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Michelle Obama: Research Paper

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Michelle Obama
Camille Menns
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Abstract

This research paper discusses Michelle Obama as a feminist who broke barriers in the media and in the White House. Her contributions as a Black Feminist and an advocate for the global education of young women have propelled her to be one of the most notable feminist figures of today. From her fashion style to her candor, Obama's unconventional ambition caused her to break through glass ceilings. Because Obama fought to be accurately represented by the media, millions around the world perceive black women differently. In addition to being the wife of one of the most influential political leaders in the world, Michelle Obama has led an unparalleled career as a politician and lawyer. Her resiliency and determination has shaped her into a woman that I deeply admire and aspire to be.

Michelle Obama

Michelle Obama is an appropriate choice for this course because she broke many barriers in the media portrayal of black women; she is campaigning for education for all girls, and her impact on society, as the First Lady of the United States is unparalleled. Personally, I relate to Michelle Obama because we are the same height and ethnicity, come from a blue-collar family; we grew up in similar economic restrictions, and face similar situations as black women. My educational background emulates hers as well. Since entering office as First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama has constructed a network that is extensive compared to previous First Ladies. Her compassion and humanitarianism continues to make a positive impact on young women around the world.

Before Michelle Obama entered the limelight as First Lady of the United States, she was just a little girl from the South Side of Chicago. Her parents, Frasier and Marian Robinson,

instilled in her the power of a strong work ethic. Despite suffering from mild multiple sclerosis, her father sustained his job as a factory worker to provide for his family. The qualities that Obama developed from her parents in her early years empowered her to become an innovative leader. Because she quickly matured, Obama encountered adversities: “Ever since her childhood, she encountered the belief that because she was well read and educated, she somehow wasn’t black enough; at the same time, the white world didn’t make her feel entirely welcome either” (Chozick 2015). This enigma would follow her into her undergraduate studies at Princeton, her early career as a lawyer, and the 2008 Presidential campaign. Obama overcame the challenge of race relations because she took pride in her identity.

During the 2008 Presidential election, Obama’s campaign manager and the media challenged Michelle Obama’s identity. Several times throughout the election process, she was asked to seem duller and less independent so that she would not divert attention from her husband. Obama’s lifestyle never fit the traditional role as First Lady of the United States: America had never met anyone like Michelle Obama before. Specifically, the wives of Presidential candidates in the past were white and did not have ongoing careers. Her career did not change the public eye’s perception of her: Obama had an honest and relatable transparency that created a positive image of her marriage and family: “More than anything, she seems to enjoy talking about her husband and her daughters [. . .] Obama is also cool in the other sense of the word; her tastes, references, and vocabulary—“freaky,” “24/7,” “got my back,” “American Idol,” Judge Mathis—if not exactly edgy, are recognizable, which, for a political spouse, makes them seem radical” (Collins 2008). Obama’s originality garnered worldwide attention; unfortunately most of the attention was negative.

Despite recent improvement, the media has a history of being critical of women: especially black women. Black women have been shamed for their physical attributes, which perpetuated negative stereotypes and perceptions. When the media initially began reporting on Michelle Obama, they not only targeted her physical appearance, but also her character: “The FOX News channel referred to her as “Obama’s baby mama”¹ – a term “rooted in the specific history of shaming black women as sexually immoral” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 273) – and also suggested that she gave her husband a “terrorist fist jab” when they bumped knuckles at a campaign rally in St. Paul” (Meyers 2013). In addition, *The New Yorker* magazine revealed their cover page on July 21, 2008: Michelle sporting a large Afro and combat fatigues, a gun and ammunition belt slung over her shoulder. There also was a portrait of Osama bin Laden hanging over the fireplace, in which an American flag was burning; and Michelle and Barack Obama (he was clad in a turban and what would likely appear to Westerners as an Arab-style robe) were bumping fists (Meyers 2013). Despite the blatant attacks by both conservative and liberal media, Michelle Obama utilized a powerful tool that changed perceptions, but also created the public image of her as a celebrity.

The tool that Obama used was YouTube, and through it she shattered the stereotypes of successful black women. By creating roles like Mom-in-Chief and First Hostess, Obama stripped the negative connotations associated with black women and showed the complexities of being the first African-American First Lady. Unlike the First Ladies that preceded her, Obama has appeared on magazine covers of a wider range of genres: both domestic and global (Quinlan 2012). When Obama assumed the title of First Lady, she introduced a new facet of black womanhood: “The intense public discourse surrounding Michelle Obama’s fitness for First Ladyhood further magnifies and illuminates the continuing connections between race, gender, and national identity that govern black women’s roles in the public sphere” (Cooper 2010). Michelle

Obama used her platform to create a space for black women to claim their authenticity in a white society.

