

Michelle Obama, Has Not and Is Not Going to Flout the White Standard of Beauty

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Introduction

The 2008 presidential election witnessed the unprecedented coming into power of the first mixed-race President and the first black lady. Their victory has been celebrated as the radiant light for the ultimate liberation for black people. And Michelle Obama, though highly controversial during the presidential campaign, has been crowned as a pioneer for the black women to flout the demeaning white standard of beauty that has dominated public discourse for centuries.

White standard of beauty, although having undergone significant changes, is anyhow the product of a patriarchal society. According to Professor Patton, the white standard of beauty today refers to being light-skinned, slim and wavy or straight hair, which has never been, through centuries, within the power sphere of women themselves¹, as apposed to the white men dominating every aspect of life in American society. In the bipolar opposition between man and women, men are still superior over women. Therefore, no matter to what extent the white standard has changed, it is still the say of men, to be more specific, the white men, instead of women. This supremacist white standard of beauty has actually pushed not only the black women into the margin, but also most white women.

Against this historical backdrop, this paper attempts to find out the truthfulness of Michelle's forerunner role to defy the white standard of beauty through an analysis of Michelle Obama's image during the presidential campaign. Since image is too objective to be inclusive and exhaustible, Michelle's image in this paper will only refer to her physical appearance, which will be further divided into her height, her hair, her toned arms and her dressing. Moreover, this paper will also incorporate Michelle's political concerns and her First Ladyship as another angle to delineate whether Michelle has the genuine intention and plans to help women, especially colored woman to throw away the yank of the supremacist white standard of beauty. In doing so, this paper, in the end, will try to reach the conclusion that Michelle Obama has not and is not really going to challenge the white standard of beauty. And all shall be done through the lens of an intersection of gender and race.

Body

This part will follow the chronological order from during the presidential campaign and after the presidential campaign to attest whether Michelle Obama has and/or is going to defy the white standard of beauty for the colored women.

Michelle, a child of Ivy League, did not plan to enter the political arena, until the day her husband, Barack Obama was elected the nominee of the Democratic Party. Since then, Michelle resigned her job, and threw her weight behind her husband's campaign for the 44th president of the United States. For the initial speeches on the stump, Michelle Obama has been severally criticized by the public for her not being supportive to her husband's career, for her complaint about her husband's morning breath, and so forth. She was depicted by the media as "the unpatriotic angry mother of Barack Obama"². However, her threatening and unfeminine image started to change when she wore the turquoise dress in one primary, which debunked the so-called masculinity of hers. By choosing the fashionable dresses to show her womanhood, Michelle soon became the apple in the eyes of the fashion industry. People have been obsessed with Michelle Obama, her height, toned arms, hairstyles and dressings. Women, especially black women, take Michelle as their role model not only in fashion, but

also in their fight against the white standard of beauty, which has marginalized them for ages. Though there is prevalent claims that Michelle is leading a new round of black women awareness, this paper will dig into depth to prove just the opposite of the claim by dissecting the exact image of Michelle, and her First Ladyship.

2.1. Michelle Obama's image during the 2008 presidential campaign

2.1.1. Her submissive height

Though the white standard of beauty has never explicitly included height as one of its elements, the submissive height of women to men is by all means included in that paradigm in a subtle way. In this patriarchal society of America, the combination between a shorter husband and a taller wife is rarely acceptable by the public. As such, Michelle Obama, a woman with a prominent even domineering height of 180 centimeters, when accompanying her husband, 186 centimeters tall, never wears high heels more than five centimeters. Her willingness of doing so is to give prominence to Barack Obama, the fact of which is an outright submission to the patriarchal rule abovementioned. Otherwise, she will be emasculating her husband and projecting an image of reversed control over her husband, which is, not only in the presidential campaign, but also in the daily life, intolerable for most Americans. Therefore, by wearing the less-than-five-centimeter high heels or flatties, Michelle Obama has tried to create a considerate and controllable women image to cater to the preference to the electors, the majority of whom have consciously or subconsciously taken for granted the implicit paradigm that woman is inferior to man even in their height. Hence, in this sense, Michelle Obama's obedience to this unspoken rule actually did not, as she has been believed, stand up to the white standard of beauty for the black women, let alone fighting for a much fairer representation for them.

