reproduce hierarchal relationships that generate their dominance over black women in the domestic household within the confines of the White House. Black women are not seen as the "conscientious and caring hostess," as are white women who historically have relied on their labor for hosting. The financial burden that sent black women to work as domestics violated prevailing behavioral norms assigned to men and women in a heterosexual marital arrangement. By not being financially dependent on their husbands, black domestic workers seemingly usurped black male authority when their men experienced high rates of unemployment and underemployment that made it difficult to bring home a family wage. Arguably, Clinton's attempt to posit that being a "hardworking professional woman" is congruent with being "traditional" or a "hostess" grants white women greater access to work and leadership in the public

sphere. When considering the experiences of black women as domestic labor, it is important to consider the economic burdens and class disadvantages that make it difficult for them to achieve this role.

While Michelle Obama expresses acceptance of the role, she possesses a broader vision than previous first ladies in her efforts to welcome a more diverse audience reflecting the full spectrum of American people. Instead of focusing on the role as it related to hosting foreign dignitaries or diplomats, as did the other first ladies, she focused on making the White House more accessible to the American public:

> Over time, Barack and I would take steps in this direction, hanging more abstract art and works by African American artists on the walls, for example, and mixing contemporary furniture in with the antiques … Barack swapped out a bust of Winston Churchill and replaced it with a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. and gave the tuxedoed White House butlers the option of dressing more casually on days when there were no public events … When we hosted an event, I wanted everyday people to show up, not just those accustomed to black-tie attire. (Obama 2018, 309–10)

The complementary role that President Barack Obama assumed in these democratization efforts helped balance her role as the nation's hostess. She was neither the Matriarch who was "hard-driving and angry," nor was she "lacking a certain stridency" in serving an agenda that benefited the patriarch of the household (Obama 2018, 328). To that point, Obama began a leadership and mentoring program for twenty sophomore and junior girls from local high schools in Washington, D.C. They were invited to the White House for informal conversations, information sessions, and field trips each month. She describes the purpose of bringing these young women into the White House, as follows:

> My wish for them was … that in learning to feel comfortable at the White House, they'd go on to feel comfortable and confident in any room, sitting at any table, raising their voices inside any group. (Obama 2018, 357)

First ladies before Obama also went to great lengths to serve as positive role models for young women; however, none put such a programmatic emphasis on making the White House an open space for adolescent girls. One of the stated aims of this program was to instill the confidence that had empowered Obama herself, who acknowledges having asked herself "Am I good enough?" many times in several academic and professional settings (Obama 2018, 284). Through the establishment of this program and the assertion of the purpose to make the mentees

"comfortable and confident in any room," Obama subverted the raced-gendered White House traditions that were established for women and families unlike her own from white, middle-class backgrounds (Obama 2018, 356–57). Instead, she made a concerted effort to open the White House to young girls from military and immigrant families as well as homeless shelters.

PRESIDENT'S PROTECTOR

The role of the president's protector is defined by the action that the wife of the president takes to protect her husband from harm in all aspects of his life, from health and emotions to work and reputation (Borrelli 2002). This mandate to protect the husband and president is historically consistent with depictions of idealized white womanhood and hegemonic femininity, though not with depictions of black womanhood. The requirement of submissiveness in hegemonic femininity, in particular, is relevant to this role because the first lady is supposed to organize her daily tasks to revolve around the personal benefit of the president without any expectation of reciprocation. Submissiveness, fundamentally, is the requirement that women silence their intellect, desires, and suffering in all aspects of life when it comes to their relationships with men (Collins 2004; Welter 1966). The purpose of this submission is that the thoughts and desires of men are supported and that their suffering is remedied by women (Welter 1966). Submissiveness is also used as a distinction between men and women: men are to be aggressive and action oriented, while women are supposed to be dormant and reactionary (Collins 2004; Welter 1966). While submissiveness is manifestly passive, it also takes on the element of service because women are expected to submit their needs, thoughts, and desires to the purposes of tending to the needs, thoughts, and desires of men.

