

Michelle Obama 'Got Back':  
(Re)Defining (Counter)Stereotypes of Black Females

*Margaret M. Quinlan*  
*University of North Carolina*

*Benjamin R. Bates*  
*Ohio University*

*Jennifer B. Webb*  
*University of North Carolina - Charlotte*



Perhaps no figure in American political discourse is as explored as is the President (Stuckey, 1991). Despite the deep investigation of the men who have held office, Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) claimed that their political and marriage partners—the First Ladies—remain one of the most fascinating, yet underexplored facets of both the American presidency and the history of women in the United States. At least through the Carter administration, the First Lady has been expected to be an “escort” or “hostess” who maintains a comfortable, quiet home environment where husbands can rise to fame without domestic distractions (Kelley, 2001). Since the prominence of the position under Rosalynn Carter, however, the role of the First Lady has become more political (Maddux, 2008). Should a First Lady become involved in politics, she primarily is expected to gain women’s support during her husbands’ campaign and, otherwise, remain a supportive partner (Dubriwny, 2005). Winfield (1994) suggested that because the public and the press expect the First Lady to be a “political wife,” when she exceeds these roles the public and the media may react negatively.

When Barack Obama became the 44th President of the United States, his election also introduced us to a new First Lady, Michelle Obama. Communication scholars have claimed that Barack Obama’s presidency has created opportunities for a new understanding of race in the US (Enck-Wanzer, 2011; Orbe, 2011). Just as Barack Obama may be reshaping how we understand the presidency, Michelle Obama may reshape how we understand the role of the First Lady. Although some communication scholars claim that Michelle Obama is quite similar to previous First Ladies (Kahl, 2009), others claim that she is introducing a new concept of black womanhood to the post of First Lady and to the nation (Joseph, 2011).

Given the potential for Michelle Obama to introduce a new concept of Black womanhood, thereby reshaping how the public understands the role of the First Lady, it is important to understand what older concepts of Black womanhood are also at play in the media and on blogs. We begin, therefore, with an outline of the literature on media portrayals of Black women. Then, through an analysis of newspaper and blog commentary regarding Michelle Obama, we assess whether her image is coded using preexisting conceptions of Black womanhood or new ones. This analysis found that many portrayals of her are coded as the classic stereotype of the Mammy. At the same time, however, we found attempts to reframe the Mammy’s size into a marker of a uniquely Black beauty.

## Black Women in the Media

Images of Black women in the media are prevalent, and these images have typically been negative and stereotypical (Squires, 2009). They are often portrayed as criminals, buffoons, or hypersexual individuals. These stereotypes originate from the historical roots of slavery but are also present in contemporary media (Littlefield, 2008). The existence of racial stereotypes in media have been well documented and researched (Fujioka, 1999), and the media perpetuate stereotypes in ways that people believe are accurate descriptions of groups (Sims-Wood, 1988). When Blacks are portrayed, images of deviance, deficiency, and dysfunction are dominant (Coleman, 1998). The predominance of negative representations of Blacks in the media continues to perpetuate the historical degradation and stigmatization of Blacks (Abraham, 2003). As such, stereotypes that remain in the media can be harmful to Blacks—physically, psychologically, and socially (West, 1995).

These negative portrayals of Blacks may be changing (Bogle, 2001), but Black women have been less advantaged than Black men by these shifts in media portrayals (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). According to Givens and Monahan (2005), recurring reticulation of Black female stereotypes in the media can shape viewers' interactions with Black women in lived experience. Furthermore, Hudson (1998) argued "these stereotypes simultaneously reflect and distort both the ways in which black women view themselves (individually and collectively) and the ways in which they are viewed by others" (p. 249). One area of qualitative research that does not receive enough attention is the correlation between gender role socialization and the media's role in perpetuating or negating gender and race stereotypes (Harris & Hill, 1998). Because of our interest in understanding newspaper and blogger interpretations of Michelle Obama and in historical and present-day perceptions of Black women, we sought to examine how her body is being presented to the American public.

For this analysis, we set up Google Alerts with the subjects "Michelle Obama and weight," "Michelle Obama and arms," and "Michelle Obama and body" to help us gather discourse material. This effort was supplemented by searching the America's Newspapers database using the same search terms to retrieve articles published between 7 February 2010 and 4 January 2012. After narrowing articles and blogs to those closely related to Michelle Obama's body, a total of 74 articles and blogs were subsequently subjected to a sensitized reading that focused on stereotypical representations of Black women and counter-stereotypes of those images (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Our sensitized reading of the discourse found that representations connected to the image of the Mammy were the most prevalent racialized image in journalistic and blogger discourse surrounding Michelle Obama; counters to this stereotype also emerged.