2.1.2. Her toned arms

Slenderness is appreciated by the white standard of beauty, but a pair of muscular arms is beyond the comfortable zone of what slimness really means. Michelle Obama's toned arms, therefore, have undergone heated discussion among the public and the media. Even though her slim but muscular arms were depicted as unfeminine, masculine and frightening³, Michelle insists on wearing her sleeveless dress to show her sculpted arms. Her boldness to publicly defy the slimness rule has been said to boost the confidence of black American women, and to encourage them to display their arms as a kind of beauty, rather than ugliness, which again raises the awareness that "black is beautiful". At the first glance, it seems to make some sense. However, if we looked closer at the impact of her toned arms, it is not difficult to find out that this pair of arms is actually first pushing women to lose weight, and to be slim, which indeed succumb to the supremacist white standard of beauty, and then it continues to persuade women into a continuous workout, so as to get those sculpted arms, which is in conflict with the daily life of most black women, especially those from the working class and underclass. Although Michelle has concentrated on the fitness of women's arms, she is actually advocating a much more stringent rule. Her tone arms may have displaced slimness as the prom queen, but the muscular triceps, at bottom, have erected a much more unattainable standard for black women who have to work their guts out for their basic subsistence. Therefore, Michelle Obama, instead of despising of the white standard of beauty, has established a more rigorous rule that will marginalize more women than the white standard beauty has already done.

2.1.3. Michelle Obama's hairstyles

Hairstyle always comes to the fore in the black's fight against the white dominance, which requires them to wear straight or wavy hair. The Afro kinky and braiding hairstyles are not

acceptable to most of employers. For instance, a black woman has a fatter chance to get employed, if she wears straight or wavy hair. Though there are vague laws and regulation to protect people's right to wear hairstyles as they like, there is an abundance of precedents of people who are fired just because of their hairstyle. Under this mean hair discrimination, many African American have no choice but to yield in. Michelle Obama is no exception. Her hairstyles are more a submission to the white standard of beauty than defiance. Michelle, no matter what type of hairstyle she wears, has stuck firmly not to wear African hairstyles, decorated by all kinds of accessories. If she should choose to do otherwise, Barack Obama's presidential campaign would be resisted by most white people. According to the Pew research center, the voting rate of the white was 79% in 2004 election⁴, much higher than that of the black and minority groups. Losing the white approval means losing the whole campaign. As such, in order to shore up her husband presidential campaign, it is, of necessity, for Michelle Obama to project an image that will not offend the white majority. So, when she stands before the public, the rule of thumb, in terms of her choice of hairstyle, is to obey the widely accepted hair rules, the carefully trimmed straight hair. Factually, Michelle has no difficulty in choosing the straight hairstyle, since she has been wearing this kind of style through her college life, to her legal practice, and to her civil service, before the campaign. No matter whether she like it or not, a conspicuous flout to the white supremacist standard of hair is not likely to happen, not now, even not in the coming four or eight years.