The role of the president's protector represents a double bind for white first ladies. Although they are expected to be the president's protector, to the extent that they are to tend to his physical, mental, and professional well-being, they also cannot be perceived as forcing their protection on the president. Any perception of emasculation of the president by the first lady would put the first lady at risk of being cast as a "bitch" or an uppity, vocal, or pushy woman (Anderson 1999, 602). It is important to note, however, that the controlling image of the bitch is used as containment

tactic to place women back within the normative pattern of behavior that is viewed as inherent in their gender and race — for example, silence, submission, and modesty (Anderson 1999).

On the other hand, black women have historically been depicted as aggressive and independent versus submissive (Jewell 1993; Collins 2004; Harris-Perry 2011; Jordan-Zachery 2009). Rather than having a controlling image that serves as a containment mechanism to keep them within a white, heterosexist patriarchal structure that benefits their whiteness, the controlling image of the "Sapphire" serves to exclude them from any societal benefit within established raced-gendered institutions. The Sapphire is, in effect, the president's protector, but she is demonized and pathologized to oppress women of color. The Sapphire is constructed in relationship to the "Kingfish," or the corrupt and cunning black man (Jordan-Zachery 2009, 41). She is meant to be his moral guide — in other words, his protection from himself. This is similar to the ways white women are supposed to look after white men — the same ways these first ladies describe watching over the president's physical and mental health, staffing choices, and political fallout of their personal sexual decisions. However, black women who take part in the same guidance are deemed Sapphires because, in the words of Julia Jordan-Zachery, "she is not passive or indirect enough according to American standards … she is a nag — the woman who cannot or will not stop talking" (2009, 41).

President's Protector: Implications at the Intersections

The role of the president's protector was adopted by all first ladies in this analysis. Though different first ladies focused on different objects of protection (health, mental state, political cover) and different ways of protecting (domestic duties, comforting, official work as first lady, internal advocacy), all note their engagement in these behaviors. All six first ladies frame their compliance with this role as a service to the president.

Wilson's engagement with this role was undoubtedly one of the most prominent of all the first ladies, given her husband's stroke while he was in office. However, even prior to his stroke, Edith Wilson conveyed her adherence to this role. In the midst of internal speculation as to whether a public announcement of President Wilson's and Edith's engagement would cause a scandal, Edith wrote to the president,

> This is my pledge, dearest one, I will stand by you — not for duty, not for pity, not for honour — but for love — trusting, protecting, comprehending love. And no matter whether the wine be bitter or sweet we will share it together and find happiness in the comradeship. (Wilson 1939, 77)

This statement was not made specifically in reference to her role as the first lady, but her promise to "stand by" the president foreshadowed her commitment to aiding her husband in his pursuits in their marriage. She often spoke of tasks she would perform to ease the schedule or the health of the president (Wilson 1939, 134–35, 243, 254, 300), such as committing to new forms of exercise that would benefit the president or cooking. However, it was at the end of the term that Edith's role as the president's protector became supremely important. In describing the last month of their time in the White House, which was not long prior to when President Wilson would pass away, Edith states,

> Our last month in the White House was a hectic one for me, not the least difficult of my responsibilities during these days of stress being to maintain about my husband the atmosphere of calm essential to his physical condition. (Wilson 1939, 314)

In addition to her hostessing responsibilities and serving as a liaison between the president, the public, and Congress, Edith was also ensuring an "atmosphere of calm" in the White House. In this pursuit, she was protecting not only the president's health but the potential public backlash if the state of his health had gone public. This level of protection, if public, would likely have caused Wilson to be viewed as "emasculating" the president. However, the protection persisted in the sanctity of privacy from public scrutiny.

