

EXPLORING ROLE, AGENCY, AND FEMINISM IN THE FIRST LADYSHIP: MICHELLE  
OBAMA AT THE 2008 AND 2012 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

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To Ed Hinck.  
For being an exemplary mentor  
and for teaching me how to argue.

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING ROLE, AGENCY, AND FEMINISM IN THE FIRST LADYSHIP: MICHELLE OBAMA AT THE 2008 AND 2012 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION

by Sara Rae Kitsch

Unelected and un-appointed, with no specific job requirements or charges, first ladies of America serve their country as a product of their marriage and circumstance. However with continuously increasing visibility and rhetorical agency, these women have the opportunity to shape political discourse and public attitude regarding women's space in the public sphere. Michelle Obama who currently informs the role has now made two appearances at the Democratic National Convention. Her rhetoric at this national level serves as an exemplary case study into her ability to craft a persona that meets the ever changing and demanding requirements associated with the role of the first lady in the twenty first century. Faced with double binds and numerous situational exigencies she has been called upon to address the nation before two significant elections. With the role of first lady capable of serving as both a site of feminism advancement but also a portrayal of archetypal femininity, the research questions of this study seek to answer the questions: How does Michelle Obama craft a persona through which she can address criticisms from multiple audiences? And, in comparing Michelle Obama's performances in 2008 and 2012 what are the rhetorical strategies she uses to navigate Jamieson's double bind for female public leaders? To address these questions, an analysis of Michelle Obama's speeches from the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Convention will be guided by the Feminine Style as well as elements of Neo-Aristotelian criticism. After conducting analyses of each of these speeches, the first lady's expert ability to use rhetoric to craft a persona to answer her multiple audiences while staying authentic to herself, provides meaningful insight on

the ways in which Michelle Obama is both combatting and breaking the double binds associated with the most antiquated and traditional female public role in the nation.

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## CHAPTER I

### EXPLORING THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LADY

Perhaps no figure in American political discourse has been more studied than the president (Quinlan, Bates & Webb, 2012). Yet their marriage and political partners represent a vastly understudied and fascinating area of U.S. rhetorical history. As Campbell (1996, 1998) points out in her work on the rhetorical presidency the office of the first lady is not only crucial to the role of the presidency, but a fascinating rhetorical role itself. Watson (2000) argues that the public knows more about the First Lady's hairstyle than her political influence, and maintains that the role is largely misunderstood and ignored. Watson and Eksterowicz (2006) note in their collection of essays dedicated to the first lady, a dynamic field of study is emerging in order to understand the role of first lady and her contributions to the presidency, and more importantly, the nation.

Although research on first ladies is increasing, specific insight regarding their rhetoric and communication remains limited (Wertheimer, 2005). In defense of a communication perspective, Gutin (1989) writes:

...by analyzing the communication activities of the President's wife—the speeches, radio and television broadcasts, interviews, press conferences, and magazine and newspaper articles written by the first lady—one is able to best understand and appreciate the changes that have taken place. (p. 2)

Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) assert that:

...routinely including first ladies into our scholarly assessment of presidential administrations will ultimately lead to a more enriched understanding of the presidential institution, as well as a greater appreciation of their unique rhetorical and political

contributions...there is [still] much to examine and admire about these women who helped create a place for women in politics (p. 587).

The Obama family now occupies the public space of first family, and with Michelle Obama as the first lady, America has been watching her bring a new sense of youth and style to the role. This is an exciting time for communication scholars interested in the first lady and her rhetorical rise. According to Spillers (2009) “the institution of first lady is ripe for an overhaul and Michelle Obama is just the woman to deliver” (p. 307). However, thus far, the limited research on Michelle Obama has focused solely on issues of race and gender instead of generating research on how they impact not only her public persona, but also her ability to perform the role of the First Lady (e.g. Kahl, 2009; McAlister, 2009; Madison, 2009; Spillers, 2009). Thus, I am interested in how Michelle Obama responds to the challenges of the role of first lady. To explore how she addresses the public as both a First Lady candidate and four years later as the First Lady I will examine her performance at the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Convention.

This chapter will present a historical perspective on the first lady for the purpose of describing the different ways the role has been approached, appropriated, and in some cases avoided. In doing so, the gendered double binds that first ladies have encountered and continue to face will surface. This chapter will also demonstrate how these constraints continue to develop and are still seen in the demands presently placed on Michelle Obama. Chapter two will then make a shift to consider the role of the first lady as a rhetorical agent with the potential to create change through her discourse. Additionally, chapter two will describe the obstacles facing Michelle Obama more specifically, and describe an approach to studying her rhetoric based on concepts drawn from two critical traditions, neo-Aristotelian criticism and feminist criticism. To

understand the socio-historical context of the role of the first lady, this chapter will now present a history of the first ladyship.

### History of the First Lady

From the birth of our nation, America has elected individuals to the office of President of the United States of America. Despite being described as one of the hardest jobs in the world, the role of President is rather spelled out with clear duties set by the Constitution and guidelines for appropriate behavior maintained by both the historic image of the role, and a carefully crafted staff. Whatever room is remaining for personal style is left up to the president himself, each bringing a unique flavor to the White House (Wertheimer, 2005). As all current and previous Presidents have been male and only two have been bachelors, the spouse who accompanies the Commander in Chief plays a crucial role in our nation's history. This position, historically filled by a woman, has come to be known as the First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS).

Unelected and unappointed, her role is a product of circumstance and as Wertheimer points out, "for better or worse, the basis of her service is her marriage" (Wertheimer, 2005, p. xi). In describing the role of the first lady, from the birth of our nation until present day, Patricia Brady puts it best when she declares the first ladyship "...a bizarre Mrs. America pageant in which contestants are judged for womanly perfection and everyone comes up losers" (Watson & Eksterowicz, 2006, p. 21). Indeed, since the time Martha Custis Washington was plucked from retirement after the Revolutionary war up to present day, the role we now call "the First Lady" is anything but ordinary.

While the title of "First Lady" has only been widely accepted and recognized since the mid nineteenth century, the role itself has predated the completion of the White House. There are

no legal bindings or charges *officially* associated with it, however, as this chapter will explore, every move and action of the first lady, official or otherwise, is open to question (Watson & Eksterowicz, 2006). While most women who find themselves in this historic role serve admirably and selflessly, it is not without great personal cost. Their job, while unsalaried, is shaped by tradition and influenced by society. The first lady must evolve with culture, an endeavor that has not proven easy.

Since the earliest days of this country, first ladies have struggled with the proper performance of their role, which coincidentally holds considerable fame, status, and visibility throughout the nation (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002). In 1797 Abigail Adams was accused of “playing politics” and over stepping her boundaries when she spoke out about the divide between Jeffersonian Republicans and Federalists. Two hundred years later, Hillary Clinton was similarly under constant public attack for her role as a “full partner” in her husband’s administration (Caroli, 1995). Upon taking office as First Lady, Bess Truman promptly cancelled all regular press conferences; likewise, Jackie Kennedy often refused to attend ceremonial teas and luncheons (Caroli, 1995).

While some, like Margaret Truman, daughter of First Lady Bess Truman, have stressed the importance of making the role of first lady “her own,” ultimately she must “invent a public persona” (Wertheimer, 2005, p. xi) from which to address a multitude of public and private audiences. As early as the first Presidency, Martha Washington noted the boundaries she must not depart from and the public audience to whom she was required to attend (Caroli, 1995; Wertheimer, 2005). As Wertheimer (2005) explains, “Although the American public cannot articulate with one voice what they want from a first lady, many are quick to point out what they as individuals do not want once she performs that action” (p. xii). While all first ladies can be

thought of as individuals with individual needs and wants, upon assuming status of FLOTUS, her identity becomes owned in part by the tacit role requirements. This chapter will explore those role requirements and the threats they pose to the first lady's identity.

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss the history of the role of First Lady. In doing so, I will chronologically present the First Ladies of the United States grouped by key time periods. Second, I will discuss the first lady's increasing participation in campaigning and politics. Finally, I will provide a concluding rationale as to why the study of First Lady rhetoric is important, and how a study of Michelle Obama's rhetoric, in particular, contributes to this literature.

### History of the Role

To understand the progression of the role of First Lady, Caroli (1995) argues for a review that captures "how each saw her place in time and how others saw her" (p. xxii). By illuminating details of both the time period and the women in office, we are better able to understand major developments in the role of first lady. For example, we cannot fully appreciate the advances in social politicking made by Sarah Polk or even the public tantrums of Mary Todd Lincoln without knowledge of the time period in which they acted, a time in which most women were silent and domestic. Likewise, this structure works to highlight that the development of the role is not always a linear process. While some women pushed boundaries for women's rights and higher public visibility, those who directly follow often resorted to a more traditional enactment of domesticity and silence. Following Caroli's (1995) outline from her book, *First Ladies*, this review offers insight to the political and social settings of key time periods in U.S. history. It also provides an overview of key events, contributions, and struggles of the women in office.

Arguably, through an understanding of the time period as well as the women in office, one is better equipped to judge changes, advancements, and characteristics reflective of the role of First Lady. Against a historical backdrop, this contrast frequently illuminates the lack of clear boundaries, pressure to conform, and consequences of breaking the mold.

*Setting Precedents (1789-1829).* As a frustrated Martha Dandridge Washington made her way from her cozy Mt. Vernon home to the prominent city of New York, she was unintentionally pleased by the heavy dose of approval and adoration she was met with along the way. However, Mrs. Washington soon discovered, as she had thought, the monotony of constant public attention wore on her. As the boundaries of the social life of the President's lady were still being defined, she continued her efforts to mold the role into something she could live with (Brady, 2006).

From 1789 until 1829, the women who inhabited the role of first lady set many important precedents for those after to follow. Martha Dandridge Washington paved the way for all and roles reflective of her time in the White House still exist today (Allegor, 2000). She set a tone of formality, structure, and yet an appropriate amount of aloofness from politics—only to be challenged by an outspoken successor, Abigail Adams. Dolley Madison, who served in the role of hostess for Thomas Jefferson's two terms (Jefferson was a widower at that time), before becoming the official "first lady," wielded significant social power and influence over Washington, and with a general sense of approval. Finally, Elizabeth Monroe and Louisa Catherine Adams remained highly private (Caroli, 1995).

By the end of Washington's second term, some aspects of the Presidency and first ladyship had been defined. Martha was not only a ceremonial figure, representing formality and the democratic image, but also a counterpart to whatever role her husband was playing. As

Caroli (1995) noted, “When her husband appeared pompous, she might stress humility; if he chose to move casually among guests, she could hold court in queenly fashion” (p. 7). While George and Martha set some traditional precedents that would remain generally unchallenged for more than a century, others who followed had different ideas of what the role called for.

When John Adams took office in 1797, rumors began to spread that his wife, Abigail, was far too influential and outspoken. Abigail Smith Adams had different views of a woman’s role in a marriage. She never had a problem speaking out; in fact it came naturally to her, and was a trait she brought to the role of first lady. From the beginning of her husband’s first term, she was accused of “playing politics,” and many thought she was continually over stepping her role as the wife of the President, especially when she spoke out against opposing views of the Republicans. Only a small minority approved of her strong, vocal, opinions, foreshadowing the future feelings of unrest towards a President via the actions of his wife (Caroli, 1995).

Dolley Payne Todd Madison also made significant contributions to shaping the role of First Lady during her tenure in the White House, which was extensive. Thomas Jefferson, who took office after Adams, had no qualms about being a widower and the President. However, after several awkward dining experiences in the White House, he soon realized he would need a woman to help play hostess to his many guests. He called upon none other than Dolley Madison, the wife of a longtime friend, James Madison (Caroli, 1995).

As we enter the nineteenth century, we see Dolley Madison increasing her power and ultimately, that of the First Lady’s. According to Allegor (2000), Dolley almost single handedly created the position of the “president’s lady,” setting a precedent that would go unchallenged until the twentieth century. In a time when Americans and Europeans alike considered the federal union a shaky proposition at best, the world watched Washington closely for signs of

failure. Instead, they saw Dolley Madison using her position as a wife and hostess to strengthen the nation's political system though what Allegor (2000) refers to as "Housekeeping as Nation Building." By extending the social season and using her position as hostess to bring opposing parties together, she began to craft the role and duties of the first ladyship in times of struggle.

*Those who Substituted (1829-1869).* When Thomas Jefferson asked Dolley Madison to serve as his hostess in the White House, he put into effect a persisting tradition for future bachelors and widowers who took the office of the Presidency; however, the men who followed in this tradition made some minor changes to the hostess position. Instead of asking a removed, more mature woman, Jackson, Van Buren, and Buchanan, relied on daughters, daughter-in-laws, and nieces, all of whom were under the age of thirty. Andrew Jackson's wife, Rachel, who died just before his Inauguration, appointed her niece, Emily Donelson, to serve in her stead shortly before her fatal heart attack. Martin Van Buren, a long time widower, appointed his new daughter-in-law, Angelica Singleton Van Buren, while James Buchanan, the only true bachelor President for many years, relied on his twenty-seven-year-old niece, Harriet Lane (Caroli, 1995).

Among these appointed "substitutes," Harriet Lane carried the most influence in Washington. Fashion trends resulted from her personal style, gifts were offered, and she even campaigned on behalf of her uncle. Her popularity eventually led to rumors that she was a truly influential figure in Van Buren's life and in his decision-making. Sarah Agnes Pryor, wife of a Washington newspaperman, labeled Harriet as Van Buren's "confidante in all matters political and personal" (Caroli, 1995, p. 43). As Caroli (1995) notes, Harriet Lane was a "transitional figure in the history of White House chatelaines." Her age defined her as a youthful White House hostess, but her popularity in campaigning and supporting causes she favored made her seem more like a First Lady of the twentieth century.

Widowers and bachelors were not the only presidents to have a substitute hostess standing in for the First Lady. In fact, many first ladies themselves beginning with Elizabeth Monroe and spanning the better part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century opted out of the social duties prescribed by their role. Although there are records of Elizabeth Monroe's persistent health issues, so too were reports of her ill feelings towards the social obligations as the first lady. While her husband served as secretary of state prior to the presidency, Elizabeth made it clear she wanted little to do with the wives of other departments, often refusing social interaction with them. As First Lady, she openly resisted inviting the public into her life and home. One example of this is her youngest daughter's wedding, which took place during Monroe's time in the White House. Expecting to find their names on the guest list, Elizabeth Monroe disappointed many Washingtonians when she kept the event strictly private, not inviting any public guests. Additionally, she often took long vacations from the White House to visit her children. This made it impossible for the White House to host many events as women were not allowed to enter without a hostess present. While no first lady before her set such standards of low interest and willingness to be involved, many followed suit (Caroli, 1995).

From 1841 to 1869, Anna Harrison, Letitia Tyler, Margaret Taylor, Abigail Fillmore, Jane Peirce, and Eliza Johnson each pled poor health, grief, and lack of interest in their husband's elected position. Subsequently, each woman appointed a substitute, namely daughters and daughters-in-laws, to stand in their place as White House hostess. While some of them certainly endured their share of illness, Catharine Beecher (in Caroli, 1995) notes, it is likely these women also used illness as a way to express their discontentment with the expectations put on their lives.

Letitia Tyler, who indeed suffered a stroke two years before John Tyler took office, curiously was able to continue to oversee their large house in Virginia, but showed no interest in participating in life at the capitol; she appointed her daughter-in-law in her place. Abigail Fillmore preferred an evening of reading to a dinner with strangers. She often complained of a weak ankle that kept her in bed for an entire day and night after standing in a receiving line at a social event. Anna Harrison who started her husband's campaign enthused, greeting those who came to meet their family, cited illness as keeping her from his inauguration a few years later. She then managed to live healthy for another twenty-four years, outliving all but two of her nine children (Caroli, 1995). These women felt they had little control over their social expectations. Withdrawing helped them to create autonomy and avoid unpleasant social obligations.

Additionally, nineteenth century America encouraged women to present themselves as sickly and frail as an early form of America's obsession with thinness; it was also a common element of female socialization during the nineteenth century. Fainting frequently characterized femininity and was linked to female hysteria of the nineteenth century. This hysteria was considered "typical" of women. Known as "the vapors," it presented symptoms such as shortness of breath, irritability, sexual desire, nervousness, and lack of appetite. No longer recognized by medical professionals, this phenomenon today would be associated with ambulatory schizophrenia, depression, or conversion disorders such as anxiety and hysteria (Smith-Rosenberg, 1972). Although many of these women undoubtedly suffered from illness and chronic health issues, their inability and unwillingness to play the part of First Lady was only enhanced by America's tolerance of this fragile femininity. No written rules or duties existed for the first lady and appointing substitutes allowed these women to exist outside the traditional

obligations of the role while continuing to portray mid-nineteenth century women as weak, immature, and lacking substance (Caroli, 1995).

In her 1966 article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” Barbara Welter discusses the script for the role of nineteenth century women and their “rightful” place in the domestic and private sphere of the home. During this time in history, women were informed via magazines and religious literature on how to remain part of the cult of “True Womanhood.” True Womanhood, which inevitably was only attainable for white, non-minority women, was based on four necessary attributes or virtues, including piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Adherence to these traits was essential due to the fact that only through these qualities could a woman gain happiness and power.