### The Mammy

The image of the Mammy is often portrayed as a domestic servant, an asexual workhorse, family-oriented, dark-complexioned, subservient, and unintelligent Black woman. According to West (1995), "Physically, [the Mammy] was depicted as a bandanna

clad, obese, dark complexioned woman with African features. . . . Subordination, nurturance, and constant self-sacrifice were expected as she performed her domestic duties” (p. 459). This image emerged in the discourse discussing Michelle Obama’s body, as it emphasized her size. Although much of the discourse used size to portray her as a Mammy, this feature of “thickness” was also reclaimed as forming the basis of a uniquely Black beauty.

Newspapers and bloggers often focused on specific parts of Michelle Obama’s body, especially her buttocks (Mulvey, 1989). Consistent with the image of the Mammy, they also emphasized M. Obama’s weight. On 21 January 2009, Irene Rubaum-Keller asked in a *Huffington Post* article, “Do you think Michelle Obama needs to lose weight?” She concluded, “If she were an actress or model, she might not get work looking as she does now. I think she looks fabulous and shouldn’t change a thing. What do you think?” Although Rubaum-Keller believes Michelle Obama looks great, this opened up space for others to debate Obama’s weight.

On 14 December 2010, Nicee Jones posted a similar question on Yahoo! Answers, “Do you think Michelle Obama should lose weight for [her] New Years [*sic*] Resolution?” In response, someone responded, “Not everyone likes skinny women. Barack may like his women ‘thick’ . . . remeber [*sic*] he is half black,” implying Black men love large women. Although some men might prefer a thicker woman, uR\_mOm (2008) mocked Obama’s size, sarcastically claiming,

Sunlight depravation due to Obama’s large ass blocking light, has caused economic hardships to farmers! Just a few weeks ago at the annual televised ‘Celebrity Judging Show’, critics awarded Presidential candidate Barack Hussein Obama’s wife, Michelle, the coveted ‘Really Big Ass of the Year Award.’

Although “big ass” could be meant to disparage Michelle Obama as stubborn and unintelligent, the positioning in this statement pairs the derogation with an insult to her body, a common one often used against Black women.

Clifford Byran, a self-proclaimed “Michelle Obama Examiner,” posted an “unflattering” picture on 20 August 2010, of Michelle Obama wearing shorts. He wrote, “It seems the First Lady has put on a few pounds since the non-stop action of the presidential campaign.” Bryan was not the only person to comment on Obama’s weight gain. On 21 February 2011, Mirkinson reported in a *Huffington Post* article that Rush Limbaugh said,

If we’re supposed to go out and eat nothing, if we’re supposed to eat roots and berries and tree bark, show us how. . . . It doesn’t look like Michelle Obama follows her own nutritionary [*sic*], dietary advice. And then we hear that she’s out eating ribs at 1,500 calories a serving with 141 grams of fat per serving. . . . I’m trying to say that our First Lady does not project the image of women that you might see on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue or of a woman Alex Rodriguez might date every six months.

Indeed, healthiness is commonly conflated with weight. Here Limbaugh is suggesting that because Michelle Obama does not exemplify a model's body type, she must also be incapable of advocating healthy choices. Although Limbaugh has made a career of attacking high-profile liberal women, his reminder that we are witnessing a rib-eating black woman reflects the misogyny and racism that permeate much of his commentary.

More recently, Wisconsin Republican Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner objected to Michelle Obama's campaign to end childhood obesity, simply saying, "And look at her big butt" (Weinger, 2011). Obama's buttocks and lack of covergirl body were used as proof that the First Lady could not follow her own advice in the "Let's Move" campaign against childhood obesity. Although Sensenbrenner has since apologized (James, 2011), his and Limbaugh's comments not only insulted the First Lady, they also called on a series of associations—that skinny equals healthy, that women with shapely curves can't lead active and balanced lifestyles, and that a Black woman's size is the best way to judge her character.

### Black beauty

Although a number of writers used Michelle Obama's body size to criticize her, other writers—mostly Black writers—saw her body as presenting a uniquely black beauty. Lady Zora wrote,

She's statuesque, confident, self-defined, beautiful and black . . . because she is so unlike any other Black woman on the national and international stage . . . If Michelle were overweight and outwardly insecure about her Negritude (ala Oprah Winfrey), America would likely embrace her more affectionately as our own. She would be heralded as our national Mammy. (2009)

Oprah, a large woman herself, offered a pathway to acceptance because she fit the Mammy image, and the Mammy's struggle with weight, so well. What is really challenging to the public image of Black women, Lady Zora holds, is that M. Obama is proud of her uniquely Black beauty, and that many people are uncomfortable with this alternative image.

Some bloggers selected Michelle Obama's features that were most deviant from White norms of beauty to articulate this new vision. For example, Samuels (2008), noted,

When I see Michelle Obama on the cover of magazines and on TV shows, I think, 'Wow, look at her and her brown skin,' said Charisse Hollands, a 30-year-old mail carrier from Inglewood, Calif., with flawless ebony skin. And I don't mean any disrespect to my sisters who aren't dark brown, but gee, it's nice to see a brown girl get some attention and be called beautiful by the world . . .