Michelle Obama also took on the established and familiar role of president's protector. Rather than protecting him from ill health or bad political advice, she focused on providing a respite for her husband from the emotional and mental strain of the presidency. She confined her protection to her role in private, during family time between her and the president. She describes her active effort to keep politics out of their scheduled dinners:

> I tried in general to avoid [business] . . . every night. If I had an issue with something going on in the West Wing, I usually relied on my staff to convey it to Barack's, doing what I could to keep White House business out of our personal time. (Obama 2018, 325)

> In general, I hoped the time with me and the girls would always be a respite, even though work was forever close by. (Obama 2018, 346)

However, distinct from the other five first ladies of this analysis, Obama's protecting was always passive. She never describes going out of her way to intervene with staff to give the president more time with his family, actively suggesting changes for the purpose of promoting a healthy lifestyle, or protecting secrets about his health status. Her protection consisted of what she did *not* do — talk about politics in the domestic sphere. This is incredibly compliant with norms of domesticity and submissiveness, as we have described previously. Considering the risk that Michelle Obama faced of being typecast as a Sapphire, this behavior on her part is not surprising. Although the other five first ladies would have received backlash for appearing pushy or too forward in their defense of the president's time, their willingness to describe these actions in their autobiographies suggests that they perceived themselves as having more leeway with the public in their performance of these duties. Obama's autobiography, however, never strays from the notion that the only protecting she must do for the president is to show self-restraint.

The ways in which the white first ladies and Michelle Obama frame their role as the president's protector unsurprisingly reveal that this role is fundamentally constructed around the idealization of hegemonic femininity. When the first five first ladies describe their presidential protector duties in the context of service to their husband, they are complying with an expected behavior as white women and presumably benefit from their compliance with the dominant ideals of femininity. Even if they do not benefit in a tangible way in terms of favorable press coverage or high public approval ratings, we can infer that these first ladies believed they would benefit from such a public display of this type service, as they emphasize it their autobiographies. Approaching the duties of the same role, Michelle Obama frames her actions in such a way as not to comply with an expected ideal, but to undermine it. As a black woman, aggressiveness is expected rather than submissiveness; her actions can be perceived as nagging rather than caring. Thus, she frames her protection in terms of passivity to combat and avoid negative controlling images attributed to her as a black woman.

PUBLIC SYMBOL

First ladies' public symbolism is robust — every first lady serves as a public symbol for women, wives, mothers, and the president. Essentially, she serves as a public symbol for the proper "place" for a woman in

American society. Each of these roles can obviously be approached with a variety of frameworks, but to comply with notions of hegemonic femininity, these women must display a level of dependency. Given that the first lady has no constitutionally mandated power, and there is no precedent for her having a paid position outside the home, she is safely sequestered in the White House and in effect serves as an extension of her husband in private, domestic sphere activities of family and community. The fundamental purpose of first ladies portraying themselves as extensions of the president is to convey that their actions are not their own — they are at the request, or to the benefit of, the president. As an extension of the president, the first ladies are dependent on their husbands for legitimacy. They are subordinated within a structural arrangement that is deemed the natural order for a legally sanctioned marital relationship with the president of the United States, whereby the first lady is financially dependent and must forfeit her independence and career ambitions for the duration of his term in office. Her ability to adhere to such a role that fosters female submissiveness constitutes an important criterion for evaluating both her femininity and agency in the private, domestic sphere and ensures that it does not detract from the president's perceived power and authority in the public sphere.

All the tenets of hegemonic femininity — submissiveness, heterosexuality, physical fragility, domesticity — remain contingent on a relationship with men because hegemonic femininity does not exist without hegemonic masculinity and vice versa (Collins 2004). As with the roles of nation's hostess and the president's protector, this framework for public symbol prescribes a role for *all* women based on dependency, but that which only *some* women can achieve in accordance with normative standards. Black women have simply never been able to be dependent on their male counterparts in the same way that white women have because of the separation of their families during slavery, the exhaustive labor of black women during the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras, and the rates at which young black men have been subject to mass incarceration in the United States. Black women are often depicted as strong, independent single heads of households who show no signs of dependency or vulnerability, but rather an unyielding ability to persist and overcome adversity in a racist, patriarchal society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2009).