According to Welter (1966) “Religion or piety was at the core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength” (p. 152). Religion belonged to women by a divine right from God. Women were “naturally” religious as it suited their traits of dependence. Likewise, it enforced the notion that women belonged in a separate, private sphere. Religiousness was valued in a woman especially because it did not remove her from her home—her proper domestic domain. Every young girl was taught that it was better to pray than to think. Likewise, women were warned not to let their intellectual pursuits take them from God; irreligion in a woman was unthinkable.

In addition to piety, purity was also essential to a woman. Women were urged to maintain their virtue, and horrible stories were told in magazines of the awful fates that awaited those who strayed: anguish, heartbreak, and death. As Welter (1966) notes, purity was a “moral imperative.” Submission and domesticity were also requirements of the nineteenth century woman. Women’s magazines called for a woman who neither felt nor acted for herself, but was a

passive and submissive responder. A woman was to work in silence, unseen. Therefore, a woman's roles were those accepted by submission. Welter writes that "The true woman's place was unquestionably by her own fireside—as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother" (p. 162). Her job was to project comfort and cheer to those around her. As an example, Welter lists some of the essays in women's magazines of the time including: "Woman, Man's Best Friend," "Woman, the Greatest Social benefit," and "Woman, A Being to Come Home To."

As Bizzell (2010) also argues, nineteenth century culture certainly promoted separate spheres for women and men. Gender ideologies asserted that women risked their chastity if they were to exit their private, domestic sphere. In the home, women had influence, especially when it came to matters of religion, morality, and children. However, engagement in any type of social movement or public activity outside of religion interfered with a woman's ability to perform her domestic functions (Gabrial, 2008). Thus, the American woman had a choice: to define her rights by way of the women's magazines and ensure her happiness or go outside the home and seek rewards other than love (Welter, 1966).

*Three Exceptions (1841-1877)*. Despite these societal norms, three first ladies of the nineteenth century chose to take part in the opportunities and responsibilities of the role of first lady. In different ways, they promoted a more visible and active woman of the nineteenth century. Sarah Childress Polk, Mary Todd Lincoln, and Julia Dent Grant broke the mold among a good number of women who pled illness and appointed substitutes in order to escape the public life they were thrown into. Sarah Childress Polk was independent, intelligent, and had a true interest in politics. While in Washington, she fostered many relationships with other strong, well-connected women and men. As Caroli (1995) notes, "Her roster of friends indicates that

Sarah Polk was one of the few nineteenth-century first ladies to develop her own supporters...” (p. 62) Although some duties such as keeping a clean house often fell through the cracks, Sarah most enjoyed catering to the needs of the voters. Though her outspoken nature gave way to critics who worried about her influence, she remained within all visible boundaries for a woman of her time. She dressed appropriately and entertained properly, avoiding public criticism.

Mary Todd Lincoln is arguably the most frequently referenced first lady of the nineteenth century, with many books and plays written about her. However, as Caroli (1995) notes, this is ironic because in many ways Mary was a failure in her role as first lady. During a time when women had very few outlets for their energy, some chose a more destructive path, including Mary Todd Lincoln. Raised in the West, Mary Todd Lincoln was extremely anxious about moving to Washington. She was unsure that her education and upbringing would fit in with the people in the East. As the country prepared for war and mothers sent their sons off to battle, the Lincolns lost their eleven-year-old son, Will. Despite it being a grievous occasion, Mary raised questions when she spent lavish amounts of money on clothing and jewelry for mourning. Stories of her obsession with money were well circulated. Even after the death of her husband, she deemed his estate insufficient, requesting more money from Congress. Though Mary Todd Lincoln became known for her tantrums, she also demonstrated strength and resolve in her determination to be known in Washington.

While Mary Todd Lincoln stood out for her lavish shopping and notorious tantrums, Julia Grant ushered in a first family beloved by the press and public alike. Despite her lack of interest and knowledge in politics, Julia and her family spent many happy years in the White House spending money that would have raised attention in the Lincoln years, but now went unnoticed. Both Julia and Ulysses wrote memoirs after their time in office and she accompanied her

husband on a trip around the world after his second term ended. After many years of evasion Julia Grant represented the possibility for change in the first ladyship, a role that was now recognized, praised, and critiqued at the national level of public attention.

*Opportunity for a “New Woman” (1877-1908).* The time period spanning between 1877 and 1908 came with the possibility for change. Julia Grant left the White House without appointing a substitute. Likewise, the White House was about to be home to the first college educated women of its time with Lucy Hayes. However, as Lucy Hayes, Lucretia Rudolph Garfield, Frances Cleveland, Caroline Scott Harrison, and Ida McKinley exchanged the title and position, we instead saw a return to domestic feminism and docility, despite the growing number of women in America pursuing new rights and causes (Caroli, 1995).

Lucy Hayes, who was highly educated at Wesleyan Female College, was familiar with the emerging feminist movement. When she took the White House feminists sought her help in securing women’s suffrage. Yet, despite being urged from a close family member to become involved in such a cause, Hayes did not offer her support. She had already tempered her youthful interest for women’s reform before she came to the White House. However, it was during her tenure that an important and lasting controversy occurred: should President’s wives’ use their position of power to champion causes? While Mrs. Hayes decided instead to devote her efforts to her husband’s career, she also built a lasting reputation for her enduring kindness and simplicity as a politician’s “wife”—traits that would remain inherent to first ladies into the twentieth century. The women who held the White House until 1908 demonstrated a quiet, but public commitment to what Caroli (1995) refers to as the “seriousness associated with domesticity” (p.106).

*Development and Change (1909-1920).* During the twentieth century the role of the first lady began to change. Between 1909 and 1920, Edith Roosevelt, Helen Taft, Ellen Wilson and Edith Galt Wilson contributed to the institutionalization of the role of first lady. Edith Roosevelt began this change by choosing to hire her own individual staff to deal with her personal correspondence. She also separated the living and working quarters in the White House once and for all. The President's staff was no longer invited into the private residence of the first family. Additionally, Edith Roosevelt was known for her shrewdness in politics and strong social presence, insisting on weekly meetings with the wives of cabinet members.

Helen Taft, who followed Roosevelt into the White House also added to the changing perception of the first lady role. Starting her career as a teacher, Helen Taft did not believe she would ever marry, rejecting William Taft's marriage proposal at least twice before accepting. Despite not taking up with any women's causes once in Washington officially, she did seek power through her husband's career. It was public knowledge that she pushed him to take office and made it clear she would play a role once he got there. Helen Taft also set the standard for presidential inaugurations to come, riding alongside her husband back to the White House after the address.

Ellen Axson Wilson, the first wife of President Woodrow Wilson, was the first to edge towards taking a public stand for women's rights in addition to championing some civil rights causes. Although she died only a year after Wilson took office, her public image was that of a leader. Finally, Edith Bolling Galt Wilson, who Woodrow Wilson remarried while in office, demonstrated her power in the White House by presiding over a sick President. After Wilson suffered a stroke in September of 1919, Edith Wilson took control, presumably running many White House operations for nearly 18 months while her husband still held office. Memos from

the White House signed “Edith Galt Wilson” only raised curiosity of the public and governmental officials alike over who was in charge.

In the time period between 1909 and 1920, the role of first lady was pushed towards a more consistent and legitimate role within the White House. Edith Roosevelt separated “work” and family by creating separate living quarters and assigned all formal entertaining events to professional staff. She also hired a secretary to handle her personal correspondence. Though these delegations may seem commonplace, they helped to create consistency in the role of First Lady. Though Helen Taft made no new additions to the staff, she did abolish weekly “women’s meetings” with cabinet members’ wives. Inserting herself into more substantial roles, she chose to ride with her husband during his Inauguration, showing what Caroli (1995) describes as disapproval of a limited women’s sphere. Ellen Wilson asked on her deathbed for a “slum clearance bill” to be passed and carry her name. Finally, Edith Galt Wilson controlled access to her ill husband. As Caroli (1995) notes, the impact of their actions can be seen best by asking what would have happened had these women done otherwise? She concludes that the role would have remained characteristic of its nineteenth century development rather than reflective of the twentieth century first lady with which we are familiar.

*The Perplexing 1920s (1920-1933)*. The 1920’s brought about a unique time of both transformation and setbacks. Although women’s lives had the potential to change dramatically with the availability of cosmetics, contraception, and the opportunity to join the labor force, not all women embraced these changes. Despite women’s suffrage, not every woman was eligible to vote. Likewise, while many women were obtaining a college education there was still a clear divide between male and female occupations. Similar paradoxes presented themselves in the

three women who served as first ladies during this time: Florence Kling Harding, Grace Coolidge, and Lou Henry Hoover.

At age sixty-one, Florence Harding was the oldest first lady to enter the White House. However, despite her age she appeared youthful, energized and ready to take on Washington. Accused of being the true politician in the relationship, Florence worked hard to create favorable relationships with the press and intentionally managed her image as an older woman. She involved herself in each of her husband's campaigns, including his early runs for the state senate and lieutenant governor. She also spent many hours around the local newspaper offices making use of publicity opportunities and building strong relationships with the press for favorable coverage. Male reporters became "her boys," the women "the girls." In regards to her feminist views, Caroli (1995) notes that they were always restrained so not to offend those less modern.

Grace Coolidge was known for separating her family life from politics and was never seen as interfering. Much like Martha Washington she often charmed and played the roles her husband could not. This set her apart from Lou Hoover who succeeded her as First Lady. Because the role of women was a general topic of discussion during the late 1920s, there was much attention put on the candidates' spouses during the 1928 election. Lou Hoover was reserved during her White House days in comparison to her early time in Washington and yet she chose a very public role as first lady. Despite her feminist lean, encouragement of women's careers and outspoken nature with America's youth, she failed to win the country's approval and interest like her predecessor. As Caroli (1995) notes, this is probably due to her refusal to publicize any of her personal life for the American people. During her time in the White House she refused interviews and even casual photographs to be released, resulting in isolation from a

curious public. However, her ambition foreshadowed changes for the role of first lady in the next few decades.

*A Mixed Generation (1933-1961).* From 1933 until 1961 America would only see three changes in the commander in chief. In the era of the Great Depression, World War II, and the 1950s, a unique combination of women represented the first lady role, and more than one generation grew into maturity while they were in office. While Eleanor Roosevelt brought promise to the feminist movement and broke precedents, Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower represented a more traditional first lady figure reminiscent of the nineteenth century.

Despite Eleanor Roosevelt's shy and lonely childhood and early adult years, she grew to be one of the most well-known first ladies of all time. Taking office during the great depression, the Roosevelts dealt with the closing of banks, veterans marching on Washington, and continued civil rights struggles. Making it clear even before her husband's victory that she would be one to break the mold, Eleanor was the first to actively use her power and position to support women. Stubbornly keeping a job while in the White House, she combated criticism by donating all of her earnings to charities such as the Women's Trade Union League and Red Cross. Although her feminism still aired on the more conservative side, she continued to actively support women's and civil rights during her time in the White House.

Following Eleanor in the first lady role was Elizabeth Virginia "Bess" Wallace Truman and Mamie Eisenhower. While each brought their own unique qualities to the position, these two women clearly represented a step back towards traditional gender roles and first lady behavior reflective of the nineteenth century. Bess Truman who saw publicity as unfitting and unbecoming for a lady immediately cancelled all press conferences during her tenure in the White House, valuing privacy above all. Although she worked on Harry Truman's payroll as a

clerk and was rumored to be influential in his decision making process, she sought to merge her identity with his. Mamie Eisenhower also represented a more opinion-less femininity that blended well with the traditional gender roles of the 1950s—and charmed much of the American public.

*The Unsettled 1960s (1961-1974).* In a time of both growth and unrest, including exploration into space, the assassination of JFK, and the Vietnam war, three first ladies with different priorities and personalities held the White House. Campaigning for the president became a requirement, not an option, and the social hosting role diminished. American journalism moved Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Claudia Alta “Lady Bird” Taylor Johnson, and Thelma “Pat” Ryan Nixon, from side columns to the front page.

Jackie Kennedy led the way casting a unique spell over the White House and America alike. Complimenting her ambitious husband she signified that a President’s wife could in fact bring her own interests to the role of the first lady. Her now famous television tour of her White House restoration only fueled America’s need to make her a TV celebrity. However, like many first ladies before her, Jackie did not like the public obligations the role came with and often refused to show up to public ceremonies and events. Caroli (1995) hypothesized that her lack of loyalty in the spousal role could have been in response to JFK’s inattention to their family.

Lady Bird Johnson and Pat Nixon took up their own personal causes while in the White House. Lady Bird started the “beautification” project to improve our highways and preserve lands, while Pat Nixon spearheaded the “Right to Read” program. These personal projects headed by first ladies helped to alter public perception of the role and made a further push towards a consistent, active, and public first lady (Caroli, 1995). Lady Bird also pushed this

further by appointing a larger, better trained staff than the East Wing had ever seen before. However, staffing issues also caused jealousy and controversy in the Nixon years between the East and West Wing, reminding us that the role of first lady is still dictated by the President, and the power they have available can always change.

*New Dimensions (1974-1993)*. The 1970s and 1980s saw a unique group of energetic women inhabit the White House; some offering a candid look at the role of first lady and others who chose to represent more a more traditional portrayal. Elizabeth “Betty” Bloomer Warren Ford came first, eager to make her mark. Best known for her frank and honest statements about her personal life and controversial topics such as teenage drug use, Betty contributed to “making talking easier” in America. She was the first woman in the White House to work on the front lines for feminists, and put her effort into the Equal Rights Amendment (Caroli, 1995).

Rosalynn Smith Carter and Nancy Davis Reagan provided largely contrasting examples of what the role of first lady could look like at the end of the twentieth century. Rosalynn was the first wife of a president to represent the U.S. on international missions regarding policy issues. When mixed reviews and unsettled feelings towards her trip on behalf of the president surfaced she also raised issues about the limits of the first lady’s power. However, her four years in the White House continued to extend the job of First Lady. Her policy trip only added to her full time commitment to campaigning for her husband and effort put toward making his administration a success. While some historians rank Jimmy Carter as next to last among twentieth century presidents, Rosalynn ranks third among first ladies, raising questions about a first lady’s reliance on her husband’s power.

Nancy Reagan, however, was committed to creating an image far different than Rosalynn Carter. Focusing on luncheons and White House china, she took a more elitist approach to living

in the White House that contrasted distinctly with the Carters' reputation for carrying their own luggage. Old discussions about the proper role of a First Lady were revived during her tenure. Traditionalists who preferred the "helpmate" role fully supported Nancy Reagan while feminists entered the ongoing debate about what type of female role model the country needed. However, midway through the first Reagan Administration Nancy began to take on drug abuse in America, bolstering her approval rating (Caroli, 1995).

Lastly, Barbara Pierce Bush took office rounding out the 1980s. The oldest woman to hold the office of first lady, Barbara was a devoted wife and mother who in her late age anticipated no great changes in her life. Her relaxed and hands off method in the role won her praise and popularity among many Americans. Despite public knowledge that she and her husband differed on issues of gun control and women's rights, Barbara mainly stuck to noncontroversial topics and hosting duties during interviews, leaving "hot topics" off her public record.

*Contemporary Times (1993- present).* As Hillary Rodham Clinton entered the role of the first lady, America was well aware that they were in for change. A successful, Yale educated lawyer, Hillary Clinton often found herself amidst controversy. While some saw her as the new look for motherhood in the early 1990s, others feared her power and influence in the White House; this was especially salient as Bill Clinton claimed a "twofer" presidency should he be elected, referencing the power he hoped to share with his wife. However, despite criticism and a fair share of White House issues, Hillary Clinton, who led the reform on health care during her tenure, is arguably the first lady who pushed the boundaries of the role to assert equality for females in the political realm. Her role set new and acceptable standards for first lady activism and power (Caroli, 1995).

Despite following the tremendous force that is Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush is also a compelling force to be recognized. As a major advocate of literacy and reading, the former schoolteacher and librarian emerged as a competent and admired first lady figure. Known to some as the “comforter in chief,” Laura was first to reach out to children and schoolteachers after the 9-11 attacks, and the first presidential spouse ever to deliver the weekly presidential radio address on behalf of the plight of Afghan women. Additionally, during her tenure she continually promoted projects that involved policy instead of the traditional first lady “pet projects.” Laura Bush projected a balanced image of both the traditional demands of the role of first lady including wife, mother, and hostess, with the modern call to be an independent advocate. Although many predicted her reign would be far more traditional, she continued to strike a balance between traditional and modern roles of the first ladyship (Wertheimer, 2005). This blended image leaves Watson (2000) to wonder whether her role is a reflection of herself or one devised by the Bush administration.