The First Lady of the United States is the matriarch of America. The matriarch is commonly viewed as domineering and powerful, but according to Black Feminist Thought there are other implications that come with the title. Patricia Hill Collins, the author of *Black Feminist Thought*, recognized a pattern of four socially constructed images of Black womanhood. These four labels are the mammy, who accepts her subordination; the matriarch, who symbolizes the strong mother who emasculates her husband and lovers; the welfare mother, who is responsible for causing her own poverty and that of her community; and the Jezebel, who lies at the heart of attempts to control Black women's sexuality (Meyers 2013). Throughout the 2008 election, Michelle Obama was viewed as the matriarch: "Pundits have portrayed Obama as an oversharer and a taskmaster, demeaning her husband by acknowledging his morning breath and his body odor. [. . .] The story that the Obamas like to tell, [. . .] is that Michelle pulled Barack aside just before he took the stage, warning him, "Just don't screw it up, buddy!" (Collins 2008). The subtle word choice, like demeaning, renews the stereotype of black womanhood as controlling and manipulative. Before Michelle Obama entered the White House, being a matriarch had a positive undertone: now there is a distorted view that it emasculates men.

By taking the initiative to start programs like Let's Move! and Let Girls Learn, Michelle Obama is changing the negative scope as a black matriarch by empowering the youth of America. The celebrities that promote each initiative through music videos and social media benefit the popularity of each campaign. In comparison to earlier First Ladies, Michelle Obama has built a notable network of celebrities, including Beyoncé and Taylor Swift, who have access and utilize social media to provide information to millions of young followers. Her ability to connect and collaborate with anyone cemented the startup of her campaign: "This is one of those issues that has no party. It has no race. It has no socioeconomic boundaries. This is about our kids. I want to leave something behind so that we can say, "Because of this time that this person spent here, this thing has changed." And my hope is that that's going to be in the area of childhood obesity" (Pine 2014). Michelle Obama chose to convert her energy to make a positive impact on the youth of America. Moreover, her global outreach in Europe and Africa through her Let Girls Learn campaign positively affects the lives of many young women.

The avenues that Michelle Obama traveled to be the first African-American First Lady of the United States were rough, but her ambition and versatility kept her on course. Her multiple successes as a politician, activist, and black feminist renew my motivation every time I consider quitting. Because of her courage and determination, Obama has set a high standard for her successors: not only in the White House, but also for black women around the world.

Camille Menns
FY103.12: Well-Behaved Women Seldom Make History
Dr. Buckley
10 December 2015

Annotated Bibliography

Chozick, Amy (2015). "'Michelle Obama: A Life,' by Peter Slevin." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, Web. 09 Dec. 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/books/review/michelle-obama-a-life-by-peter-slevin.html?_r=1

Amy Chozick is a national political reporter at *The New York Times*. Before that she worked for *The Wall Street Journal* as a foreign correspondent, and has spent several years contributing to *The New York Times Magazine*.

In this article, Chozick reviews a biography of Michelle Obama written by Peter Slevin. Her analysis was unbiased and deeply insightful, which is why I chose to use this source. In addition, the contextual details that Chozick provided allowed me to connect my ideas in two different paragraphs. This source also added focus to my thesis, and I researched more information from this source so that it fit with my other sources.

Collins, Lauren (2008). *The Other Obama*. *The New Yorker*. Web. 28 October 2015.
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/03/10/the-other-obama>

Laurel Collins began working for *The New Yorker* in 2003 and became a staff writer in 2008. Her subjects have included Michelle Obama, Donatella Versace, the graffiti artist Banksy, and the chef April Bloomfield. Since 2010, she has been based in Europe and has been covering stories from London, Paris, Copenhagen, and beyond. Her story on the *Daily Mail* was recently short listed for the Feature Story of the Year by the Foreign Press Association in London (*The New Yorker*). *The New Yorker* is a respected academic source because it has been producing journalism since 1925. It has an audience that is not limited to New York City, but extends around the world. Collins' credibility is established because she won an award for her journalism and has been working for *The New Yorker* for over a decade.

In order to produce this article on Michelle Obama, Collins had to do an extensive amount of research. Collins discusses in the article that she traveled with the Obama campaign during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. She does not spout general known information about Michelle Obama, but specific, intimate details about Obama's everyday life. In addition, Collins writes about Obama's unparalleled candor and how it affects the public's opinion of her. Instead of facilitating a discussion about Michelle Obama by associating her with President Barack Obama, Collins gives the reader the perspective of Michelle Obama as a woman. Collins does not cite many academic sources in her article because she observed Michelle Obama in person and interviews many of Obama's closest friends and family. Because my research paper entails who Michelle Obama is as a feminist, not as the wife of President Obama, this source is credible because of its first hand knowledge of Michelle Obama before her life as the First Lady.