The prevalence of this image and others such as the Mammy, who is depended on by the white family, and the Matriarch, who is depended on by her male partner and family, is all predicated on the

"independence" of black women and contrasts with the dependence of white women on relationships with men who possess the political and economic means to support their wives and children. Thus, the performance of the role of public symbol is more ably achieved by white women.

Public Symbol: Restriction versus Representation

Each first lady acknowledged her status as a public symbol, though each first conveyed their symbolism of different things, and with different affectations. Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Lady Bird Johnson conveyed the role of the first lady as a symbol of their husbands and their administrations. Roosevelt pointedly remarks on her role as a public symbol and how she felt her symbolism detracted from her ability to be an independent and autonomous person.

> On the whole, I think I lived those years very impersonally. It was almost as though I had erected someone outside myself who was the President's wife. I was lost somewhere deep down inside myself. That is the way I worked until I left the White House. (Roosevelt 1961, 280)

This statement is so loaded with personal meaning that it is difficult to specifically analyze exactly what parts of herself Roosevelt felt she had to bury. However, it has been repeatedly recognized that Eleanor Roosevelt challenged the contemporary notions of what it meant to be a woman in the public eye and the wife of the nation's leading politician (Anthony 1990–91; Borrelli 2002; Caroli 1987; Gutin 1989; Watson 2001). When taking into account Roosevelt's other statements explaining how she limited her political involvement so as not to hurt the president, it is possible that her political involvement is part of what she "buried" (Roosevelt 1961, 186, 193). Rather than portraying herself as an independent political agent, she remarks that she fully took on the role of the "President's wife" — in other words, an extension of the president.

Rosalynn Carter and Hillary Clinton are interesting cases for their framing of their public symbolism. Rosalynn Carter presents an unfettered message that she is a symbol of herself and her own policies rather than just an extension of the president, and she takes direct credit for her accomplishments without qualifying her competence. Carter took part in a number of political activities on behalf of the Jimmy Carter administration and in her own independent initiatives. She did a tour of official State Department trips to several countries in Latin

America and testified before Congress to advocate for policy remedying mental health issues. In her description of her trip to Latin America, she demonstrates that other state officials, as well as the public, did not expect a diplomatic trip by the first lady to focus on policy and that they did not think she could convey the message of the president to foreign leaders. However, in the following excerpts, Carter conveys a full sense of agency during the trip and takes total credit for her ability to complete the mission:

> When I saw that he had invited his wife to join us for our first meeting, I realized that he expected our visit to be a social one. No matter what I asked him, he would answer to the men in our party. I was determined to get his attention and to have my say. (Carter 1984, 196)

> As it turned out, my duties throughout the trip were heavier than the President's on his own official visits: I assumed the official responsibilities *plus* the chores of a First Lady. (Carter 1984, 200)

In the first statement, the most striking element with regard to the public symbol of the first lady is the fact that she associates the conversation of substantive policy with a foreign leader to be "[her] say." This implies that she did not view her role on the diplomatic trip as only an envoy of the president but as an independent political representative. In the second statement, she recognizes that the "official responsibilities" and the "chores of a First Lady" were separate — in order for them to be additive (i.e., "plus"), they would have to be originally mutually exclusive. However, she claims credit for completing both.

Even as Hillary Clinton acknowledges her role as a symbol for women, girls, and wives, she never directly addresses the aspects of hegemonic femininity that explain why her actions were viewed as controversial. Clinton was arguably the most publicly politically active first lady since Eleanor Roosevelt, and she takes direct credit for her work (on diplomatic trips, the Health Care Task Force, and women's and children's issues) in the administration throughout her autobiography. Even Eleanor Roosevelt, however, does not take direct credit for her political agency, and therefore the combination of Clinton's activeness with her claim of credit is a contradiction of the accepted symbol of the first lady as a wife, mother, and representative of her husband. She acknowledges the role of gender as the primary factor in her status as a symbol:

> We were living in an era in which some people still felt deep ambivalence about women in positions of public leadership and power. In this era of changing gender roles, I was America's Exhibit A. (Clinton 2003, 133)