2.1.4. Her dressing

A women, wanting to live up to the white standard of beauty, has to be feminine at first, which, more than often than not, is demonstrated through her taste for dressing. As a slave descendant, Michelle Obama's dark complexion has congenitally precluded her from the parameters of the white standard of beauty. And the vinegar criticism of her as the angry mother of Barack Obama has further damaged her feminine image during the campaign, which has led people to doubt whether she can maintain the sacredness of the First Ladyship. In order to dodge the malicious reports and rebuild her womanhood, Michelle has chosen to conceal carefully her so-called masculinity, by showcasing her high taste of fashion and dressing. With her dressing disproportionately covered by the press, Michelle's role as an authentic and pragmatic woman has been accepted and imitated, and partially because of this, her supporting rate began to be more favorable. Therefore, some people celebrate the gradual acceptance of Michelle Obama by the public as a victory of her brilliant representation of black women. However, it is far from a promising course. On surface, Michelle Obama's savvy choice of fashion designers, like Jason Wu from Taiwan, like Cuban-born Isabel Toledo, to some extent, may have displayed her concerns and care about the colored people, and she tries to break the monopoly of the white dominated designing realm. But what she has done is not as wise as it is looked from at the first glance. Michelle Obama's choice of clothes brands and designers, on the one hand, may have ridiculed women from wealthy families, to whom Michelle has been acting like a saint who is not greedy with the luxurious brands. On the other hand, Michelle may have alienated the black women from the working class and the underclass, who usually live from hand to mouth and could barely make their ends meet. The women who are actually represented by Michelle Obama are limited to those middle-class women, who must have a decent job and a handsome salary. This portion of women encompasses a larger group of white females, but a smaller group of black females. Therewith, Michelle Obama's dressings have been more representative for the white female from the middle class, rather than the really underrepresented black female.

To sum up, though Michelle Obama has been said to represent black women to challenge the white standard of beauty, in most cases, she indeed hasn't done that, in order to solicit the white's vote.

2.2. Will Michelle Obama's First Ladyship promise a bright course?

Some people believe that after Michelle becomes the first black lady in the United State, this history-making woman will lead the African American women to charge a full-fledged war against the white standard of beauty. However, this hope will not likely happen within the coming four or eight years. Due to Michelle's blackness, her First Ladyship is destined to be painted with the colors of race and gender, the intersection of which will define her future work. "The First Lady, an unelected position lacking any constitutionally-defined job descriptions, carries great social meaning."⁵ She is expected to play the role of "national hostess and housekeeper"⁶, whom other women are molded upon and learning from. Painted in this light, "the First Lady personifies domesticity and traditional womanhood."⁷ Hence, the prioritized work for the First Lady must reflect appropriate women's concerns and thus be centered on the domestic and family issues, the deviation to which must be done at the First Lady's own peril. A vivid lesson before Michelle has been Hillary Clinton, who, when she was the First Lady, went beyond the four corners of domesticity by campaigning for a new health care reform. After she failed, she was forced into silence and oblivion. Therefore, Michelle Obama, after she has assumed the First Ladyship, has to act within the traditional and historical framework of responsibilities. In order to project a conforming image as a true woman, she first resigned her high-paid job to fully support her husband's presidential campaign. After her family moved into the White House, she has devoted herself to the pleasant settlement of her two girls and her husband. The later major causes she has pursued have all been germane to domesticity, like her visit to the military family, her growing of vegetable in the backyard of the White House, her speech at universities, and her Christmas gift giving away, etc. Michelle Obama has to carefully arrange her political agenda that must perfectly fit the true womanhood. Otherwise, she may find herself skating on thin ice. Before Michelle, the First Ladyship has been monopolized by white women. It is natural that Michelle Obama, as the first black lady, will be appraised through a white-favored angle. Not a single First Lady, including Hillary Clinton, has tried to touch the racial issue. Being black is a sensitive topic in America, while fighting for a fair representation of the black is even more sensitive than being black. Anyone, who attempts to touch the racial issue, even in the slightest way, will arouse huge and sometimes mutinous reaction from the public. There has and will always be hostile eyes lurking around her, which, whenever finding her transgress into the racial-related zone and her challenge of the white patriarchal rules, will force her to retreat, and get her blocked.