### The First Lady and Campaign Politics

The First Lady as a rhetorical resource for herself and her husband is not entirely a modern invention, but rather an evolving one. It has also grown with the first lady’s increased involvement in campaigning and public events (Wertheimer, 2005; Watson, 2000). Watson (2000) points out the presidential campaigns that society is familiar with today are a product of the twentieth century. Campaigning in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was short and not elaborate. There was not an extended “season” of campaigning, with few events, barely lasting through the nominating convention before Election Day. Therefore, early first ladies played little to no role in campaigning. Early twentieth century first ladies and political wives mainly helped with “front porch” campaigns. Florence Harding held “photo-ops,” while more traditional

women like Bess Truman and Mamie Eisenhower preferred to smile and wave behind their husbands. Their position as “front porch” campaigners still reflected the boundary (the front porch) between the public and private sphere.

In more modern times, especially with the invention of the television and expansion of the media, first ladies have been expected to play a more official role of “campaigner.” Early beginnings of this can be seen in the 1930s and included regular public appearances and attendance at campaigning functions and rallies. Eleanor Roosevelt went as far as to speak at her husband’s nominating convention. As Wertheimer (2005) notes, “Ever since First Ladies have become aware of their power to influence, increasingly have they used that power rhetorically to advance their husbands’ and their own agendas” (p. xiii). In the later part of the twentieth century, examples of these efforts include Jackie Kennedy’s youthful television appearances, Lady Bird Johnson’s extensive tour abroad to promote the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, and Betty Ford’s personal campaign for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which included speeches and individual appearances. Throughout these developments in campaigning and rhetorical activities the reigning administration and the First Lady’s office continually attempted to guide and influence favorable public opinion.

The potential to influence the public was further realized in the form of nominating conventions. In 1992, Barbara Bush was tasked by her husband’s campaign to take the stage at the Republican National Convention. Her goal was to offer the nation some “matronly charm” in the hopes of stabling her husband’s failing re-election (Cass, 2012). Though Bush lost the election, Mrs. Bush’s performance highlighted the potential of sending a supportive spouse onto a national stage. Since her performance in 1992, first ladies and their non-incumbent counterparts have addressed the nation at their respective nominating conventions. This list

includes Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Dole in 1996, Laura Bush in 2000, Laura Bush and Teresa Heinz Kerry in 2004, Michelle Obama and Cindy McCain in 2008, and most recently Michelle Obama and Ann Romney in 2012.

Prior to Barbara Bush, the record of first ladies speaking at nominating conventions was sparse. Eleanor Roosevelt was the first to speak at the Democratic National Convention in 1940. Giving unscripted remarks she spoke to a silent war time crowd, pushing the rhetorical boundaries of her role and unifying her party (Blair, 2001). Additionally, Pat Nixon spoke at the 1972 Republican National Convention—though scholarship has not yet addressed the impact of her remarks.

Most notably, the 1996 election and DNC and RNC appearances by incumbent Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Dole prompted critics to evaluate their rhetorical contributions in relation and the gendered and constraining nature of their public roles. For example, Elizabeth Dole was admired for her perfect blending of femininity and her Ivy League credentials; the press and public alike praised her performance at the 1996 RNC. However, Hillary Clinton's logical and impersonal rhetorical style struggled to gain support for her DNC performance and raised more abstract questions about our nation's perceptions of gender and the role of the first lady. As Campbell (1998) noted:

her limited ability to feminize her rhetorical style, to perform a culturally defined feminine role publicly, is clearly a disadvantage. At the same time, our failure to appreciate the highly developed argumentative skills of an expert advocate, when that advocate is a female, reveals our deficiencies, not hers. (p. 6)

As previously noted, the appearance of presidential candidate spouses at nominating conventions has continued. However, research has largely ignored the opportunity to understand

how the women faced with this task balance their identity, gender, and public expectations on such a large national stage. Further exploration of these performances lends to an understanding of our society's expectations of gender, women in political leadership, and more specifically the role of the first lady.

### Rationale

The history of the first lady is expansive. With the growth of her involvement in campaigning during the twentieth century still on the rise, it seems like the office of first lady, currently in the hands of Michelle Obama, is a site for possibilities. Although Barack Obama has now entered his second term of the Presidency, Michelle Obama's role as first lady is still "to be determined." In 2009, Spillers argued that while "the institution of the first lady is ripe for an overhaul and Michelle Obama is just the woman to deliver," (p. 307) it is clear that her image has been reframed into a softer, more pleasant one than she presented along the 2008 campaign trail. Other scholars claim Michelle may be the one to redefine the role but also that she is being judge differently than previous first ladies (Joseph, 2011; McAlister, 2009; Quinlan, Bates, & Webb, 2012). As the first African American first lady, she is not only grappling with the usual gender and power constraints of the role, but also introducing new concepts of African American womanhood and motherhood (Quinlan, Bates, & Webb, 2012).

In 2009, a small group of scholars interested in our new first lady published a forum in *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, discussing issues of race and classism. In "\_\_\_\_ Trash in the White House: Michelle Obama, Post-Racism, and the Pre-Class Politics of Domestic Style," Joan Faber McAlister (2009) discusses that Michelle Obama's individual battles with the role of first lady are overwritten by issues of race and class. While press coverage of Michelle

Obama was quick to point out her unusual first-lady-like appearance, with a tall, athletic frame and “buff” arms, McAlister (2009) points to the classed standards being applied to her physique, calling it “fit for menial labor” (p. 312) but unfit for a first lady. Michelle Obama also faces distinctive challenges with her clothing choices, often under scrutiny for “breaking first lady rules” in her mixing of high and low-grade fashion. Moreover, this has translated into apprehension on the public level of her position as the woman who will redecorate the White House. As these criticisms continue, we are seeing a new intersection of gender *and* race take hold of the first lady role.

In discussing Michelle Obama as an advocate for strong families, Kahl (2009) notes that the world waited patiently to see which social causes the intelligent and well-trained Harvard lawyer would champion in her first ladyship. However, at the time Kahl (in 2009) concluded that instead of specifying a single cause she has adopted a generalized concern for the welfare of families, by serving herself as “a symbol of the complexities of contemporary motherhood” (p. 316). This in itself provides a unique position from which to study the rhetorical practices of the current first lady. Kahl also noted that in dealing with the ideology of the first ladyship, Michelle Obama adds complex layers of subtext including both race and class.

As the role of first lady grows in prominence and rhetorical space a wild card is thrown into the mix. Scholarship has noted her additional difficulties in taking on the nation’s most gendered role, especially in initiating black womanhood into the post of first lady (Joseph, 2011). Despite our society’s legal passing of civil rights acts, the gender norms and constraints placed on the role are only reflective of *white* women throughout the past two centuries. Thus we see another difficulty: America wants the first lady to embody the traditional gender roles created

and maintained throughout the history of the role; they also want the position to reflect current gender ideology.

While the role is criticized heavily for holding or threatening to hold too much power on the basis of marriage, Americans and scholars alike do recognize the significant impact and power the first lady's rhetoric and public figure represents. Feminists in particular have a vested interest in the first lady, because she represents the hallmark of womanhood on the national stage. Women in particular have been asking for her help since the mid nineteenth century—feminists have continually asked her to champion their causes, which is why they feel they have so much at stake with her position and her public image. Therefore, analysis of Michelle Obama's rhetoric requires a perspective informed by feminist rhetoric.

Michelle Obama in particular represents a unique and coveted role for feminists because for the first time in American history, our first lady is not white. She is an African American woman from the south side of Chicago. She does not fully represent the dominant ideology. Her persona can be considered a rhetorical substance and that substance is constituted and claimed in different ways by different groups. Thus, she is being claimed and fought over—her words constitute a rhetorical substance that many groups are vying for: the ideology of the role of First Lady, the Democratic party, women in general, African American women, traditional second wave feminists, and third wave feminists. Central to these concerns, and at the heart of these conflicting expectations is the role Michelle Obama is called upon to play—that of the First Lady of the United States.

I argue that through the examination of Michelle Obama's rhetoric on a national stage, we see her actively constructing a persona through which she is able to address her multiple audiences. It is a rather recent phenomenon for first ladies to speak at nominating conventions

(Cass, 2012). However, there is much to be gained by studying this new venue for discourse, not just for first ladies, but also for women, leadership, and politics more generally. As a first lady, speaking at a nominating convention represents a new national stage from which they are able to utilize their power, visibility, and rhetorical outreach.

It is necessary to look at Michelle Obama's Democratic National Convention speeches because they are the platform from which she reaches the largest audience and the one from which she must address the most audiences. Campaign rallies are likely to attract democrats and women, while specialized speaking events may be geared towards African American women or women more generally, but on the national stage offered at the DNC she has the opportunity and the task of addressing all of these audiences at once on behalf of her husband, a candidate for the office of President.

Much was to be gained at Michelle Obama's performance at the 2008 DNC. Michelle Obama, as I will argue, was tasked with multiple responsibilities. Barack Obama had not yet won the White House, and as I will demonstrate, he relied on his wife to influence voters, specifically supporters of Hillary Clinton, including women and blue-collar workers. Likewise, she was needed to offer concrete examples to what the media called the "soaring rhetoric" of Obama. This stage provided Michelle the opportunity from which to address a truly national audience on matters of her husband's nationality and America values. I will also demonstrate that her 2008 DNC speech was personally important for Michelle Obama. As a potential first lady she had not yet secured her identity with the American public. They knew her as cold, arrogant, and controversial. She needed to address her critics and to create an identity for herself that could be seen as "presidential" and "first lady appropriate." Michelle Obama had multiple audiences to

address in her 2008 DNC speech, which was inevitably constrained by her gender and role as non-candidate spouse.

At the 2012 DNC we see an opportunity not only to compare Michelle Obama to her 2008 speech, but also to investigate the added constraints of the role of first lady. With four years under her belt and generally high approval ratings, she was once again required to support her husband in the nomination. However, the 2012 DNC also came with a key audience who needed to be addressed: women. As the war on women waged between Obama and Romney in the election season, we see a unique opportunity to explore Michelle Obama's performance as both a woman in the political realm and first lady, an antiquated role. In 2008, she needed to solidify an image fit for first lady, in 2012 she needed to address various kinds of women across the nation to secure their votes. To understand the ways that Michelle Obama responds to potential critics, enacts the role of FLOTUS, honors the political purpose of the setting, and transcends the double binds of her political culture, neo-Aristotelian elements of criticism are required.

In a way, Michelle Obama presents a type of paradox: while some scholars have predicted more traditional ideologies from a woman who dubs her self the "Mom-in-Chief," it is hard to forget her Harvard education and high profile career. If anything has been noted from the past two hundred years, it is that the role of first lady is filled with much personal sacrifice for small gain in women's political space, and we must continue to examine the rhetorical rise in order to see what is possible.

### Research Questions

1. How does Michelle Obama craft a persona through which she can address criticisms from multiple audiences?

2. In comparing Michelle Obama's performances in 2008 and 2012 what are the rhetorical strategies she uses to navigate Jamieson's double bind for female public leaders?

### Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the history of the role of First Lady. In doing so, I have provided a chronological description of former and current first ladies in key time periods. By focusing on aspects of both the time period and the women who served during them, an understanding of major developments in the role was illuminated. Finally, a rationale for study of Michelle Obama's speeches at the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Convention has been offered. Chapter II will serve to outline the first lady as a rhetorical agent with unique rhetorical opportunities. It will also highlight criticism and gender constraints reflective of the role of first lady. Finally, it will provide background on the chosen frameworks for analysis, a blend of the feminine perspective and elements of neo-Aristotelian criticism.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

Chapter I served to provide a history of the role of first lady, as well as introduce Michelle Obama as a unique rhetor currently in the role. This chapter will consider First Lady Michelle Obama as a rhetorical agent as well as provide background on the proposed frameworks for evaluation of her rhetoric. Rhetorical agency refers to the complexities a rhetor faces as a permanent subject in a specific socio-historical context, who must also maintain a fluid identity, able to resist the implications of this fixed place in time. Thus, speakers are agents of their present culture and the ideas of their time. However, they also possess rhetorical agency through which they are able to challenge those ideas. They are speaking from and within the limitations of their time, but their rhetoric holds the potential to transcend those structural limits. As I will argue, the concept of rhetorical agency poses significant opportunities for a person in the role of the first lady. To explicate this argument, the first section of this chapter will address the issues that rhetorical agency poses for the first lady. In doing so, I will discuss the rise of the rhetorical first lady throughout the past three centuries, and ongoing criticisms the first lady faces. Because the first lady must respond to a multitude of criticisms, a critical repertoire must be developed that can address the complexities of role conflict. Drawing on the principles developed in both feminist criticism and the more traditional concepts of neo-Aristotelian criticism, I will explain how the first lady, at least in the case of Michelle Obama, can achieve this agency. Finally, consideration will be given to the issue of race, which I argue is not a central element of this study.

## The Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady

In considering the role the first ladies of the United States have played in the past, present, and more importantly what communication roles they will take on in the future, it is essential to map out what Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) describe as the “rise of the rhetorical first lady.” With our current knowledge regarding the history of the role, including the ups and downs of feminism and traditional ideology, it is important to also note growth and expansion of the role in rhetorical terms. In doing so, we are able to better judge the past and more importantly future contributions to the continued “rise” of the first lady, as well as the ways in which the role both empowers and limits itself. As the rhetorical first lady rises, so too does her power in society, boosting her prominence as a national figure.

In examining the rise of the rhetorical first lady since the time of Martha Washington to contemporary times, Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) offer five important implications, also relevant to the current study. First, it has become increasingly clear that the values of the nineteenth century republican motherhood have helped craft the performances of all subsequent first ladies. Despite individual differences, each woman who takes the first lady pulpit helps to perpetuate the ideals of social issues, demonstrating that gender structures persist and have naturalized the first lady role as inherently feminine. Second and similarly, it is clear that even the earliest of actions on behalf of the first lady were foundational to the rise of her role. Yet, despite these limitations, the authors thirdly note that over time there has been gradual erosion of the public vs. private dichotomy for women in politics. Fourth, in discovering all that the first lady has and continues to bring to the White House, as Campbell (1996) notes, it is necessary to begin looking at the presidency as a two-person career. Finally, and perhaps most significant, is the suggestion that the conflict over the performance of this historical role is in part due to our culture’s

persistent concern of women's participation in politics. Evident in the rise of the rhetorical first lady, this anxiety is not limited to women simply finding the appropriate role to play in politics, but one that is somehow within the limits of "her" public sphere.

#### Precursors to the Rhetorical First Lady (1789-1920)

At the turn of the eighteenth century, women in Washington became more visible in politics. Washington, the new capital, was completely focused on politics, and therefore offered more freedom to the elite women of the city. Political wives and First Ladies alike were able to sit in the galleries, listening to speeches delivered before Congress or the Supreme Court. Moreover, with the completion of the White House as both a residence for the president and his wife, but also as a public space, all interactions were marked as political. In fact, the White House was home to the initial acts of first lady politicking, including entertaining and meeting sit-ins, which set precedent for hundreds of years. Also around this time came the first acts of First Lady patronage that further politicized the role of the first lady.

In an effort to find jobs within their husband's administrations for friends or relatives, first ladies began a new role in political conversation. Some women were approached by outsiders for help in forging a connection to the new capital city, while others politicked socially in an effort to shape a favorable image of their husbands. However, despite their new freedoms, they were still restricted from openly discussing their involvement, constrained by the nature of the public role. While some may consider these roles minor and un-influential in present times, Allegor (2000) argues, "In a democracy where successful legislation depends upon a majority and decisions are necessarily by consensus, personal relations prove crucial" (p. 145). This

capacity for influence through personal relations was exactly what first ladies were cultivating in their early efforts of social politicking.

As previously discussed, the first lady's growing social role was also visible through her work with "the people." Acts of volunteering in the eighteenth and nineteenth century represented a more acceptable *public* performance of their role. Unfortunately, it also solidified their responsibilities adhering to the traditional "republican mother" values concerned only with domestic issues. Despite the constraints, first ladies were gaining greater leadership experience and continued to expand their visibility to the public nation. By the 1890s we see Caroline Harrison give what is one of the first known public speeches by a first lady to the Ladies of the First Continental Congress, notably expanding the rhetorical space by offering arguments for volunteerism (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002).

#### Gradual Rise of the Rhetorical First Lady (1920-2002)

Several factors led to the continued, gradual rise of the rhetorical first lady. These included the rise of the rhetorical presidency, campaigning for women's right to vote, more progressive politics, and the efforts of previous first ladies. With the 1920s bringing women to the streets to support their rights as citizens, a post-suffrage era increased the role of women in the political and the public space. Women, especially first ladies, began to bring their domestic affairs to a national level (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002).

While some presidents' wives in the twentieth century worked to avoid this new public platform, others used it to bring their own agendas to the public in unprecedented ways. Making themselves more available to the press, giving public speeches at events and meetings, and

taking to radio and television outlets, these first ladies pushed the boundaries of their rhetorical space in ways never done before.

In part, these efforts reinforced lingering values of the republican motherhood, reifying women's ideological commitments to "women's issues," which were nongovernmental. Characterizing women as concerned domestic consumers framed their power as an extension of the home. First ladies such as Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Johnson who often crafted messages to *only* female citizens, continued to define women's political space as somehow different than that of men. Likewise, in the time of confusion following the post suffrage era, many Americans turned to the past ideologies of women and gender in order to make sense of current times.