However, she also states she did not understand why her actions ignited such passionate responses from the public. She acknowledges in the previous statement that it was an "era of changing gender roles" and that she was "Exhibit A." Clinton also states that she "struggled to understand how [she] had become such a lightning rod for people's anger" (Clinton 2003, 210). From these statements, we see that although Clinton acknowledges that her actions stepped outside the conventional conception of a woman, wife, and first lady, she does not reject the ideal of hegemonic femininity in and of itself. Instead, she asserts that her actions should not be viewed as controversial. This omission allows Clinton to convey her compliance with hegemonic ideals, such as dependency, throughout her autobiography when it is of political benefit, while indirectly fighting them when they preclude her from unconventional activities in which she wants to partake.

Of the four roles of first ladies described in this analysis, Michelle Obama focuses most in her autobiography on her role as a public symbol. She, like other first ladies, expresses frustration with the societal scripts that have been attributed to her because of her intersecting identities. However, rather than focus on the constraints that she navigates in comparison to white men, as other first ladies did (or implied), Michelle Obama describes her constraints opposite white women. This highlights the unique burden she faces by occupying an office that has been inhabited by white women who complied with hegemonic femininity in various ways. She states,

> I understood already that I'd be measured by a different yardstick. As the only African American First Lady to set foot in the White House, I was "other" almost by default. If there was a presumed grace assigned to my white predecessors, I knew it wasn't likely to be the same for me … my grace would need to be earned. (Obama 2018, 284)

In this statement, Obama asserts that she was taking on a role that she did not believe was made for her. The "presumed grace" that she felt she had to earn as a black woman came for free to previous first ladies by virtue of their whiteness. Further, she explains that the attributes ascribed to her by virtue of her blackness were a hindrance:

> I was female, black, and strong, which to certain people, maintaining a certain mind-set, translated only to "angry" … It's remarkable how a

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> stereotype functions as an actual trap. How many "angry black women" have been caught in the circular logic of that phrase? (Obama 2018, 265)

Throughout her autobiography, she indicates that this difference fed into media criticisms of her statements, actions, and appearances. However, she also acknowledges the harnessable power in the spectacle of being "othered," in the White House. She states,

> I had influence in being something of a curiosity — a black First Lady, a professional woman, a mother of young kids … I could direct the American gaze. (Obama 2018, 372)

This is demonstrative of the unique spectatorship of Michelle Obama. Unlike other first ladies, Obama does not try to place her role as a public symbol within the normative framework of woman, wife, or mother in order to be accepted by the American public. Instead, she acknowledges that she is unable to perform those roles in the way that they are constructed, and attempts to navigate the unique drawbacks of being the first black first lady. Simultaneously, she works to recognize the advantages of the intrigue that surrounds her intersectional identity, in order to use them to further her political causes. This is different, however, from the ways in which Wilson, Roosevelt, and Johnson describe their strategy for public symbolism. As opposed to performing hegemonic femininity to advance her own causes or that of the president's agenda, Obama embraces the effects of her "otherness" for political gain. While it would be preferable for Obama to not be "othered" in this way, it seems that Obama prefers to capitalize on the intrigue provided it affords her an opportunity to subvert rather than conform to the constraints imposed by the construct of white womanhood.

POLITICAL PARTNER

The role of political partner is not in any way inherent in hegemonic femininity. Partnership, by definition, contradicts one of the central tenets of hegemonic femininity that has already been discussed — submissiveness. A true partnership would require that both partners have equal and autonomous political say that is considered when creating a cohesive opinion or decision. In addition to the incongruence of partnership and hegemonic femininity, it is incongruent with the president-staff relationship. As all other White House advisers, the first

lady is essentially staff to the president in the political sphere. This is an inherently unequal relationship.