Although many in the Black community define beauty as having light skin, straightened hair, and small facial features (Brooks & Hebert, 2006), the features that would deny

Michelle Obama White beauty are reclaimed as being part of a uniquely Black beauty. The clearest example emerges when Terry McMillan wrote,

Those beautiful curves are hopefully sending a message to women of all ethnicities—but black women like me in particular (and of course young girls)—that having some meat on your bones is and always has been a blessing you don't have to be ashamed of. . . . Every time I see her on television or in a magazine, I get goose bumps and my cheeks hurt from smiling because she represents us, and she looks like us, and she has many of the physical attributes we as young black girls used to get teased about: having full lips, big behinds, and thick thighs. (2009)

The features that stereotypes would make into the unattractive Mammy—the lips, buttocks, and thighs—are made part of Michelle Obama's beauty. Erin Aubry Kaplan posted on 18 November 2009, "I'm a black woman who never thought I'd see a powerful, beautiful female with a body like mine in the White House. Then I saw Michelle Obama—and her booty." Rather than being coded as a "fat ass," Obama's booty becomes part of her beauty.

In addition to redefining Obama's size into part of her beauty, Obama's body was also recoded as being a sign of leadership in the Black community. While Limbaugh and his right-wing political allies criticized Obama as being overweight, many individuals, especially Black women, saw her as a "good role model" because she practiced what she preached by taking care of herself, eating well, and exercising. One mother noted:

And like everyone else, we have plenty of excuses for being sedentary, including the always-present fear of messing up our carefully done hair. 'I look at her and think, I have two kids and she has two kids,' said my friend Tamara Rhodes, a 37-year-old public-safety officer in Long Beach, Calif. 'If she can find time in the day to do her thing to look good—why can't I? She looks good and in a way that I can see myself looking—not a size zero—but really healthy.' (Samuels, 2008)

Others commented on how she was "ushering in a new body norm" (Goldman, 2008), one with height, curves, and no need to conform to "White thinness" (Weems, 2008). One blogger wrote, "The high visibility of the First Lady will be a new standard of beauty for Black women. She has a fit body and shows that she is very comfortable in her body" (Slack, nd). In these and other statements, the First Lady is seen as accepting her larger size and wearing it gracefully. Rather than being America's Mammy, she allows us to see differences in size as differences in being becoming beautiful.

## **Final Thoughts**

In this essay, we demonstrated that Michelle Obama's body is judged to be different from those of other First Ladies because she is Black. Much of the criticism of her body as not being beautiful enough appeared to have emanated from White writers after the

launch of her “Let’s Move” campaign, while much of the support for her body came from Black writers. Although one could argue that Obama opened up the space for news and bloggers to attack her body, exercise regime, and family’s nutritional choices, we believe that this focus—whatever the excuse—likely reflects an approach to the judgment of women’s bodies deeply rooted in cultural sexism, and in turn in cultural racism. Public women’s appearances have been scrutinized and critiqued for centuries, whether they engage in such a campaign or not. When even the body of the First Lady—arguably one of the most influential women in the world—becomes the primary site on which to judge her, scrutinizing commentary of her body becomes essential. Although our argument resonates with Kahl’s (2009) claim that Michelle Obama would be judged by the public on her fashion sense and aesthetics, we also find echoes of Joseph’s (2011) argument that she offers a new image of the First Lady by virtue of her African descent.

In part, and not surprisingly, framing Michelle Obama through emphasizing the size of her body is a pattern that coordinates with the Mammy image as a general representation of Black women. Media associate thinness with power, attractiveness, and approval (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004), and women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds struggle with messages about the ideal female body often based on White middle-class standards of beauty (Bordo, 2003). When Michelle Obama is constructed as the Mammy and thus as overweight in this White-dominated discourse, we must remember that the media can reactivate powerful tropes to judge the Black body in particularly harmful ways, no matter how privileged the inhabitant of that body may be (Striegel-Moore et al., 2003).

Given the history of portrayals of Black bodies, appreciating Michelle Obama’s body as an exemplar of the Mammy may also reinforce assumptions that large Black women should be subservient and domestic. Defining Black beauty in reference to White standards has been historically harmful, but insisting that all Black women become the stereotype of Sapphire by seeking thick thighs, full buttocks, and protuberant lips may simply create a different unattainable ideal of black women. If Joseph (2011) is correct in that Obama introduces a new concept of Black womanhood to the post of First Lady, we must encourage the media to break out of old images as well as all stereotypes. It does us no good to replace Mammy with Sapphire; a First Lady must be more than a stereotype based on her body shape.

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