Moreover, the political appeal for national unity will give no room for Michelle Obama's defying cause. America is now undergoing a tough time of a declining economy and declining international image. What the United States needs desperately is national unity. As a true woman, the hostess and housekeeper of the nation, there is little possibility that Michelle Obama will risk the urgent national unity by arousing racial cleavage and start a round of black awareness movement. The best way for Michelle Obama to steer under this climate is to follow her predecessors to be a true woman that represent the majority white women and a tiny portion of black women.

Conclusion

White standard of beauty of being light-skinned, slim and wavy or straight hair, though has undergone great changes, have been always out of the sphere of power of women themselves. The bipolar opposition between man and women, though has changed a little, still dominate the patriarchal society of America. Women are still considered inferior to men. The debut of Michelle Obama, as a highly intelligent women and a slave descendant, has aroused huge public reaction, positive or negative. Through her, many people, especially

black women, have seen the beacon light of the final liberation of black women from the white standard of beauty and the demeaning stereotype of women's inferiority to men. However, during and after the 2008 presidential election, Michelle's representation for them was far from rosy and satisfactory, if people are willing to look closer.

Though the white standard of beauty has mentioned nothing about women's height, from its source of power to define, it actually implies women's submissive height to men. With a height of 180 centimeters, only six centimeters shorter than her husband, Michelle is not supposed to wear and in fact, has not worn high heels more than five centimeters, in order to give prominence to her husband. In the man-dominated society, for a man, especially the first man of the country, his spouse should act womanly in every way, height included. Michelle Obama's choice of her high heels has actually obeyed the patriarchal society, and conformed to the white standard of beauty.

As to her controversial toned arms, Michelle ostensibly has sort of challenged the unattainable slimness defined by the white standard of beauty, by showcasing her slender but muscular triceps instead of just slim arms. However, her slim and beautifully sculpted arms have, at bottom, established an even more unattainable standard for women, which requires not only slimness but also consistent body build, which is out of reach for most black women.

It is much less contentious to talk about Michelle Obama's hairstyle, because of her conspicuous willingness to wear hairstyles acceptable to the white standard of beauty. No matter which hairstyle she has worn during and after the presidential election, her hair has been carefully trimmed, and has not gone beyond the straight or wavy standard.

Dressing has been the most dissentious and attention-attracting performance of Michelle Obama to stand up to the white standard of beauty. Her refuse to choose the clothes designed by the white designers, as opposed to those less famous and colored designers like Jason Wu. Her down to earth but fashionable choice of dress has displayed her independence, thrift and her acute sense of fashion, all of which have been her successful attempt to throw the yank of the white standard of beauty. But her so-called dressing defiance factually has disproportionately represented white women from middle class and a tiny group of black middle class women. Michelle Obama has hardly truly represented black women from the working class and underclass, let alone challenging the white standard of beauty for them.

Someone may rebut that the limited model-role-play of Michelle Obama during the campaign is due to the necessity of helping Barack Obama's victory in that campaign, during which she has to tailor herself to and entertain the white majority. However, after the Obamas have secured their position in the White House, Michelle Obama, as the First Lady, has slimmer chances to fight the white standard of beauty, because she is now assuming the embodiment of a "true woman", the keystone of whose work is domesticity. And she should throw all her weight to support her husband to achieve the national unity, which will further handcuff her to take any actions on racial matters, even in the slightest way. Therefore, black women's rosy dream to fight against the white standard of beauty and a new round of black women awareness is not likely to realize in the coming three years.

Notes

1. Tracey Owens Patton, *Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair*, NWSA Journal, Volume 18, No. 2, Summer 2006.
2. Alisa K Braithwaite , *First Lady Fashion: How the U.S. Has Embraced Michelle Obama*
3. Greg Ruffing, Blacks Match Whites in Voting Rates in 2008, USA Today, April 30, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-04-30-black-vote_N.htm
4. Verna L William, *The First (Black) Lady*, Denver University Law Review, Vol. 86, p. 833, 2009, University of Cincinnati Public Law Research Paper No. 09-05.
5. ibid
6. ibid
7. ibid

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