However on disputes such as civil rights act of the 1930s and the ERA debate of the 1960s, first ladies, like Roosevelt, Carter, and Ford, pushed forward by taking an active stance on controversial issues. Although their strong commitment to activism was met with harsh repercussions from both the public and media, their actions were undoable. Many first ladies went on to contest the prescriptions of their predecessors and headed similar controversial issues, expanding women's rights, and challenging republican motherhood. Despite criticism, their efforts helped to expand the role and their legacies live on (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002).

Rhetorical agency is particularly intriguing in the role of the First Lady. As the rhetorical opportunities continue to expand for first ladies in modern times, they are simultaneously limited by the constraints of their office and their gender. While some women come closer to utilizing the agency potential to advance their personal causes, it is not without a cost. As the next section will demonstrate, criticism of too much power and expected adherence to strict gender roles both work to constrain the first lady's sense of agency.

## Criticism of the First Lady

In exploring the public role of the First Lady, Campbell (1996) is quick to make the distinction between presidential wives and women running for public office. In discussing the challenges they pose to the public and press, she expresses that first ladies are most difficult, because "...they raise the more problematic issue of the relationship between women, *sexuality*, and power" (p. 181). As Watson (2000) points out, "the political enthusiasm for the presidential spouses continues to grow as we begin to realize the power first ladies have wielded throughout history and to the present day" (p. 5). While every first lady has faced some type of criticism, the mediums through which their lives are showcased have increased dramatically since the start of the twentieth century. Additionally, as noted by most first lady scholars, there is an underlying criticism reflective of the role of the first lady and the nature of society, which continues to perpetuate (Campbell, 1996; Watson, 2000; Wertheimer, 2005).

### A History of Criticism

Since the earliest days of our nation, first ladies have played some type of public role, and thus have endured public criticism. For the first century of the presidency, local newspapers mainly covered major social events attended by the first lady (Watson, 2000). Because female roles of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were dominated by what Campbell (1996) and Welter (1966) referred to as "true womanhood," (p. 181) women were to be pious, submissive, and domestic. These qualities limited the nature of their public role. However, public criticism and scrutiny did find its way into their domestic duties regarding entertaining and hosting. Martha Washington, for example, was critiqued for her entertaining style, which to some was not "royal" enough (Campbell, 1996).

During the nineteenth century as technology advanced and media coverage became more personalized, intrusive, and extensive, so too did the fascination with more modern first ladies. With the improvement of the telegraph, the electronic printing press, and growth in literacy rates, a mass media society began to zoom in on the first family as newsworthy and exciting material. By the end of the nineteenth century, small and local newspapers were being outdone by large, profit driven news with enormous circulation. Covering personal and sensationalized stories, papers lowered their cost and were being read throughout the entire nation; this phenomenon was known as the “penny press.” At the start of the twentieth century the Roosevelt family specifically contributed to the way the nation viewed the press surrounding the first family. Having a young, and attractive family proved newsworthy and also beneficial to the president. Teddy Roosevelt ultimately began using the paper to promote himself (Watson, 2000).

In more modern times, and with the age of television, the White House and an array of political advisors, carefully aid the vast media coverage of the first lady; all of whom are concerned with the public opinion and continually increasing favorable ratings. Yet, despite varying levels of communication competence and cooperation among first ladies, heavy criticism continues to plague the role. With America’s tendency to treat the first family more like public property than an actual family comes a sense of ownership, with expectations of what the first lady can and cannot do. Additionally, while the average citizen is unable to articulate the exact responsibilities of the first lady, they are quite capable of pointing out when they are not being done correctly (Wertheimer, 2005). This sense of privilege and societal trends can be seen in the ongoing and current struggles faced by the first lady.

## Ongoing and Current Struggles

The first ladies of the United States are responsible for many political contributions to the presidency. They host public affairs, renovate the White House, serve as leading public figures, some while raising families, all while supporting their husbands through the challenges of the presidency. Without prior training, they house a staff larger than any top advisor. With no guidelines, every move they make is open to criticism and questioning; which never comes in short supply, especially when the social customs of the office are violated. As Watson (2000) notes, critics of the position have gone as far as to suggest it should not exist. Narrow-minded opponents state it is an outrage to have such power in an unelected, unguided position. Extreme feminists call the role demeaning and antithetical to the ideals of feminism. Despite these turbulent forces, the role continues to persist, and the first lady continues to be a model by which all U.S. women are judged. The press and public continue to demand an active role from her, and then take pleasure in criticizing her performance (Watson, 2000). As Wertheimer (2005) points out:

In many ways, the position of first lady is more difficult to perform than the position of the United States president. Like Ginger Rogers dancing with Fred Astaire, she must follow his lead, doing whatever he does only backwards and in high heels. (p. xi)

Indeed, the role of the first lady is difficult, especially complicated by its rich history in traditional gender rules and norms. The first lady has and continues to serve as a symbol of American womanhood. As Watson (2000) argues, “whatever the status of women through the ages, it has to a degree been represented in the first ladyship” (p. 78). Like many roles based on precedence and tradition, a failure to perform and conform often lead to public scrutiny and criticism; the role of the First Lady is no exception.

Strict gender roles have always limited women's ability to participate fully in the political processes of our nation. For example, women lacked the constitutional right to vote until 1920 (Watson & Eksterowicz, 2006). Margaret Carlson went as far as to call the first ladyship the "most tradition-bound and antiquated model of American womanhood" (in Anderson, 2002, p. 108). Indeed, throughout the literature on the Presidency and First Ladyship, a highly gendered outlook surfaces. A times, her role is considered little more than "window dressing" to the presidency, and her office a frivolous waste of tax dollars (Watson, 2000). Because "the basis of her service is her marriage" (Wertheimer, 2005, p. xi) the gendered expectations of the first lady have been cultivated by three centuries of women's oppression and evolution.

From the beginning, the role of first lady has been housed in a political context. Early efforts of patronage practices and in political image activities demonstrate their early actions of social politicking. During the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ideological commitments were key in gaining women's volunteer efforts outside the home. Middle class women were expected to extend their domestic expertise to those who could not care for themselves. Although these efforts took women outside the home and into public spaces, thus increasing their power, they simultaneously reified prescribed political roles as "republican mothers." The work of a republican mother was considered a civic duty under the assumption that "being a good citizen also meant being a good mother" (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002, p. 576). By the late nineteenth century the values of republican motherhood were overlapping with concepts of the "ideal woman." Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) argue that this was further translated to: "being a good first lady meant hailing, modeling, and promoting publicly the civic values that good mothers historically instilled" (p. 576).

Such mimicked performances, along with the enduring gender beliefs help explicate why twentieth century first ladies eventually brought their efforts in social politics and benevolent volunteerism to the public platform. This demonstrated concern for social welfare in their rhetorical performances. As their rhetorical space grew, first ladies continued to take the public stage, but in doing so their actions maintained and perpetuated ideology of the republican motherhood (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002).

While there has undoubtedly been comprehensive growth in the gender ideologies surrounding the role, it has not been constant. This can be understood in part through a handful of first ladies, finding power in the privacy of the home, who articulated stronger commitments to a more traditional conception of motherhood and domesticity. First ladies such as Margaret Taylor, Abigail Fillmore and Jane Pierce, were reluctant to take the role in the first place, and did not want to serve alongside their husbands let alone be in public eye (Watson & Eksterowicz, 2006). Even during the twentieth century, first ladies such as Bess Truman were reported stating positions such as: “Mrs. Bess Truman firmly believes that a First Lady’s place is in the White house—staying there and minding her knitting” (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002, p. 577). Jacqueline Kennedy also told a *Saturday Evening Post* reporter that what she really wanted was “...to be behind him [her husband] and to be a good wife and mother” (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002, p. 577). The choices of these women continued to support traditional and gendered roles for the women of the White House, establishing some norm of passivity and nonpolitical involvement.

Today, women of the White House continue to face struggles with gender expectations. First ladies are expected to balance traditional wife and modern woman, which has proven difficult (Watson, 2000). Many Americans are still uneasy about women in positions of power and some historians feel having too strong of a first lady may have a negative impact on the

president's image (Wertheimer, 2005). In line with the traditional gender roles being discussed for women, male candidates are also expected to reinforce the socially desired traits of masculinity, fatherhood and family patriarch; this requires a first lady who in essence, stands by her man (Watson, 2000). In being concerned with appearance, style and social events, first ladies must also continue to champion issues of family and femininity. For these reasons, the feminine perspective will be discussed as an appropriate lens to explore Michelle Obama's 2008 and 2012 speeches.

### The Feminine Perspective

Forty years ago Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1973) analyzed the rhetoric of Women's Liberation, concluding that it constituted a distinct genre of rhetoric. This came to be labeled as the feminist perspective. Arguing that although in form, style and structure, this rhetoric met "the demands of the strictest Aristotelian critic," (p.78) she upheld that traditional definitions of rhetoric did not sufficiently account for the discourse in the movement, which she described as "violating the reality structure" of the cultural context in which it occurs (Campbell, 1973, p.81).

Campbell rejected historical and sociological definitions of movements as grounds for rhetorical criticism and proposed that the women's liberation rhetoric did in fact merit a separate criticism based on both substantive and stylistic grounds. The advocacy of the movement she argued, "provokes an unusually intense and profound 'rhetoric of moral conflict'" (p. 75). This is because the sex role requirements for women contradict the major values of American culture (e.g. self-reliance, achievement and independence). Therefore, Campbell concluded that the rhetoric of Women's Liberation was unique by definition due to the attack it posed on the prevailing, masculine psychosocial reality: women do not embody self-reliance, achievement and independence (Campbell, 1973).

The paradigm she proposed highlighted the stylistic features of women's liberation as "consciousness raising." This refers to a rhetorical transaction in which there is no leader, expert or rhetor. Instead, in small, leaderless groups, each person is "encouraged to express her personal feelings and experiences...all participate and lead; all are considered expert" (p. 79). Finally, Campbell described the emphasis of the strategies used to persuade, which was on personal exigencies, and private, concrete experience, which she claims are designed to violate the reality structure of women audiences (Campbell, 1973). Because women are separated and divided by typical sources of identification (e.g. age, income, ethnicity, education) they share little, if any, public experiences. Thus, speaking in terms of private, and concrete, individual experiences creates a language in which all women are participative, all are experts (Campbell, 1973).

As the study of women's liberation rhetoric progressed, so too did the work of gender critics. In her 1979 essay, Solomon analyzed the rhetoric of the STOP ERA (Equal Rights Act) movement, which countered the rhetoric of women's liberation. Identifying the use of the "mythoi of the romantic quest" as the underlying structure of the STOP ERA rhetorical vision, she drew on Campbell's work on rhetorical myths to explain how basic elements of human nature often persist to unite people (in this case, women). This clarified how the pre-discovered truths in the romantic myth of the "positive woman" successfully fought against the painful "consciousness-raising" techniques, which encouraged self-exploration of individual truths (Solomon, 1979).

Campbell, however, continued to push the boundaries surrounding feminist rhetoric, uniting two feminist social movements (from 1848 and 1963) to demonstrate how feminism, as a rhetorical movement, could be seen as an ideological conflict between "womanhood" and

“personhood,” and as the rhetorical strategy “consciousness raising” which she previously described. The notion of “womanhood,” or an idealistic gender-based identity, conflicting with the natural rights of “personhood,” set the stage for much of the politically oriented feminist criticism that followed (Campbell, 1983).

### The Feminine Perspective and Political Leaders

In the early 1990s, rhetorical scholars began to assess the rhetoric of current female political figures. Noting Campbell’s previous work on “feminine style,” Dow and Tonn (1993) sought to expand it by going beyond the context of feminist social reform, and using it not just as a strategy to empower audiences, but as a critique of traditional grounds for political judgment. Examining the rhetoric of Texas Governor, Ann Richards, they proposed a manifestation of contemporary feminine style. This combined the formal qualities of Campbell’s traditional style (i.e. use of narrative, concrete examples, analogies and anecdotes, as well as personal tone and encouragement of audience participation) with “... an alternative political philosophy reflecting feminine ideals of care, nurturance, and family relationships...” (Dow & Tonn, 1993, p. 289).

From their analysis of her speech at the 1988 DNC, the authors concluded that Richard’s rhetoric served as an example of decline in the importance of public vs. private rhetoric, which has long devalued women’s rhetorical and political contributions. They proposed that critics must revise paradigms and view feminist rhetoric in terms of *adaptation* to reflect the *alternative offers* women make outside of the masculine norm (Dow & Tonn, 1993). Adaptation allows for *equal* judgment of the feminine style in the public sphere. This analysis offered an optimistic outlook for the impact and value of women’s rhetoric in the political sphere.

Not all critics, however, agreed to expanding the “feminine style” in public discourse. In 1996, Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles offered an alternative view of contemporary campaign rhetoric; this view reflected “the continual marginalization of women in the political process and the general exclusion of women from political office and political power” (p. 338). Examining the Presidential campaign films of Reagan, Bush, Dukakis, and Clinton, the critics concluded that although the films revealed a feminine style in image construction (e.g. personal, inductive, stylized and ornamental, etc.), this practice actually promoted the hegemonic system of American politics; they argued that the existence of feminine style in political discourse “...does not necessarily represent the increased feminization of the political process” (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996, p. 338). From their perspective, women were actually being confined to more traditional, supporting, gender roles through this discourse, rather than liberated or represented by it. After all, there were only male candidates running for the office of U.S. President.

This more cynical view of the “feminine style,” became apparent in Campbell’s exploration of “Hillary Hating.” Through analysis of the former first lady, Campbell revealed the prevailing social beliefs about the public performance of gender roles. Despite Clinton’s elite training as a lawyer and a politician, “Hillary hating,” became a psychological phenomenon in America as a result of her masculine rhetorical strategies and practices, which did not reflect the peoples’ view of ideal first ladyship; a position that, as discussed, arguably exemplifies the most traditional roles of womanhood in the U.S. (Anderson, 2002). Essentially, her “limited ability to feminize her rhetorical style...” (p. 15) and perform a culturally feminine role, was a disadvantage to her career, despite her excellent argumentation skills (Campbell, 1998).

In response to both gender norms and rhetorical norms, this “feminine rhetorical style,” which Hillary did not accept nor use, was the strategic response of nineteenth century women’s

activists, who were expected to reaffirm their womanhood and domestic identities, while simultaneously responding to ordinary, masculine, rhetorical competencies (i.e. “cogent argument, clarity of position, offering compelling evidence and responding to competing views”) (Campbell, 1998, p. 4). As Campbell (1998) writes:

That women were seen as naturally and distinctively pure and pious, however, implied that they were particularly well-equipped to advise on moral matters, and their earliest efforts at public advocacy arose in relation to issues closely related to what were seen as women's concerns works of benevolence toward the poor and orphaned, and struggles against the moral evils of prostitution, slavery, and alcoholism. Women felt that gender norms authorized them to address these problems, but these same norms condemned them to silence except within the domestic circle of their homes. (p. 4)

Thus, their strategy was to rhetorically perform or enact femininity by assuming a persona qualifying nurturance, domesticity, and motherhood, while concurrently presenting cogent and substantive arguments to their audience (Campbell, 1998).

The truth in these claims can be seen directly in Anderson's 2002 analysis of Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Dole. Anderson analyzed Hillary's announcement speech for the 2000 senate race noting how Clinton identified herself as a “woman leader,” and put forth an array of “women's issues,” which invited audience identification. It can be argued that by adopting techniques such as these, which highlight traditional feminine style, Clinton was able to affirm her “womanhood” as expected by a larger national audience and proceed with future rhetorical endeavors (Anderson, 2002).

However, it seems as though gender issues concerning feminine rhetoric are far from balanced. Elizabeth Dole, who was described as the counterpart to Hillary Clinton's strong,

masculine, rhetoric, was praised for her perfect execution of the “feminine style” in her speech at the 1996 Republican National Convention (Campbell, 1998). Just four short years later, when she made what some consider the first legitimate run for the White House, by a woman candidate, Anderson (2002) found those same stylistic techniques did not work. Anderson noted that despite her use of personal narratives and concrete examples of experience, which highlighted her femininity and “normalized” traditional gender roles, she did not become a serious candidate that both men and women could accept. Anderson (2002) argued this was partly due to our system of government and conventions working against women candidates, and the need for a woman *counterpart* in the White House.

### Feminism and the Media

A final work which highlights not only a new take on the feminist perspective, but also the role of the media in feminine and political discourse is Dow’s (2003) work with feminist mythology and the media. In her article, which sought to demonstrate how mainstream media constructs what it means to be feminine in both past and modern times, Dow (2003) also highlights the enormous influence the media exerts over the general public with the feminist movement. She points out three major issues regarding the construction of feminism by the media, which include: personalization, the casting of feminists as unwilling to see the perspectives of other women, and the promotion of a very liberal version of feminism. Together, these issues provide evidence to support the influential, yet misconstrued picture the dominant media presents of the feminist movement. This work is particularly relevant in examining the rhetoric of presidential wives through a feminist perspective.