This source is valuable because there is information that I can quote in my research paper, which will support my thesis and help me generate more ideas. Collins' perspective on Michelle Obama can help me add another dimension to my research paper without being biased. Also, because this source contains several examples of the authenticity of Michelle Obama, I can make stronger connections between her ideals as a political figure and an African American feminist.

Cooper, Brittney. "A'n't I a Lady?: Race Women, Michelle Obama, and the Ever-Expanding Democratic Imagination." MELUS 35.4 (2010): n. pag. Academic Search Premier [EBSCO]. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.

<http://ezproxy.arcadia.edu:2145/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=41141ea8-c34a-4a20-a758-75c186a74b99%40sessionmgr111&vid=6&hid=128>

Brittney Cooper is an Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender and Africana Studies at Rutgers University. She is a Black feminist theorist who specializes in the study of Black women's intellectual history, Hip Hop generation feminism, and race and gender representation in popular culture. She writes a weekly column on race and gender politics on Salon.com, which have been featured in many notable sources such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. She is also a co-founder of the Crunk Feminist Collective, a popular feminist blog. In 2013 and 2014, she was named to the Root.com's Root 100, an annual list of Top Black Influencers. She received her bachelor's degree from Howard University and her master's and Ph.D. from Emory University (Rutgers.edu).

Based on her educational background, Cooper is well versed in topics concerning the development of the role as First Lady of the United States. Because of her commitment to gender and Africana studies, she is comfortable discussing Black Feminist Thought in conjunction with Michelle Obama. The context that Cooper provides in this article will help with my summary of Black Feminist Thought. Cooper cites other significant black figures such as Sojourner Truth and W. E. B. Du Bois as well as former first ladies that molded the expectations that the public eye has for Michelle Obama to meet.

This source is credible because of Cooper's ongoing projects concerning gender politics and past experiences researching Africana studies. I can use this source in my research paper to strengthen my thesis and integrate my body paragraphs with solid ideas. For my paper to have several dimensions, I need this source to help me organize my ideas with concision.

Myers, Marian (2013). *African American Women in the News: Gender, Race, and Class in Journalism*. Taylor and Francis. Web. 20 October 2015.

[http://reader.eblib.com/\(S\(plt2wp2onocrx3b1ugd0hcow\)\)/Reader.aspx?p=1323378&o=785&u=c4c1%2f11Bjyg%3d&t=1446049131&h=F3BFD15870D24B1C5EBC75C1B0C60057E9F6E861&s=39395387&ut=2445&pg=1&r=img&c=-1&pat=n&cms=-1&sd=2](http://reader.eblib.com/(S(plt2wp2onocrx3b1ugd0hcow))/Reader.aspx?p=1323378&o=785&u=c4c1%2f11Bjyg%3d&t=1446049131&h=F3BFD15870D24B1C5EBC75C1B0C60057E9F6E861&s=39395387&ut=2445&pg=1&r=img&c=-1&pat=n&cms=-1&sd=2)

Dr. Marian Myers is an associate professor at Georgia State University. Her research specialization is within the area of feminist media studies, and her primary interest is in the way gender, race, and class intersect with media representation. Before her time at Georgia State University, Myers was a reporter and editor for several years in Massachusetts and New York. Her first book, *News Coverage of Violence Against Women: Endangering Blame*, was published in 1997. Dr. Meyers is a credible source because she has done critical research in feminist studies for more than two decades. In addition, she has published several books about women in higher education, the news, media, and popular culture.

In her book, Dr. Meyers illustrates the ways that African American women are misrepresented in journalism. By citing examples such as domestic abuse and the media coverage of Michelle Obama on YouTube, Dr. Meyers thoroughly discusses the portrayal of African American women in news media. She examines Black Feminist Thought and The Black Church, which is related to Michelle Obama's fundamental beliefs. Because Dr. Meyers' analysis is credible, my research paper can integrate more ideals that Michelle Obama is fighting for. In addition, I can cite specific barriers that Michelle Obama had to break in journalism. Dr. Meyers' research goes beyond traditional news outlets and print media, but also includes Black press, local news, and

newer digital platforms. In the synopsis of her book, it states that the book is suitable for women's studies, which adds to Dr. Meyers' credibility.

Dr. Meyers dissects themes that are essential to the Black Feminist Thought. In order to truly understand the feminist ideas that guide Michelle Obama's lifestyle, I think that it is essential that my research paper discuss Black Feminist Thought. Dr. Meyers is more than qualified to fulfill this aspect of my research paper because she has been researching these ideals for more than twenty years. Her experiences as a reporter, author, and print journalist confirm the strength of her credibility. I would also like to discuss how young African American girls perceive Michelle Obama, and this source can help me develop my ideas. Dr. Meyers also facilitates a discussion about the enigma of being the First Lady of the United States. Her concise method of organizing her ideas, while also citing credible sources can help with the organization of my paper. The unifying theme of my research paper can benefit from Dr. Meyers' research.