For this reason, although the role of the political partner has in recent decades become expected of the first lady, it is a fine line that the women must walk. How, then, do they get involved in policy in an appropriate way? Who, and what, determines appropriateness? For a first lady to engage in political partnership while still maintaining the appearance of hegemonic femininity, such a partnership would have to be qualified in some way. Even if she can display some interest in policy, her autonomy in executing that policy would be reliant on the approval of her husband, the president. Any policy proposal that she pursues must not reflect badly on the president, or hurt his administration. In this sense, she remains submissive to his executive priorities and policy-related needs. The submissiveness that is inherent in this type of qualified partnership is historically racialized, for reasons already discussed in relation to the role of the president's protector. The controlling images of the Matriarch and the Angry Black Woman, in particular, depict black women as inherently aggressive. In the next section, we turn to commonalities — that is, the ways in which first ladies approach their role as a political partner — and apply an intersectional analysis.

Political Partner: Raced-gendered Limitations

Every first lady in this study framed their role as political partner in the context of submissiveness. Although the later first ladies, other than Edith Wilson, explicitly state that they lobbied the president to express their thoughts and concerns on political matters, each qualifies their influence in some way in deference to their husband's decision-making. Take Eleanor Roosevelt, for example; although she acknowledges that she exerted some political influence by proximity, Roosevelt insists FDR made his decisions without the sway of her suggestion:

> I was often supposed to be a great influence on my husband politically. Over and over again people wrote, crediting me with being responsible for his action and even for some of his appointments. Frances Perkins' appointment to the Cabinet is case in point. As a matter of fact, I never even suggested her. (Roosevelt 1961, 132)

> I have sometimes been asked what role I played in connections with my husband's speeches. The answer is that I played no role at all. It is true

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> that he sometimes used parts of letters or paragraphs from articles I have him to look at; and I often read his speeches before he actually delivered them. But that was the extent of it. (Roosevelt 1961, 162)

These statements epitomize Roosevelt's as well as other first ladies' attempts to acknowledge their well-known influence while also trying to maintain an air of submissiveness to the president. Lady Bird Johnson describes her extensive methods by which she advised the president but says that she advised in an impersonal manner and repeatedly questioned her own competence, leaving the president explicit permission to ignore. Rosalynn Carter insists that she could never tell President Carter what to do. Hillary Clinton starts by making an unprecedented claim of political partnership derived from her professional experience, but she retracts it to the private sphere after criticism and ensured that President Clinton was an independent decision maker. And Michelle Obama indicates that she was honest with her husband when asked but made an active effort to remain distant from his political duties.

Michelle Obama frames her political partnership with the president in the context of their private relationship. Although she indicates that she and the president spoke about political matters, and that there was a mutual expectation of listening and honesty, she also indicates that she did not solely determine the decision-making of the president:

> He and I were sounding boards for each other professionally and always had been. But I also knew that he now spent his days surrounded by expert advisers. He had access to all manner of top secret information, and as far as I was concerned . . . he needed no input from me. (Obama 2018, 346)

In this statement, she again acknowledges her partnership with her husband; however, she offers the familiar caveat that she was not the only adviser to the president, and in fact she was less knowledgeable than his "expert advisers." This, again, is in a similar fashion to every first lady before her and reinforces the fact that the political partnership is hierarchal with the husband as the final decision maker. However, Obama recognizes the popularity and political strength she brought to the campaign trail and to the White House:

> If I was going to continue to campaign like a candidate, I needed to be supported like a candidate. (Obama 2018, 268)

> I was a child of the mainstream, and this was an asset. Barack sometimes referred to me as "Joe Public," asking me to weigh in on campaign

> slogans and strategies, knowing that I kept myself happily steeped in popular culture … With my soft power, I was finding I could be strong. (Obama 2018, 372)

Again, in these statements, Obama acknowledges that she had political influence over her husband and over the nation. She makes no equivocations that when she did decide to engage politically, it was to the benefit of the president. However, in each of these situations — campaigning on behalf of the president and offering advice on pop culture — her husband invited her into the conversation. She remains consistent in her autobiography in that she did not initiate the political consultation, she was asked to consult. In this situation, she could provide her perspective to the benefit of the president without veering from the appearance of submissiveness.