As the history of the role has demonstrated, women have looked to the first lady to champion the causes of women since the late nineteenth century (Caroli, 1995). The high

visibility of the role and the rhetorical opportunities provide a unique platform from which to educate and display values of feminism (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002). However, it can be argued that one reason so many first ladies have potentially refused to openly support feminist causes is due to the media's construction of feminism. The first lady has been and continues to be highly constrained by traditional gender ideologies. If a first lady chooses to openly support a feminist movement or projects an image too far from society's current gender "norm," serious media and public image repercussions are likely to follow. Commentary on the first lady's behaviors and actions are filtered through the frames of the media, which often recast gender constraints. While the first lady is not without rhetorical opportunities to speak on these issues, the media presents a unique struggle to overcome.

The feminist perspective developed from a wider genre of Gender Criticism, seeks to investigate how culture defines, teaches, and enforces rhetorical performances of a feminine or masculine nature. Although Campbell's 1973 essay which declared the rhetoric of women's liberation as a distinctive and separate genre will serve as the basis for this review, there are many approaches to Gender Criticism, focusing on men, women, and society. For example, in his 2002 essay about J. Edgar Hoover, Morris uses a gender lens to examine how the infamous Director of FBI was able to use dominating male rhetoric as a way to create a diversion from his sexual orientation, and portray himself as "normal," masculine, and heterosexual (Morris, 2002). Additionally, in Sloop's 2005 essay takes gender criticism takes another approach, by considering the ways in which society reinforces gender norms through the media, with a focus on the race car industry (Sloop, 2005). While the ideas of "normal," gender norms, and the media, will play a role in the critique of Michelle Obama's 2008 and 2012 speech, it is important to focus more closely on the work surrounding the feminist perspective. However, in addition to

feminist criticism, there are some fundamental concepts drawn from Neo-Aristotelian criticism, which are valuable in evaluating Michelle Obama's speeches and first lady rhetoric, more generally.

### Neo-Aristotelian Criticism

Before looking at how Michelle Obama is able to draw on elements of the feminist approach as a way to successfully respond to the complexities of the role of first lady, it necessary to understand *why* her rhetoric is necessary, as well as *how* those feminist elements will work to be successful or not. Likewise, it is in the more basic elements of the neo-Aristotelian tradition that we are able to evaluate the impact her rhetoric can have on her many audiences, including the larger impact on people's ideals and culture more generally.

### Rhetorical Situation

Relying on the work of Bitzer and Wraga, a clear understanding of rhetorical situation allows us to understand the differences between the situations to which Michelle Obama was responding to at both of her DNC appearances. As I will argue, the exigencies challenged Michelle Obama in different ways and therefore gave her opportunities to respond rhetorically in ways that challenged cultural expectations for first lady's rhetoric. Additionally, by drawing on the work of Parrish, it becomes evident that public character, motives and audience, are especially important concepts in evaluating her use of the feminine approach. Given the fact that public criticism undermines the sources of legitimate feminine discourse grounded in character, and motives, public criticism creates an interesting rhetorical problem for Michelle Obama to solve. How she responds rhetorically to the demands and constraints of the role of first lady will provide insight into the ways first ladies can negotiate the complexities of their role.

## The Historical Context

A major element of Neo-Aristotelian criticism fundamental in understanding the rhetoric of Michelle Obama, and first lady rhetorical more generally is the historical context. In early writings on Neo-Aristotelian criticism, Parrish (1954) implies the importance of examining the social history surrounding a text, and Wraga, (1947) who wrote on the study of public address, was clear that in order to interpret a speech, there must be a thorough understanding of what goes into the speech, including situation, and nuances of meaning which are able to emerge only from understanding a text in its original context. Noting that "...a speech is an agency of its time," (p. 452) he argued that in studying the context in which a speech was delivered, "...it is possible to observe the reflections of prevailing social ideas and attitudes" (p. 453).

As defined by Bitzer, (1968) the rhetorical situation is "the nature of those contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse" (p. 1). Arguing that no expression can be fully understood unless it is in its proper context, Bitzer determined that three constituents make up the rhetorical situation: exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence indicates that in any given rhetorical situation there will be at least one controlling obstacle which serves to organize the discourse; it indicates the audience that must be addressed and the change that is needed to occur. The second constituent is the audience. Because rhetoric is situational and seeks to create change by influencing decisions and actions of persons, audience can be described as those individuals who have the potential to create change. Finally, constraints are made up of all persons, events, objects, and relations who are inherently part of the situation because they have the power to limit the need to correct the exigence. As Bitzer stated, "it seems clear that rhetoric is situational," (p. 4) and that "no utterance is fully intelligible unless meaning-context and utterance are understood" (p. 4).

From these situational factors, exigence and constraint are highly significant to the study of the discourse of Michelle Obama and the nature of the role of the first lady. Bitzer argued there would need to be at least *one* controlling obstacle, which serves to organize the discourse of a rhetor. However in the case of first ladies and Michelle Obama in particular, there are many unique obstacles guiding her rhetoric. Part of her responsibility at both the 2008 and 2012 performance was to make sense of the many conflicting roles from which she needed to speak from. Her rhetorical situation encompassed her role as a wife and mother, but also as the spouse of a political candidate, and a national figure.

Constraints are also particularly important to consider in examining Michelle Obama's performances. As I will argue, multiple exigencies also put a large number of constraints on Michelle's rhetoric. Each audience she needed to address presented unique constraints, all seeking to limit her ability to address each audience completely with their own unique needs. Additionally, there are numerous constraints reflective of the roles from which she must address her audience from: first as the spouse of a presidential candidate, and then as the first lady.

As discussed in the rise of the rhetorical first lady (Parry Giles & Blair, 2002), it is understood that the "rise" continues with each individual woman. Therefore, and it is important to know what events a first lady is called upon to respond to and what her role demands at that time are. Thus, before we can look at the feminist approach to understand how Michelle Obama's choice in words, style, and strategy makes sense, we first must know *why* she was making the public addresses and what limitations were placed on her. Without knowing more specifically what stood in the way (constraints) we cannot judge how well the first lady succeeded (Campbell & Huxman, 2009). With this information it is possible to discern how fully the first lady addressed her audience and constraints. In reviewing the history of the first

lady, it is well understood that the role is defined by historical and gender constraints. As Jamieson (1995) points out, there is a type of constraint faced by all women, including female rhetors known as double binds.

### The Double Bind Constraints

In discussing the role constraints of the first lady, it is clear that the expectations, rules, and boundaries are complex. In addition to the gendered ideology that persists in the role and the gendered criticism constructed by the media, I argue that first ladies are especially prone to what Jamieson (1995) describes as “double binds,” and that the constraints the double binds place on their life choices is often visible in their rhetoric, or lack of.

Also called “self defeating traps,” and “Catch-22’s,” double binds are a common phrase in feminist scholarship used to describe the dilemmas faced by modern women. Double binds draw their power from their ability to simplify complexity. They rely on our coping mechanisms that force us to deal with complex and complicated situations by splitting them apart and contrasting issues and qualities as “good or bad,” “true or false,” “black or white,” instead of realizing that a person can be two traits at once or somewhere in the middle. Specifically in regards to women, the notion of the double bind causes us to see choices as polar opposites and at times, mutually exclusive. While Jamieson (1995) identifies five separate double binds faced by modern women, I propose that two of these binds are especially relevant in studying first lady rhetoric. They include the “Womb/Brain” double bind and “Femininity/Competence” double bind.

*The Womb/Brain Double Bind.* The “womb/brain” double bind essentially posits that both the brain and the womb require energy; since you cannot exercise both at the same time,

you must choose one or the other. Women have always been defined in regards to their bodies, not their minds: women feel, and men think; men are ruled by their minds, women by their bodies. Throughout the nineteenth century, theologians and scientists alike argued that women who utilize their intellect do so at the expense of their uterus, thus a choice is “clear.” As Jamieson (1995) notes, it is the classic no choice, choice. “Choose marriage and motherhood and society approved. Choose the life of the mind and be punished by God and man” (p. 55). Although it was not claimed that women lack brains outright, the message was clear: a woman’s brain was far better suited for life in the private sphere.

While battles over women’s rights to higher education have been successful, the womb/brain double bind continues to persist in issues of working mothers. Jamieson (1995) argues, “the double bind faced by the working mother lies in society’s persistence in linking a woman’s identity to a man and to the role of mother and homemaker” (p. 61). High salaried women, or those who hold considerable power are never thought to be meeting basic needs of their family, but rather working for self-satisfaction. Conversely, now that the majority of women do hold some type of employment outside the home, stay at home moms are portrayed as equally less worthy, as they are not engaging in “real” work.

*The Femininity/Competence Bind.* More than two decades ago, Inge Broverman and her colleagues conducted a study revealing that all of the characteristics psychologists use to define “feminine” were inconsistent with maturity, and were for the most part, negative (e.g. easily influenced, emotional, illogical). However, those used to define masculinity were associated with positive mental health and maturity (e.g. direct, logical, able to make decisions). This study is what Jamieson (1995) puts at the “crux” of the femininity/competence double bind, “...a bind

that expects a woman to be feminine, then offers her a concept of femininity that ensures that as a feminine creature, she cannot be mature or decisive” (p.120). Essentially, a woman cannot be both feminine and competent.

This bond in particular draws energy from the human tendency to dichotomize characteristics, as noted above. If a woman attacks a problem by trying to be “male like,” she is too aggressive; if she attacks the problem by trying to be female, she is the “ineffective other.” Fundamentally, the bond specifies that assertiveness is valued in men, but not women, and that strength in a woman is threatening. No matter how a woman reacts in a situation, she finds herself in an impossible situation. As Jamieson (1995) notes, “Women are penalized both for deviating from the masculine norm and for appearing to be masculine” (p. 125).

In combatting this double bind, Jamieson (1995) puts forth a number of solutions. First, those who are vulnerable to this bind can minimize it by simply acknowledging it in their public address and after; likewise those who have overcome it add to the number of voices condemning it. Second, scholars in particular have been working to undermine the “defect” it supports. Additionally courts have ruled that use of this bind against women employees violates the federal law. Finally, and most applicable to first lady rhetoric, as women move into leadership positions, their diverse styles widens the lens through which women are seen, while their obvious competence works to splinter the bind. As women continue to take on leadership positions and engage in public address, a variety of methods and styles are sure to ensue. Exposure to this diversity helps society to explore nuances in gender roles exhibited by these women. I also argue that it helps to expand the rhetorical agency of the first lady.

The roles and responsibilities of the first lady are made challenging and guided largely by public opinion (Watson, 2000). While the role of first lady can function as a site of feminist

advancement that poses challenges to stereotypes and expands women's political space, it can also serve as a position of archetypal femininity. As Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) note, for first ladies, "their identity is reflected in a "nostalgic narrative of the nation's identity," which is constructed "through repletion, drawing from and constructing customary cultural practices" that evolve over time" (p. 596).

One particular issue, which never fails to gain negative media attention and criticism, is the subject of the first lady's power. The "presidential companionship" is an alternative perspective on the U.S. presidency, and argues that the presidency can be seen as a partnership between the president and his or her spouse. Moreover, it is granted that their relationship surpasses the boundaries of that of any paid advisor or cabinet member, leading us to conclude the first lady holds great potential, influence, and power (Campbell, 1996; Watson, 2000; Watson & Eksterowicz, 2006). Aware of the power of the office, first ladies such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady Bird Johnson, and Hillary Clinton have adopted this view of their relationship with their husband. Still, scholars argue, the position of the first ladyship holds much untapped power: power to influence the public, to push their own projects and policy, to boost their husband's image, and as a site of women's and political agency (Watson, 2000; Wertheimer, 2005; Campbell 1998; Campbell, 1996; Caroli, 1995).

As the public becomes more aware of the role the first lady can play and the power she has available, the more skeptical they become; thus the first lady is ever presented with a paradox. The public admires a strong and visible figure, and yet attacks and criticizes if she demonstrates too much power. Or if they believe she is exerting too heavy of an influence on her husband (Watson, 2000; Wertheimer, 2005). Essentially, first ladies must continually cope with a never-ending scope of criticism and blame. Every word and action is rife with potential

messages of affirmation and simultaneous negation of some aspect of gender politics. This is in part why the first lady must demonstrate her character and motivation to her audience.

#### Character, Motive, Audience

In discussing the principle means of persuasion that a critic of speeches will consider, Parrish (1954) lists six: character, content, logic, arrangement, motivation, and style. While all will play some role in the analysis of the texts, three are particularly significant in highlighting the strategies used by Michelle Obama at the 2008 and 2012 DNC; they are character, motivation, and style.

Character, which can be considered one of the most important elements in persuasive speaking, is found in indicators of the speaker's trustworthiness. As Parrish (1954) notes, a critic must judge, for example, to what degree the speaker is sympathetic, friendly, fair minded, self-respecting, and how these aspects create varying degrees of favorable or unfavorable thoughts on behalf of the hearer. Historically, we know that first ladies have not been just "accepted" by the American public as credible sources of power (e.g. Campbell, 1996). While they have the potential to wield great power, their every move is open to unending criticism. This is in part due to their ability to hold power in an *unelected* position, in addition to the strong, traditional, gender ideologies which guide their behavior as one of the world's most visible women (Watson, 2000; Wertheimer, 2005). Therefore, addressing issues of character and building trust with *any* audience they speak to will be essential for evaluating how completely they respond to the rhetorical situation which calls forth their discourse.

In examining the rhetoric of Michelle Obama, it is vital to evaluate her character in order to understand how well she is engaging and responding to her multiple audiences. Because the

role and discourse of the first lady is open to such extensive criticism and questioning from the media and public (Gutin, 1989), presenting a strong sense of character in her rhetoric is necessary in addressing any rhetorical situation and responding to the exigency on the national level. Without the support and trust of the nation, she is unable to be neither persuasive nor effective her discourse. Smaller or individual speaking engagements may warrant a lessened need to develop character explicitly; however, when the first lady is vulnerable to national criticism and scrutiny, it is vital she enhance this element as an initial step in becoming a credible rhetor for her audiences, thus making it necessary in evaluating her choices in strategy in answer her audience.

Motivation, which is the speaker's ability to appeal to the audience in ways they can be expected to respond to, is also a critical component of the Neo-Aristotelian approach in evaluating the DNC speeches and first lady rhetoric in general. By appealing to the basic interests, desires, wants, instincts, and emotions of an audience, the speaker in turn becomes more persuasive (Parrish, 1954). Because *any* rhetorical situation a first lady will face automatically arises with constraints reflective of their role, they must find alternative ways to appeal to their audiences, who expect a portrayal of historical standards and gender norms. The feminist lens, previously discussed, allows the critic to evaluate first lady rhetoric in terms of available motives. As Campbell noted the role requirements for women contradict the major values of American culture (like self-reliance and independence) and thus their rhetoric is unique by definition, and relies on alternative means of persuasion (Campbell, 1973).

For First Ladies these conflicts can best be demonstrated by their charge to play the role of supportive spouse and traditional woman, in addition to a competent public speaker and fierce advocate. For example, Pat Nixon worked at a bank to finance her husband's campaign for

Congress. However, whenever she was questioned publicly about the use of her time, she emphasized only her domestic roles, including laundry and sewing. Likewise, Hillary Clinton, known as a tough lawyer, attempted to modify her role after Bill Clinton's presidential nomination. Speaking out less and participating in a "cookie bake off," she downplayed her husband's references to her as his "full partner," in order to appear more feminine and less dominant (Caroli, 1995). Likewise, it is important to note that people often read people's actions with motive in mind. Thus, a first lady's motive in any given rhetorical situation does not go unquestioned. With the constant media attention and pop culture popularity with the public, it is arguable that her motives are questioned more thoroughly than the average person. As the criticism of the first lady will demonstrate, the public is generally unsure of her actions until they have labeled them as "right" or "out of bounds."

Finally, Parrish (1954) defines style as the choice and arrangement of words. While style helps to determine the value of a speech in terms of enduring literature, it also is necessary in order to build authenticity by giving the speaker uniqueness by which he/she is distinguished from other speakers. From this perspective, we are potentially able to judge first lady rhetoric as a unique style of discourse. Additionally, in regards to Michelle Obama's 2008 and 2012 speech, the element of style is also closely related to the feminist approach. It involves judging elements of illustrations, use of vividness, examples, analogies, vivid narratives and appropriateness. By comparing Michelle Obama's use of style (including elements of the feminine perspective) with the elements of rhetorical situation (including her role as first lady), it is possible to judge the effectiveness of her speeches.

## Issues of Race

One aspect of the rhetorical situation, which is also tangentially related to character, motive, and audience, is the matter of race. Though race has been presented as an equally compelling and important issue (as gender) in discussing First Lady Michelle Obama there are several reasons why it warrants a *separate* study from the present one. The research questions I am posing call forth a study that examines how the rhetor, in the *role* of the first lady, is responding to the requirements and traditional constraints of that role, on a national stage. This study thus intends to present an analysis of how our current first lady is constrained by the nature of her role and how she develops strategies to overcome the challenges of rhetorical agency. This includes the strategies she develops to overcome aspects of the double binds and her effectiveness in responding to her rhetorical exigencies. As the next two chapters will develop, those exigencies, while numerous and complex, are not centered on the issue of race for her performances at the 2008 and 2012 DNC.