Pine, Joslyn (2014). *Wit and Wisdom of America's First Ladies: A Book of Quotations*. Dover Publications. Web. 20 October 2015.

[http://reader.eblib.com/\(S\(vngtevpwxl0r14tnof3js5\)\)/Reader.aspx?p=1919977&o=785&u=c4c1%2f11Bjyg%3d&t=1446048933&h=1EB9EF33687A8FAA928ED76D0D0ED76F44B68921&s=39395387&ut=2445&pg=1&r=img&c=-1&pat=n&cms=-1&sd=2](http://reader.eblib.com/(S(vngtevpwxl0r14tnof3js5))/Reader.aspx?p=1919977&o=785&u=c4c1%2f11Bjyg%3d&t=1446048933&h=1EB9EF33687A8FAA928ED76D0D0ED76F44B68921&s=39395387&ut=2445&pg=1&r=img&c=-1&pat=n&cms=-1&sd=2)

Joslyn Pine is an experienced author in terms of writing books of quotations. Pine has written a dozen books of quotations, which adds to her credibility because she effectively captures the persona of each subject. She has written books of quotations on money and wealth, African Americans, the Presidents of the United States, and the First Ladies of the United States. She published her first book in 2000, which was a bestseller for Dover Publications. Previous to her first publication, Pine was a managing editor for Dover Publications, and she currently is a freelance book editor.

Writing a book of quotations requires thorough research and reading with a critical eye. Pine is a credible source because she has been publishing for fifteen years, and before she began publishing she was a managing editor for a respectable American publisher. Dover Publications was founded in 1941, and is primarily an educational resource for children. Because it has been an educational resource for many years, Dover Publications is a credible source. Pine carefully selected each quote because she accurately depicts the evolution of the First Lady of the United States. The quotes discuss many topics including womanhood, humanitarianism, and relationships. Politics is also a main theme, but it is not overwhelming to the reader because of the intriguing authenticity of each First Lady.

In my research paper, I would like to use specific examples to support the feminist ideals of Michelle Obama. This source is valuable because it accurately summarizes Michelle Obama's contributions to society since she became the First Lady of the United States. Pine's credibility, as both editor and author, affirms her book as an academic source.

Quinlan, Margaret M., Benjamin R. Bates, and Jennifer B. Webb. "Michelle Obama 'Got Back': (Re)Defining (Counter)Stereotypes of Black Females." *Women & Language* 35.1 (2012): n. pag. Academic Search Premier [EBSCO]. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.

[http://www.researchgate.net/publication/259297132_Michelle_Obama_Got_Back_\(Re\)defining_\(counter\)stereotypes_of_Black_females](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/259297132_Michelle_Obama_Got_Back_(Re)defining_(counter)stereotypes_of_Black_females)

Margaret M. Quinlan (Ph.D., Ohio University) is an Associate Professor of Communication and a Core Faculty Member of the Health Psychology Ph.D. Program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She received the Bonnie E. Cone Early Career Professorship in Teaching (2015-2018). Her scholarly work explores the organizing of health care resources and work opportunities for people with lived differences. One of her primary areas of interest are social justice issues that affect marginalized populations including disability-rights and gender inequities (UNC Charlotte).

Dr. Benjamin Bates' research and teaching is in the public understanding of health and healing. Although first trained as a rhetorical scholar, Dr. Bates appreciates and uses critical, qualitative, and quantitative methods to address questions at the intersection of health, medicine, and questions of public need. Specifically, he investigates communication campaigns in the context of public and environmental health and public understanding of health and healing. In addition to extensive teaching in Athens, Ohio, Dr. Bates has also taught and researched in southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Dr. Bates's research, teaching, and service were recognized by the Eastern Communication Association when they awarded him the Past Presidents' Award, named him an ECA Distinguished Research Fellow, and, most recently, conducted a Spotlight on Scholarship at their annual meeting (Ohio University).

Jennifer Webb's research interests primarily center on studying the positive psychology of eating, body image, and weight with an emphasis on ethnic minority women during the developmental period of emerging adulthood. Her research has focused on clarifying the biopsychosocio-cultural determinants of body composition changes during the first-year college transition in African American and European American women. Other research interests include the health impact of weight-related stigmatization along with the psychoneuroendocrinology of appetite, eating, metabolism, and weight. Future investigations will integrate mindfulness- and self-compassion-based approaches to promoting positive body image, eating, and weight regulation among ethnically-diverse first-year college women (UNC Charlotte).

Although all three of the authors have an extensive professional background in healthcare and psychology, their credibility in communications is what makes this source credible. They discuss black women in media and cite specific examples of the media objectifying Michelle Obama. They also highlight the resilience of Michelle Obama before she became First Lady of the United States. In my research paper, I would like to discuss Obama's versatility and determination: I believe that this source can strengthen this aspect of my paper.