The underlying basis of this framework of political partnership, submissiveness, has raced-gendered implications, which have already been explained in the context of the president's protector. However, while the white first ladies in this analysis portray an image that is congruent with the public expectation of someone of their race and gender (a white woman), Michelle Obama subverts a raced-gendered stereotype that implies the opposite of submissiveness — in this case, the Angry Black Woman. This stereotype depicts black women as "out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when she speaks softly), and to be feared. She will not stay in her 'place'" (Jones and Norwood 2017, 2049). Obama experienced the invocation of this stereotype on the campaign trail and when there were rumors that she was attempting to exert influence in the West Wing. Her display of the same framework of submissiveness in political decision-making as the other first ladies can be seen as an adaptive strategy to avoid the raced-gendered attacks by the press in the event she in any way contradicts the role they envision for the first lady as a political partner. Although other first ladies exhibit the same framing of the political partnership, they do not do so to avoid malicious raced-gendered stereotypes. Conceptualizing the first lady's role in this way leads to the recognition of conflicting or competing narratives whereby Obama is uniquely situated opposite a dominant form of femininity, otherwise known as hegemonic femininity, that requires constant upkeep and her racial identity informs the script by which gender is understood to be discursive.

CONCLUSION

It is vitally important that scholars consider the ways in which race privilege (read: whiteness) and gender oppression function simultaneously to influence the construction of political institutions and the behaviors of their agents, even absent constitutionally or statutorily mandated power. It must be discerned whether the agents of these institutions — in this case, first ladies — are acting as enforcers of power hierarchies that uphold and sustain interlocking systems of oppression within the executive branch and beyond by virtue of their roles. In this study, we have investigated the autobiographies of six first ladies to delineate the ways in which role fulfillment serves to legitimate and reproduce a controlling image. Each woman describes fulfilling the role of the first lady in a way that suggests the "first lady" is a controlling image created by a raced-gendered institution.

As described earlier, raced-gendered institutions perpetuate the subjugation of people of color and women through organizational norms that manifest themselves in repetitive acts and role performance (Hawkesworth 2003). The institution of the first lady privileges white women and constrains women of color through the enforcement of behavioral norms that reify the cult of true womanhood. In order to fulfill their roles as they were intended, and to be granted the status of an accepted "first lady," these women must comply with hegemonic femininity. The potential for success in fulfilling these roles is restrictive because only white women are capable of reflecting and embodying the benchmarks of hegemonic femininity. These roles are also monitored and policed by the American public, which sharply criticizes first ladies who do not conform to hegemonic femininity in their roles within the institution. It must be recognized that first ladies who are compliant or complicit within the institution are active agents insofar as they ensure that a controlling image maintains its status as the norm by which all women are judged within and beyond the executive branch while recognizing the restraints first ladies face in determining their role as pseudo-staffers of the president.

In Michelle Obama's role as the first lady, the raced-gendered nature of the institution is again demonstrated. As Hawkesworth (2003) would suggest, Obama was faced with a catch-22 — that is, she needed to conform to institutional norms through compliant acceptance of the first ladies' roles — nation's hostess, presidential protector, public symbol, and political partner — while at the same time affirming her blackness

through a savvier and masterful performance of hegemonic femininity. Her raced body became gendered as she assumed the role of first lady, and her gender status, in turn, was racialized during her tenure. Rather than embody the image of the first lady constructed to oppress her, she co-opted hegemonic femininity in a way that was not threatening and yet was true to her racial identity as she subverted controlling images of black womanhood — the Mammy, Matriarch, and Angry Black Woman — from within the executive branch.

If the role of the first lady is to change and become one that does not reproduce racing-gendering oppression, the responsibility is not to be put on women of color. The responsibility lies with white women, who must reject the controlling image of the first lady and recognize that their performance of that controlling image, in pursuit of favorable public opinion, not only subordinates white women to men but also subordinates women of color to white women. Raced-gendered institutions can be undermined, and controlling images deconstructed, but it takes active resistance — not only by women of color but by the white women these institutions and images privilege.

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