As I addressed in chapter one, current literature has begun to examine how critics of Michelle Obama use issues racism and classism to frame her individual shortcomings as a first lady. For example, as McAlister (2009) notes, critics of Michelle Obama labeled her the “angry black woman” in order to de-complexify her as a person. Likewise, she argues that the “real” offensives critics are making towards Michelle Obama are being used to target issues of race associated with classism. McAlister argues this is a result of the majority of society believing that we live in a “post racism” era; classism is the new standard of judgment as overtly racist comments in public would be “distasteful.” Finally, Joseph (2011) posits that Michelle Obama herself uses tools of post-identity in order to overcome issues of racism and sexism, by promoting the fiction that the country has passed the era of racism and misogyny.

Despite the intriguing opportunity for scholarship in this area, the present study is instead interested in how she more generally and on a national level, is responding to her *role* as the first lady, as prescribed by tradition and current gender ideology. As previously noted, the first lady is an individual being, with unique traits and needs, however upon assuming the status of FLOTUS becomes tacitly governed by the role requirements. Of course future research should explore the unique position of Michelle Obama as an African American woman in the role of First Lady as well.

### Selected Texts

Michelle Obama has now spoken at two separate nominating conventions. She first performed at the Democratic National Convention in 2008, held in Denver, CO. More recently she has addressed the Democratic National Convention in 2012 in Charlotte, NC. These two speeches will be used as the texts of study in this rhetorical analysis of first lady Michelle Obama. Transcripts for both speeches have been acquired online at the National Public Radio website. They have been checked for accuracy by comparing the prepared transcript to live, recordings of Michelle Obama's performances (Transcript, 2008; Transcript, 2012).

### Summary

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the feminine perspective. I have also discussed elements of Neo-Aristotelian criticism, including rhetorical situation and context, character, motive, and audience. A blend of these two rhetorical lenses was argued as the best way to judge the rhetoric of Michelle Obama at the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Convention. Likewise, I have discussed the importance of using the feminist perspective to evaluate female, political leaders, in addition to how the media's framing of feminism presents a

consistent struggle in the performance of first ladies. Finally, I have discussed Jamieson's concept of "double binds," and how these binds work to constrain women, and first ladies in particular. As the first lady continues to grow rhetorically, her opportunity for rhetorical agency also grows. However, faced with numerous role constraints and prevailing criticism, it is essential that the first lady develop a critical repertoire of strategies from which to address her multiple, and conflicting roles and audiences. To understand how Michelle Obama rhetorically manages these roles and to gain insight on how she works to overcome the double binds, I will examine her DNC performances in 2008 and 2012.

In Chapter III, I will provide a detailed description of the events leading up to the 2008 Democratic National Convention, followed by my analysis of the speech. Chapter four will provide the historical context and analysis of her 2012 speech. As I have argued throughout this chapter, a clear understanding of rhetorical situation allows us to evaluate the situation to which Michelle Obama is called to respond to at both her DNC appearances. From this we are not only better able to judge her strategies, but also uncover what exigencies are reflective of her role, and therefore opportunities to expand rhetorically. The final chapter will provide a concluding discussion, and implications of this study, including suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER III

### MICHELLE OBAMA AT THE 2008 DNC

Chapter one offered a history of the role of first lady and introduced Michelle Obama as a unique rhetor currently in the role. Chapter two considered First Lady Michelle Obama as a rhetorical agent as well as provided background on the proposed frameworks for evaluation of her rhetoric. Chapter three will now present a historical context of the news and events leading up to Michelle Obama's performance at the 2008 Democratic National Convention as well an analysis of her 2008 speech. As noted in chapter two, a closer look at the media attention and issues she faced before her speech will help explicate her specific constraints as a First Lady candidate. Knowledge of these constraints allows us to understand what audiences needed to be addressed with her DNC speech. It will also lend to the analysis of her ability to craft a persona to answer these criticisms.

Along the 2008 campaign trail Michelle Obama was outspoken and present, though unable to create a stable, positive identity with the American public. Voters who knew her mostly as the caricature "angry black woman" painted by her critics were still wondering what type of first lady she would be and what role she would play in the White House. This sparked debate over her readiness to take on the role of First Lady. These feelings of uncertainty stemmed from mixed reviews, early blunders in the campaign, and her seemingly poor translation from person to paper.

#### Context of the Democratic National Convention

In 2008, Michelle Obama, wife of the then presidential nominee Barack Obama, took the stage at the DNC in Denver, Colorado. She was the evening's final speaker on the opening day

of the convention, which took place at the Pepsi Center. On the night of Monday the 25<sup>th</sup>, Craig Robinson, Michelle's older brother, introduced her as the headline speaker, under the day's theme of "One Nation." Her speech lasted just over 20 minutes and focused on cultivating a more human perception of her husband, addressing skeptical voters, and reassuring the nation that she and her Barack were persistent, hardworking folks, who would fight for "the nation as it should be" (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1).

Michelle's speech at the DNC was important for two major reasons. First, she needed a platform from which to solidify her and her husband's "American" identity with the American people. Representative Jesse Jackson was quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* saying:

So far, the public has only seen the sound bites and the YouTube version, and you have not heard from Michelle... It will be a proud moment to see the unedited version, the smart, graceful Harvard-educated lawyer, mother and supportive spouse. (Glanton, 2008, p.1)

Moments before Michelle spoke at the DNC, her Chief of Staff, Stephanie Cutter was also quoted "...she's very excited to give this speech. She's going to be talking about the Barack Obama she knows and the entire Obama family. She's going to tell their story. For the first time to millions of American people" (transcript, foxnews.com, 2008). Likewise, Valerie Jarrett, a close friend and colleague of the Obamas noted, "It is intended to be very personal, open and very revealing about who they are...America will know their values, their life decisions and what drew them to one another" (Glanton, 2008, p.1).

The second reason the speech was important, was due to the delicate nature of the Clinton supporters Barack needed to gain in order to beat John McCain in the presidential election. As noted in a *New York Times* article, Obama, who had lost the female demographic in previous

primaries, did not corral Hillary Clinton's supporters after winning the party nomination (Saulny, 2008). Many grumbled at Clinton's loss and threatened not to support the Obama ticket (Naylor, 2008; *The Belfast Telegraph*, 2008). News of bitterness on behalf of Clinton supporters was evident, with one article noting "even as the four-day convention opened there was more evidence of the deep unease among Democratic voters about the choice of Barack Obama as its presidential candidate" (Naylor, 2008, p.1). Additionally, a Gallup/*USA Today* poll revealed that "only 47 percent of Clinton supporters will back the Obama ticket, and that another 23 percent say they may jump ship for the Republican, John McCain, or the independent Ralph Nader before the election" (Naylor, 2008, p.1). With the election looming and in light of these events and sentiments towards Barack, Michelle needed to assure many of the female and blue collar Americans of her husband's dreams for the nation. However, before this opportunity came, Michelle faced a number of issues, which ultimately called forth her rhetorical strategy.

#### Leading up to the DNC

Moments before Michelle Obama took the stage at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Stephanie Cutter, Michelle's Chief of Staff, spoke again, this time with Fox News Host, Bill Hemmer about the address. Noting that this rare occasion provided an opportunity for her to speak without fear of being quoted out of context, Stephanie described the circumstance as unique.

...the one thing about tonight is that nothing is going to be taken out of context. You're going to get that speech; American people are going to get that speech unfiltered. They're going to hear directly from Michelle Obama, and it's going to be the real Michelle Obama

— not subject to the other sides of the spin or the high jinx. This is the real Michelle Obama. (transcript, foxnews.com, 2008)

The opportunity for a candidate's spouse to speak at a nominating convention is a relatively new phenomenon, and for Obama, the situation provided a pivotal platform from which she could address millions of Americans. For the first time in the 21 month long campaign for her husband, she was going to be able to introduce herself and her family, personally, to the nation. Furthermore, she was going to be responding to a number of situational issues that had been brewing, leading up to the Convention and her husband's nomination as the Democratic candidate.

First, were the many doubts and attacks on her husband, and his campaign for the White House—specifically, citizens who doubted his nationality and his values. In a *Washington Post* article in May of 2008, Obama campaigners shared stories of the struggles they faced recruiting support. Across the country, volunteers noted that they were met with crude racism and even personal attacks regarding their support of Obama. In northeastern Pennsylvania, one Mayor, Norm Ball, wrote to a local newspaper about his choice to support Hillary Clinton over Barack, explaining: "No, I want a president that will salute our flag, and put their hand on the Bible when they take the oath of office" (Merida, 2008, p. 1). Another campaigner, Karen Seifert from New York, expressed her disbelief when another Clinton supporter asked her how she could trust Obama, pointing to her t-shirt with his face saying "He's a half-breed and he's a Muslim. How can you trust that?" (Merida, 2008, p. 1).

However, these personal attacks were not the only type of skepticism floating around the country. A much more public shadow of doubt was cast on the candidate when Jerome Corsi's anti-Obama book, *The Obama Nation: Leftist Politics and the Cult of Personality*, reached

number one on the *New York Times* hardcover nonfiction best-seller list. Although the Obama campaign argued that the book should be on the "*fictional* best-seller list," they finally responded to the book with a 40 page rebuttal, claiming the author was a "...fringe bigot peddling rehashed lies," in a *USA Today* article in early August 2008 (Pickler, 2008, p.1).

In addition to the overtly racist comments and rumors circulating about Barack Obama, there was also widespread doubt at a more general level concerning his morals, values and "American-ness" outside of politics. In an early 2008 online article for *Time Politics*, it was being noted that Michelle was the one providing a "real-life example" of her husband's "soaring rhetoric" (Newton-Small, 2008, p. 1). While Barack consistently brushed over his past, only offering small pieces of information, Michelle was able to give the public the more intimate stories they craved (Newton-Small, 2008). She was described as coming from a "conventional background" that her husband's supporters could relate to, which contrasted with Barack's outwardly exotic upbringing that often troubled voters (Newton-Small, 2008). In the weeks leading up to the DNC, reports were clear that America was looking for a bridge from Obama's big dreams to their own. As stated in an online article from *The Edmonton Journal*, even Barack was "...counting on his wife of 16 years to convince Americans her bi-racial, internationally raised husband shares a personal story every bit as American as their own" (The Edmonton Journal, 2008, p.1).

The second major situational issue plaguing Michelle was her personal identity. Throughout the campaign, Michelle had spent a good amount of time in the spotlight, and while she was dubbed "the closer" by numerous sources, for her ability to get more commitment cards signed at her rallies than Barack Obama could at his (Gibbs, 2008), she had yet to close with the American people. Voters, who knew her mostly as a caricature, painted by her critics, were still

wondering what type of first lady she would be and what role she would play in the White House.

In 2008 Michelle was heavily criticized by both the right and the left for making a now infamous statement in which she claimed she was proud of her country for the first time in her adult life, now that her husband was running for president. Republicans called her “unpatriotic,” “rude,” and “ungrateful,” forcing Barack to comment on the issue (Gibbs, 2008). However, this was not the first time Michelle Obama had been outspoken or deemed unfit for the role of first lady. In an earlier article from the *New York Times* in 2008, a spectator at the African-American awards gala in Atlanta, called her address at the reception “long and inappropriate for the occasion” (Saulny, 2008, p.1), while others in attendance noted it seemed condescending, especially since she was speaking to a group of high achievers (Saulny, 2008). Reports of this nature earned her titles such as the “angry black woman” (Glanton, 2008, p.1).

Unlike other first lady potentials, Michelle Obama was anything but ordinary. During her standard stump speech given during the campaign, she avoided “sunny” topics, and discussed controversial issues such as education and inequality (Leonard, 2008). She also talked about her husband, often revealing private issues and personal flaws that her supporters relished (Grigsby-Gates, 2008), but prompted critics to label her as a “high-profile and controversial spouse” (Glanton, 2008). Although she learned to better manage her humor that often left Barack as punch line, she noted in a 2008 *New York Times* article that:

What I’ve learned is that my humor doesn’t translate to print all the time. But usually when I’m speaking to a group, people understand what I’m trying to say, they get the humor, they understand the sarcasm, they get the joke. (Saulny, 2008, p.1)

In that same interview, Michelle was quoted saying that she was "...trying to be as authentically me as I can be...My statements are coming from my experiences and my observations and my frustrations" (Saulny, 2008, p.1). However, her controversial and outspoken nature left Americans wondering if she did in fact fully support her spouse's run for the White House.

In Jodi Kantor's 2012 book, *The Obamas*, Michelle was portrayed as a strong willed woman who was not willing to sacrifice the family she had built for anything, not even the Presidency. Likewise, in an article published right before her speech at the DNC, she is re-quoted from that summer saying:

I'm a wife, I'm a working woman, I'm a daughter and a sister and a best friend. But most importantly, I'm a MOM. "My girls are the first thing I think about when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I think about when I go to bed at night. (*The Edmonton Journal*, 2008, p.1)

*The New York Times* also reported that even previous to 2008 she had kept crowds waiting with calls to her "little people," daughters Sasha and Malia (Saulny, 2008). Yet despite her struggle to remain a fierce, working mom, and supportive wife, while establishing a separate identity from her husband, Michelle Obama found herself with a rare opportunity to respond to her critics.

### Situational Opportunities

Despite her debatable performances throughout Barack Obama's campaign Michelle Obama was still the best hope he had at the 2008 DNC to convince Americans that he was their best bet, a man who truly identified with the American population. As seen in various reports throughout 2008, Michelle had the ability to persuade a number of diverse audiences of her

husband's character and values. As one newspaper reported, she was able to identify with the African American population, "... even if they have struggled to do the same with her husband" (Leonard, 2008). Her life was the example to her husband's rhetoric, coming from a family who really did achieve "the American Dream." While touring in South Carolina in early 2008, she identified herself as an ordinary American, noting:

I was raised in a working class family on the South Side of Chicago, that's how I identify myself, a working class girl. My mother came home and took care of us through high school, my father was a city shift worker who took care of us all his life. The only amazing thing about my life is that a man like my father could raise a family of four on a single city worker's salary. (Newton-Small, 2008, p. 1)

In early 2008, *Time Magazine* also discussed her ability to resonate not only with female African Americans, "... torn between voting for the first woman president or the first black President," (Newton-Small, 2008) but also with the female population as a whole, a demographic Barack continually struggled with. One student from the University of South Carolina noted she was torn between Obama and Clinton. However, after hearing the moving rhetoric of Michelle at a rally, decided to lean toward Obama, saying: "She was really a real person, I was inspired, just in awe" (Newton-Small, 2008, p.1). Her ability to be a "real person" continued to help Americans feel understood by both she and her husband. Right before the DNC, one news article summed it up:

For her fans, Michelle Obama represents something far different: a thoroughly modern American woman who balances the tightrope of career and parenting while somehow looking fabulous doing it... But it's been Michelle's personal style and her marriage to Obama that have attracted the most notice. She publicly—and irreverently—complained

about her husband's snoring and his inability to pick up his dirty socks. . . .She also speaks with unabashed affection about her husband, helping humanize him with voters (Leonard, 2008, p. 1).

Given her struggle and unique position in the 2008 election, Michelle Obama had a lot riding on the opening speech of the Democratic National Convention. In order to accomplish her goals, she needed to let the public into her private life, demonstrate her ability to be a tough and logical Harvard trained lawyer, express support for her spouse, honor her responsibilities as a mother, remain authentic as a person, and speak in a way to reconcile these expectations.

### The Rhetoric of Michelle Obama

Faced with a complex situation, Michelle Obama drew on several rhetorical tools to craft an expert persona to answer her multiple audiences. First, she needed to invent a sense of rhetorical agency on her own terms to honor her commitment to authenticity as a person balancing public and private roles. Second, by speaking from her multiple perspectives she was able to organize her speech in a way that allowed her to serve as the most comprehensive character witness for her husband, while also building her identity with the public. Third, through her use of theme/metaphor she was able to create identification with the audience by renewing faith in a long standing cultural narrative. Fourth, through her use of language strategies of allusion, parallelism, enactment, and identification, she was able to weave together her role as a supportive spouse and display her readiness to take on the role of first lady.

### Inventing a Basis for Feminist Agency

Michelle Obama had a number of situational exigencies calling forth her rhetoric at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. First, she needed a platform from which to solidify her

and her husband's "American" identity with the American people. With doubt surrounding his nationality and his values, she needed to provide reassurance that although Barack Obama had an unusual upbringing his vision for the nation was in touch with the dreams of Americans nationwide. Additionally, she needed to address the various Clinton supporters nationwide who were unsure if they could support the Obama ticket. In addition to women, many blue collar workers were unsure of Obama's concern for them. Finally, after several key issues during the months leading up to the speech, Michelle was called to address her readiness to take on the White House and the role of first lady. This included her ability to enact domesticity and supportive roles, while maintaining her individuality as a mother and a lawyer.

However, she could not accomplish these tasks without remaining loyal to her upbringing and family, her public identification as a leader, and her private identity as a wife and mother. If she remained too open and candid about her personal life with Barack, the public concern regarding her readiness for the traditional role of first lady would be questioned; if she asserted her own intelligence and integrated fully with her party's platform, she risked removing the spotlight from her husband's goals for the Presidency. Essentially, if she over played any one of her many roles, her conflicting exigencies of serving as a public character witness while providing private, personal examples of her identity, were bound to conflict. Thus, the situation was complicated by the demands of intersecting public and private identities, revealing the daunting double binds Jamieson identified for women.

Ostensibly, Michelle Obama begins her speech by creating identification through the public enactment of family. Beginning with her opening line, she uses family as a natural way to connect with her audience while asserting her goal as a character witness for her husband,

Barack Obama. More subtly however, she begins by placing herself and her family in a position of superiority over her husband in order to build agency as a credible character witness.

The first line of her speech is significant for several reasons. In the opening line she states: “As you might imagine, for Barack, running for president is nothing compared to that first game of basketball with my brother, Craig” (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1). After being introduced by her brother Craig, her introduction establishes continuity between her brother and herself. This connection prepares the audience for a message that unifies. Her first line frames the first persona that she will speak from: the role of sister. It also acknowledges the purpose of the speech, naming Barack and his candidacy for the Presidency; but it also works to place Michelle Obama in a position of power, allowing her to attest as a true character witness. Michelle placed her brother Craig in the role of her father since his passing. She states:

Like Craig, I can feel my dad looking down on us, just as I've felt his presence in every grace-filled moment of my life. At 6-foot-6, I've often felt like Craig was looking down on me too ... literally. But the truth is, both when we were kids and today, he wasn't looking down on me. He was watching over me. (p. 1)

Thus, through these two sections of text, what Michelle Obama is so delicately recognizing is that while running for president has been unquestionably challenging, it is not the first time Barack Obama has been tested and evaluated. He has played basketball with Michelle's older brother, who also happens to be a NCAA Division I college basketball coach. Therefore, much like you're your average American tradition of “meeting the parents for the first time,” her family has passed judgment over him by way of a specific cultural tradition. In African American culture basketball is not *just* a game. For many inner-city African Americans,

basketball is much more than a sport; it is a method of education and expression. Basketball teaches social skills, symbolizes rites of passage and establishes cultural identity (George, 1992).

Although subtle, this approach was a non-controversial way to appeal to greater cultural values. Aside from the more specific basketball reference, the approach more visibly appealed to the American cultural value of taking the opportunity to measure a suitor for one's daughter. Likewise, because it was Michelle Obama's first move in her speech, it served to establish a story foundation for subsequent comments and action. By playing her role as a sister, Michelle Obama was able to create a sense of superiority surrounding herself and her family. She provided evidence that Barack Obama was not automatically "accepted" into her family; rather he was tested by the traditions of their cultural identity.

Since Barack Obama had passed the "test" she moved to equalize her position with him, noting that "with little more than our faith in each other and a hunger for change — we joined my husband, Barack Obama, on the improbable journey that's brought us to this moment (p. 1)." By *joining* with her husband, Michelle recognizes that she and her family made a conscious *choice* to become equals with him; they did not simply "follow" —rather they purposefully *joined* in the journey; and in doing so took on a piece of both the burden and the reward of what was to come. However, the freedom to deliberate and choose to join also implies the power to refuse; thus this line in the speech affirms Michelle's sense of agency that she chose to join Barack on her volition.

After affirming Barack as a worthy candidate who has been joined by her and her family, Michelle moves to equalize herself with her audience. Although she hints at this equal relationship by starting her speech with personal pronoun usage: "As *you* might imagine..." (p. 1) which signifies her perceived similarity to her audience, she strengthens this by noting: "But

each of us also comes here tonight by way of our own improbable journey.” (p. 1). This creates a sense of identification based on their common bond of a unique journey. Thus after constituting her sense of agency on her own terms she moves to begin a strategy of enactment, a journey of growing closer to Barack leading the audience to this moment of the connection.

### Perspectives as an Organizational Strategy

In the first moments of the address that Michelle Obama has invented her rhetorical agency out of mainstream, cultural traditions, and she has done so on her own terms. From there, she then begins to craft a persona from which she is able to serve as a comprehensive character witness, while maintaining her identity as an individual. To accomplish this, Michelle Obama drew on the rhetorical resources of her roles to play the role of feminine virtuoso. She did this through an organizational strategy based on perspectives. This topical approach treats a subject by familiar divisions (Campbell & Huxman, 2009). In this particular speech those familiar divisions are the major roles/personas Michelle Obama plays in her life: sister, daughter, wife, and mother. These roles are associated with traditional and social duties for women and also roles that she played in Barack Obama’s life.

It is through this organizational structure of personas that we see Michelle Obama address her many critics and testify as a character witness for her husband, all while creating a sense of unity among herself, her husband, and her audience. Through these perspectives she is able to publicly bring the audience into the private realm of her life and by doing so, craft a persona aligned with the public, yet traditional role of the first ladyship. She introduces these roles at the top of her speech, noting:

I come here tonight as a sister, blessed with a brother who is my mentor, my protector and my lifelong friend. I come here as a wife who loves my husband and believes he will

be an extraordinary president. I come here as a mom whose girls are the heart of my heart and the center of my world... And I come here as a daughter — raised on the South Side of Chicago by a father who was a blue-collar city worker and a mother who stayed at home with my brother and me... (p. 1)

While this is not an exhaustive list of her roles, it is important to note that these personas are non-controversial. Despite her high profile campaign labels and controversial nature in the media, the roles she chooses for this speech are a part of her identity; they cannot be denied, nor disputed. Speaking from these perspectives works to neutralize the more outspoken and raw elements of her character which caused unease among many Americans during the 2008 campaign season. They are roles appropriate for a female rhetor and convey mainstream cultural values associated with family and reflective of the domestic sphere and feminine style. Therefore, from both a cultural and logical standpoint, Michelle builds her case for her husband.

#### Journey and Weaving as Metaphors

Michelle Obama draws on the use of two significant metaphors/themes throughout her speech as a way to create identification with her audience and to answer her critics: journey and weaving. First, it is through her metaphorical “journey” that she carries us through her “improbable” voyage leading up to the DNC and exemplifies her husband’s commitment to a better nation. At the beginning of her speech, her use of “journey” works to lay the foundation for her ongoing narrative. It functions to create movement in her speech, transitioning her in and out of her multiple personas. On a more abstract level it also implies a sense of hope—a reoccurring theme in the Obama campaign. As women are traditionally seen as more domestic it is implied that there are inherently less opportunities to embark on a journey. Yet Michelle

Obama exemplified a person who has been a part of many extraordinary journeys; this is why she describes her journey as “improbable.”

It was improbable that Barack Obama, who started as a Senate candidate, would go from the 2004 DNC key note speaker to the Democratic nominee for President in four short years. It was also improbable that he be nominated because Hillary Clinton was a stronger and more well-known candidate who had already spent time in the White House and the Senate. However, more tacitly, Michelle Obama’s choice to describe her journey as improbable signified that it was improbable for an African American woman to be addressing the DNC as her husband became the presidential nominee—as a victory would make them the first African American family to occupy White House.

Throughout the campaign Michelle Obama faced notable criticism for being too “cold,” “haughty,” and “arrogant.” Reports of her bitter behavior, such as her pride remarks, earned her the “angry black woman” label and prompted widespread unease about her ability to serve as the first lady. The role of first lady is bound by antiquated traditions and historical gender norms—all developed by white, mainstream families, thus even minor missteps on Michelle’s part were enough to cause apprehension. More overtly, it was not uncommon for Barack Obama’s nationality and religion to be questioned. As noted previously, voters did not think twice about calling him a “half breed” or claiming he was Muslim (Merida, 2008).

However, throughout the campaign both the Obama’s avoided direct references to their race. As Joseph (2011) notes: “In utilizing the tropes of postrace, Obama speaks of her Blackness through the code “the South Side of Chicago,” which...is meant to connote both Black and working class” (p. 68). Thus, a direct reference to this improbability on the grounds of race could confirm public unease in her ability to hold the traditional role. However, an

indirect reference to the “improbable journey,” alludes to the obstacles she and her family faced as the first African American family running for the Presidency. An indirect reference also avoids further labeling as the “angry black woman,” and instead conveys her sincere sense of hope, a major theme of Obama’s campaign.

Michelle Obama’s use of the “improbable” journey metaphor appeals to the many audiences she needed to address. It subtly nodded to Hillary Clinton, the more likely nominee; it also recognized African Americans who dreamed of their own improbable moment like the one she was experiencing; and finally, it acknowledged Barack Obama as a strong candidate. Just as her improbable journey with Barack and her family had led up to that moment, her use of the journey metaphor works to create movement, leading us throughout the rest of her address and to each of her personas. The rhetorical journey Michelle takes the audience on moves them closer to Barack Obama. However, in order to continue with the audience on her improbable journey without creating uncertainty about her readiness for the traditional role of the first lady, she must speak in a way that is non-threatening; thus she draws upon the metaphor of weaving.

On a literal level, “weaving” has been seen as a domestic and feminine activity since the time of ancient Greece. By definition, weaving refers to the combing of elements into a complex whole, or the introduction of a new element into a pre-existing whole, in the act of uniting elements into a coherent whole. Though Michelle Obama does not engage in “actual” weaving with yarn, she enacts a domestic and private trait in the public realm of politics by weaving with her words. Her Harvard education and experience as a lawyer have taught her to form arguments and offer evidence to support them; though these modes of arguments are traditionally viewed as masculine, Michelle Obama is able to use them under the veil of the feminine style through her

artful use of weaving. Weaving as a feminine mode of speech is thus, a resourceful way to bridge expectations of domesticity with logical expression.

In an effort to combine Barack Obama's exotic upbringing with her blue collar upbringing, and more palatable "American story," she enacts a form of verbal weaving to unite Barack Obama, with herself, forming a coherent whole. After taking careful consideration to first speak of her unique upbringing and family values, she then notes:

And you know, what struck me when I first met Barack was that even though he had this funny name, even though he'd grown up all the way across the continent in Hawaii, his family was so much like mine. He was raised by grandparents who were working-class folks just like my parents, and by a single mother who struggled to pay the bills just like we did. Like my family, they scrimped and saved so that he could have opportunities they never had themselves (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1).

As she casually mentions her first meeting with Barack Obama, she begins to "weave" him into her speech as a second complex element. Yet in this next passage, it is clear he remains an equal part of the "coherent whole":

And Barack and I were raised with so many of the same values: that you work hard for what you want in life; that your word is your bond and you do what you say you're going to do; that you treat people with dignity and respect, even if you don't know them, and even if you don't agree with them (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1).

At this point, she and Barack Obama have been woven together, as one. This is demonstrated in her clear articulation of *one* set of values that is shared.

Thus it is on this journey she embarks on that she weaves the audience closer and closer with Barack Obama. She also uses this domestic theme of weaving as a way to address her

critics and skeptics. It is her delicate weaving of her public enactment of family values with Barack's that garners trust from a skeptical nation and reassures the nation of her domesticity and traditional nature. It is through Michelle Obama's use of weaving that she is able to connect her powerful stories together, taking her audience on her journey, a vicarious enactment which liberates her from the constraints of domesticity.

### Language Strategies as Unifying Strategies

Michelle Obama draws on several key language strategies, including pronoun use and conjunctions as a way to create identification throughout her speech. Though subtle, her use of pronouns allows her to frame her audience in the role of a similar and equal person. Used repeatedly, this strategy helps Michelle create a sense of unity among herself, Barack Obama, and the audience. Her pronoun use also helps to separate the various stops she makes throughout her journey. Her use of conjunctions functions both grammatically as a way to join ideas together, but also as a way to transition in and out of roles. Through her use of "and" she is able to make seamless transitions between various elements of her values and Barack's, and her goals and the audience's.

At several points throughout her speech, Michelle Obama also draws on the language strategy of parallelism (i.e., repetition) in order to introduce and emphasize ideas and as a way to bring together people, creating a sense unity among Americans. She first uses this strategy to discuss the many personas from which she will be speaking from throughout her address, and again to offer evidence of Barack's work before running for president. The use of parallelism allows her to assert her many identities from which she can offer the most comprehensive self-introduction and testimony to her husband. This strategy of parallelism, which she has used

before, not only allows her to draw on a feminine identity as described by Dow and Tonn (2003) by reflecting feminine ideals of family relationships, but also invites her audience to recognize the many roles she plays. These are the same non-controversial personas that she will portray throughout her speech.

By explicitly listing the roles she filled every day, she was able to reach out to millions of Americans and affirm who she is and where she is coming from. Likewise, while no two people will share the exact same public experiences, offering multiple identities on the most basic level allowed her to reach out to her audience, who despite politics, potentially stepped into those roles every day. This created a sense of perceived similarity with those who assumed those same roles. This included women, who identified with being a “sister” or a “wife;” a parent, who knows what it feels like to have children as their top priority; or perhaps a person living in or who came from modest upbringings. In this single introductory passage, she made several key audiences feel important and acknowledged, including blue collar workers and mothers.

Her use of conjunctions here and throughout her speech serve their grammatical purpose—as a way to by join together ideas, but also as a way to integrate her roles. For example, by ending with the conjunction “*And* I come here as a daughter...” she effortlessly moved herself into her second persona for the evening: daughter. It is in this role that she is able to create a running strategy of identification through the cultural narrative of the “American Dream.”

The premise of the American Dream is a basic one—if you work hard, you can succeed. In America, the opportunities for success are as diverse as the people who live there; race, class, or ethnicity cannot hold anyone back. These are ideas central to the Obama’s story and seamlessly parallel the theme of “hope” that Barack Obama was running on. Thus, in her

speech, Michelle Obama set out to reaffirm belief in this cultural tradition as a way to indirectly address several exigencies.

In doing so, Michelle risked the possibility of giving an unconvincing enactment of the American dream, thereby missing the opportunity to connect with her audience. By sharing her story, she accepted the chance that it could be uninteresting or too familiar to her audience—she and Barack often made reference to their unlikely beginnings. On the contrary, her “improbable journey” could have also been considered *too* improbable to renew faith in the cultural narrative; if the “dream” seemed too implausible, it would not have created identification. However, despite these risks, Michelle Obama was ultimately successful in her use of the strong cultural narrative. First, speaking from the perspective of a daughter, she was able to invite the audience into her personal “American story.” This is important because her modest upbringing lends itself to identifying with hard working and stay at home parents, blue collar workers, and those who still believe that if you work hard, you can succeed. She noted: “And I come here as a daughter—raised on the South Side of Chicago by a father who was a blue collar city worker, and a mother who stayed at home with my brother and me” (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1).

She was also able to share her identity as a daughter, provide concrete examples of her family values and in doing so, honor her father’s memory:

My dad was our rock. Although he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his early 30s, he was our provider, our champion, our hero...He never stopped smiling and laughing — even while struggling to button his shirt, even while using two canes to get himself across the room to give my mom a kiss. He just woke up a little earlier and worked a little harder. (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1)

Michelle Obama was also able to use the allusion of the American dream to draw parallels between her own story, values, and beliefs, and that of her husband's; at the most basic level reaffirming trust in his *American* story, noting that:

...what struck me when I first met Barack was that even though he had this funny name, even though he'd grown up all the way across the continent in Hawaii, his family was so much like mine. He was raised by grandparents who were working-class folks just like my parents, and by a single mother who struggled to pay the bills just like we did. (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1)

Finally, by re-telling this narrative from her perspective, Michelle Obama reaffirmed her “improbable journey” metaphor, renewing faith in an important cultural tradition. Four years prior to that night, Barack Obama spoke as a Senate candidate at the 2004 DNC. Nothing that his parents “...imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential,” (*Washington Post* transcript, 2004, p. 1) he too credited his success to the great American dream. Thus, by using this allusion, Michelle was able to demonstrate that she and Barack, at that moment, had come full circle. Both coming from “improbable” beginnings, she honored the American Dream through her story and achievement, while successfully building trust in her husband's character. She also tacitly addressed previous criticism questioning her patriotism—for only in America is this dream, this full circle, possible, she states: “So I know firsthand from their lives — and mine — that the American dream endures” (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1). Instead of foregrounding race for which she was criticized earlier in the campaign, this statement foregrounded the transcending cultural narrative, working to convey indirectly her pride in America.

As Michelle Obama transitions out of the role of daughter, she steps into her role as wife. From the persona of wife, Michelle shifts the focus from her own personal journey to her journey with husband's; thus she is able to serve as a character witness for her husband, delicately weaving together her life story and values of which she spent the introduction setting up with his. From the role of wife, Michelle is also able to testify, first hand, that Barack Obama is the best bet for America.

It is important to note that as she transitions from the role of daughter into wife, she begins with a conjunction: "And you know, what struck me when I first met Barack..." (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1). By using "and" she connected her values, described while she was in the role of the daughter, with Barack's values, which she is now discussing. Additionally, by using the pronoun "you" to refer to the audience, she continues to create a sense of identification, referring to them not as millions of Americans, but as a similar individual "you." She further creates a sense of unity between herself, her husband and the audience through her use of the pronoun "you" in the sentences that follow:

*And Barack and I were raised with so many of the same values: that you work hard for what you want in life; that your word is your bond and you do what you say you're going to do; that you treat people with dignity and respect, even if you don't know them, and even if you don't agree with them. And Barack and I set out to build lives guided by these values, and pass them onto the next generation.*" (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1)

She adds emphasis with her parallelism of "and Barack and I," which strengthens her claim that she and her husband do in fact share the same values. Additionally, through the pronoun usage "you" she is generating identification with her audience, using the personal pronoun to signify that similar to her and Barack, the audience also believes in these values. Also, using the

conjunction “and” she continues to tie together each passage of her narrative about growing with her husband: “*And* as our friendship grew, and I learned more about Barack... (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 2).

Continuing from her perspective as a wife, she then begins to shift focus from her journey with Barack to Barack’s journey; she makes this transition by weaving together her hopes and aspirations with Barack’s. Fundamentally, the purpose of her speech is to support the candidate—her husband. Thus, political in nature, her journey must also reflect his political accomplishments. Using her foundational premise of a “story” to continue creating movement in her journey with Barack, she shifts the focus to his past work. This progression from her to him, seems natural and logical—just as stories progress, so too does a journey. She testifies:

Barack stood up that day, and spoke words that have stayed with me ever since. He talked about "The world as it is" and "The world as it should be." And he said that all too often, we accept the distance between the two, and settle for the world as it is — even when it doesn't reflect our values and aspirations. But he reminded us that we know what our world should look like. We know what fairness and justice and opportunity look like. And he urged us to believe in ourselves — to find the strength within ourselves to strive for the world as it should be. And isn't that the great American story? (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 2)

In this passage she uses the pronoun “he” to suggest that she has witnessed her husband’s vision for the world as it “should be.” Likewise, her use of “we” and “us” hints that her audience is aware of what fairness, justice and opportunity look like. However, she must offer proof of this claim: *how* do we know what fairness, justice and opportunity look like? By once again drawing on “the great American story,” she mentions the allusions of women’s suffrage and Dr. Martin

Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech, reminding us that we are all tired together, driven by "the same conviction that drives the men and women... across this country." She starts generally, mentioning the "*People* who work the day shift, kiss their kids goodnight and, and head out for the night shift..." and then becomes more specific, noting the "military families," the "young people," people like "Hillary Clinton," and "Joe Biden," who, like "all of us," are "driven by a simple belief that the world as it is just won't do" (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 2).

Though she is still speaking from the persona of wife, Michelle Obama reminds us of her journey, the one we, the audience started with her, now brought together by "the thread that connects our hearts..."; the obligation that we must "fight for the world as it should be." She brings together "the current of history," which she has already expressed in the anniversary of two major historical events, with a "new tide of hope," that is her husband's run for the Presidency. Essentially, Michelle Obama has just connected each individual to the American dream, and to her husband's promise of hope—a restored faith in the narrative. She has explicated how we accomplished great things in the past, and how we continue to do so in the future: by fighting for the world as it *should* be. The spotlight now shines on her husband and the moment is right for her to shift to a discussion of his promise as a candidate.

She then testifies that Barack not only shares this belief, but it is what drives his work. Her parallelism: "it's what he did..." drives this point home, offering examples of his work on the streets of Chicago, in the senate, and for the nation. Giving her husband's platforms to "end the war in Iraq responsibly, build an economy that lifts every family, and make health care available" she again testifies to his work for the nation, judging her conclusion to be accurate based on the fact that:

It was strong enough to bring hope to those neighborhoods in Chicago...It was strong enough to bring hope to the mother he met worried about her child in Iraq...And it was strong enough to bring hope to people who came out on a cold Iowa night and became the first voices in this chorus for change that's been echoed by millions of Americans from every corner of this nation. (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 3)

Michelle Obama makes her final transition into her persona as a mother just before the end of her speech. She has offered a record of Barack's public service in the past, but because he has yet to win the presidency, she must also speak of his promises for the future. By transitioning into the role of mother, she is placing herself in a position where the future is extremely important—she has two young daughters. Tying herself to Barack via their children, she is also tacitly implying she trusts Barack as the father of her children (the future) and thus the audience can trust him with the future of the nation. Her pronoun use of “our” signifies that together, they share and are connected by the experience of being parents; her tense is future oriented:

...the Barack Obama I know today is the same man I fell in love with 19 years ago. He's the same man who drove me and *our* new baby daughter home from the hospital 10 years ago this summer... (p. 3). And as I tuck that little girl and her little sister into bed at night, I think about how one day, they'll have families of their own. And one day, they — and your sons and daughters — will tell their own children about what we did together in this election. They'll tell them how this time, we listened to our hopes, instead of our fears. How this time, we decided to stop doubting and to start dreaming. (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 4)

## Rhetorical Timing

The closing deserves commentary. Bitzer (1968) noted the ancient Greeks gave special attention to the timing of speech—the “right” moment to speak and a “right” sense of timing as one spoke. In closing her address and in reviewing her personas, Michelle runs through her multiple roles once again. In this final passage, it becomes clear that by speaking from her multiple personas of sister, daughter, wife, and mother, Michelle Obama was able to serve as the most complete and comprehensive character witness, shedding light on the past, present, and future. Declaring as a daughter: “So tonight, in honor of my father's memory...” she reminds us that Barack Obama has been tested and joined by her family; as a mother she confirms her trust and faith in him and his care with their children’s future “... and my daughters' future...” (p. 4) and finally as a wife, she reminds us of the nation’s improbable journey and her confidence in her husband:

...out of gratitude to those whose triumphs we mark this week, and those whose everyday sacrifices have brought us to this moment — let us devote ourselves to finishing their work; let us work together to fulfill their hopes; and let us stand together to elect Barack Obama president of the United States of America. (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 4)

Four observations can be made regarding the sense of timing. First, consider Michelle’s use of history. Most observable is her second mentioning of the “triumphs we mark this week.” As Michelle noted previously in her address she is speaking on the same week as the 88<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women winning the right to vote and the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. On the most basic level, the timing of these events coincides with Michelle’s need to appeal to a diverse audience of blue collar and female voters who were previously supporting.

Second, in addition to her ceremonial appropriateness of recognizing these two monumental achievements in U.S. history, they also serve as a well-timed reminder that as an African American and as a woman, that very moment in her speech, is a victory. Her timing of the first mentioning works to reaffirm not only her improbable journey, but also her enactment of renewing faith in the American Dream; she notes: “I stand here today at the crosscurrents of that history — knowing that my piece of the American dream is a blessing hard won by those who came before me” (p. 2).

Third, her use of personas enabled her to speak from multiple points in time. As noted previously, this offers what I argued is the most comprehensive testimony of her husband’s achievements and goals; but it also works to create a strong sense of identification between her audience and Barack Obama. Because she chose to speak first as a sister and daughter, the audience was able to be introduced to Barack Obama in the same way that Michelle once was. They relived her family’s testing of Barack, Michelle’s curiosity about his “strange” name and family history, and her satisfaction with his early life decisions. Speaking from the role of wife, allowing time to elapse since those “early days with Barack,” Michelle Obama next was able to give the audience a sense of his commitment to hard work, which sometimes translated into unpopular work. Her many examples and narratives from their continued growth gave the audience a picture of a man who was determined and willing to meet the needs of those around him—whether in Chicago or all cities of the nation.

Finally, Michelle Obama speaks about her husband from her perspective as a mother. Noting the *actual* time (10 years this summer) that has gone by since he drove home their first baby from the hospital, Michelle reaffirms a sense of identification between Barack and the audience through the mainstream, cultural tradition of the “first drive home.” However, she also

expresses her stake in the future—her children— forecasting an ongoing sense of identification; she notes that Barack was committed giving his children what he had never had, “the affirming embrace of a father's love” (p. 4) and in essence can be counted on to do the same for American’s prosperity. In these ways, she has prepared the audience for the powerful closing in the final moments of the speech, building support for this moment in time. The closing is both fitting and powerful as an appeal for political unity.

### Rhetorical Objectives

Upon entering the 2008 DNC Michelle Obama was faced with a complex set of rhetorical objectives. First, she needed to address previous criticism of her behavior during the campaign and reassure the nation she was ready to take on the role of first lady. Second, she needed to increase the nation’s familiarity with her husband, presidential nominee Barack Obama. Finally, she needed to appeal to unity among the Democratic Party in order to rally the Clinton supporters and help ensure Barack Obama’s election.

First, to combat uncertain feelings and to help familiarize the nation with the “real” Barack Obama, Michelle drew the strategies of identification, allusion, and enactment. First, she used strategies of identification which use language to create a sense of perceived similarity between the rhetor and the audience. One method is through the appeal to shared values as a way to create bonds. Using the mainstream, cultural tradition of “meeting the parents,” Michelle relied on Barack’s first interactions with her family as a way to immediately move him closer to millions of Americans who shared similar experiences. Likewise, she fostered identification between herself and the audience, discussing her first meeting with Barack and her surprise at how many things they had in common as a way to demonstrate that she too had concerns getting to know someone with a different upbringing than her own. From there, she used an allusion to

share cultural knowledge of the American Dream as a way to draw on her own version of the American Story and put Barack Obama in touch with the hopes and dreams of Americans. Michelle Obama's use of the American Dream as a strategy to foster identification with her husband and the audience combined both their enactments of the cultural narrative as a way to give the most vivid evidence that Barack Obama's dream for the nation was every bit American as each individual tuning in.

Second, to address criticism she faced throughout the campaign and demonstrate that despite her label as the "angry black woman," she was ready for the antiquated and traditional role of first lady, Michelle Obama drew on the use of metaphor/theme, and enactment of the American Dream. In essence she was able to take her audience on her journey, a secondhand enactment which in a sense freed her from the constraints of domesticity, while still nuanced with feminine qualities. Additionally, the personas she portrayed throughout her journey reflected mainstream and domestic appeals. She also engaged in weaving, a domestic activity, as a way to speak in a subtle feminine style. Finally, her enactment of the American Dream through her narrative of her American story allowed her to address doubts about her patriotism.

Finally, Michelle Obama needed a way create unity among the Democratic Party, especially among those who previously supported Hillary Clinton. Clinton's supporters included many women and blue collar workers who were unsure if Barack Obama understood their position and needs. To achieve this problem and to appeal to Clinton's supporters Michelle Obama used strategies of identification and parallelism as a way to emphasize that she and Barack fully understood their positions and needs for the future. She created identification drawing on her father's narrative and her modest beginnings—reminding the audience that only in America can someone like her go from the South Side of Chicago to the White House. She

also suggested that she and her audience share common view points when it comes to keeping the American Dream alive and paralleled this idea with examples of the men and women who she has met across the country—even mentioning Hillary Clinton by name. This allusion and enactment of a strong cultural narrative like the American Dream celebrated the values and beliefs of the Democratic Party and appeased many of the Clinton supporters. Likewise, Michelle Obama’s organizational strategy based on perspectives highlighted her multiple, and potentially conflicting roles as a woman in society, offering a flexible rather than fixed definition of what being a “woman” meant to her allowing various types of women to identify with her. Finally, her delicate use of pronouns throughout help to make the audience feel a part of something bigger; by using the pronoun “you” and “we” she symbolized to her audience a sense of equality and unity that she and her husband hoped to bring to the party.

### Summary

This chapter has provided a historical context for Michelle Obama’s speech at the 2008 Democratic National Convention. It also provided an analysis of her speech. Although it will be further discussed in the final chapter, this analysis has demonstrated that the first lady was able to develop an organizational strategy based on perspectives, which allowed her to craft and speak from multiple personas. This perspectives approach which also drew on language strategies including identification, parallelism, and allusion reaffirmed the cultural narrative of the “American dream.” After Barack Obama won the 2008 Presidential election, Michelle Obama returned to the DNC in 2012 with a new set of exigencies and challenges. Chapter four will next describe the historical context and events leading up to Michelle Obama’s speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention, as well as provide an analysis of that speech.

## CHAPTER IV

### MICHELLE OBAMA AT THE 2012 DNC

After creating a foundation on which to further explore first lady rhetoric through a case study of Michelle Obama in chapter one, chapter two described the theoretical lenses that would be used, including the feminine style and elements of Neo-Aristotelian criticism. Chapter III then offered a historical context of the news and events leading up to Michelle Obama's performance at the 2008 DNC, in addition to an analysis of her address. This chapter will first, provide an overview of the key issues Michelle Obama faced during her first four years in the White House; second, explore the historical context in the months leading up to the 2012 election and her address at the DNC; and finally, provide an analysis of her 2012 speech.

#### Context of the 2012 Democratic National Convention

Arguably, Michelle Obama performed successfully at the 2008 Democratic National Convention as a keynote speaker. As far as creating a stable image to take on the role of first lady, many were comparing her to an idealized Jackie Kennedy in terms of style, grace, and appeal (*Vanity Fair*, 2009). She had testified on behalf of her husband's vision for the nation, softened her image to the American public, and successfully repaired her mistakes from the campaign. She had addressed multiple audiences on her own terms through her newly crafted rhetorical agency. However, with the change came a new set of criticisms and issues to tackle.

#### The First Four Years

At the start of the President's first term in office, the Obama family began adjusting to life in the White House. Over the next four years their family would face the criticism and scrutiny typical of White House living. Despite promising "hope and change" to the American

people, the public often criticized the Obamas for not changing fast enough, or in Michelle's case, not making the *right* changes. Michelle Obama endured and often fought back against criticism of her image and personal life, including the projects she supported and the clothes she wore.

*DNC Fallout.* The day after Michelle Obama spoke at the 2008 DNC, a *Los Angeles Times* opinion writer dubbed her "June Cleaver," unleashing a wave of unsupportive and critical media messages from a largely feminist base. She was being criticized for allegedly putting aside her role as a Harvard trained lawyer, and allowing the primping and priming of "public relations magic" to transform her (Sommerfeld, 2008, p. 1). Other immediate reactions knocked her for being "overly staged" (Towrey, 2008, p. 1) and conforming to the idealized image of a first lady. She was critiqued by the media for casting aside her role as an intelligent, strong, hardworking, woman in American society. As one newspaper noted, "They're sanding off some of her wit, and downplaying the strength of her marriage as a partnership of equals" (Sommerfeld, 2008, p. 1). The author of the "Cleaverization" article stated in response to public approval of her speech, which embodied many American ideals: "Fair enough, but she also is a lawyer with the same blue-chip education boasted by her husband. Apparently, campaign tacticians decided that she should de-emphasize that aspect of her persona..." (Cleaverization, 2008, p. 1). Thus, while her performance worked to address her multiple critics and audiences leading up to the election, it also created a new set of obstacles and critics.

Likewise, in March of 2009 the comparison between Michelle Obama and Jackie Kennedy fell short. Upon posing for her first official White House portrait, Michelle ignited a lasting controversy over her choice to "bare arms" when she sported a sleeveless black dress for

the picture (Ibanga, 2009). Despite it being a look typical of Michelle Obama, and a look very similar to Jackie Kennedy's first White House portrait, critics attacked her for being unprofessional, too informal, and out of season (Ibanga, 2009). They also used the occasion to draw attention to other fashion missteps, including another sleeveless look she chose for her husband's first address to Congress in February 2009 (Kantor, 2009).

*Fashion Focus.* Despite gracing the covers of *Vogue* and *People*, Michelle Obama would be continuously criticized for her fashion choices throughout her first four years in the White House; they were too informal, too expensive, and at times, not American enough, referencing designer Oscar De La Renta's criticism that the first lady should not be wearing foreign designers when too many American designers were looking for a break (Aceshowbiz.com, 2011; Vilensky, 2009). In 2011, Michelle Obama appeared on the Today show, and commented during her segment that she "wears what looks good, irrespective of label" (Odell, 2011, p. 1). And while she said she takes it as "a compliment" that people pay attention to her wardrobe, she remained clear that it was not a huge concern in her day-to-day life (Odell, 2011). Later in 2011, her shopping preferences once again took the spotlight when a reporter for the *Washington Post* questioned if her casual trip to a local Target was refreshing or false, speculating that the First Lady was only out to reimage her high maintenance taste in couture (Farhi, 2011).

*Travel Itinerary.* During the summer of 2011, Michelle Obama was tasked by her husband to travel to Africa in order to spread goodwill on behalf of the U.S. and meet with young leaders of academic and civil leadership. The trip stirred criticism of the first lady for a number of reasons. First, it aroused disappointment from many African advocates who argued that Obama was not paying enough attention to African nations himself, having taken only one

trip to sub-Saharan Africa since his inauguration; he was sending his wife alone on this trip, leaving the power in her hands to spread support from the United States (Hartman, 2011).

Additionally, it created controversy over Michelle Obama's travel log.

Prior to her trip to Africa, Michelle had landed herself the nickname of "a modern day Marie Antoinette," after taking a lavish Spain vacation amidst the harsh recession the previous summer with daughter Sasha. Her approval rating reportedly dropped significantly after the trip (Shahid, 2010). She had also been accused of planning an unnecessary and "frivolous" trip to Mexico with Dr. Jill Biden, wife of the Vice President. Despite intentions of meeting and establishing contact with young civic leaders, some conservatives were outraged she would take time to plan a trip to a place that has long been a hotspot regarding immigration policy. The First Lady also slipped on delicate international customs, first hugging Queen Elizabeth in 2009, prohibited by royal protocol, and then shaking hands with a Muslim minister in 2010, who was not permitted to touch the opposite sex outside of family; he later publicly blamed the First Lady for the interaction (Hartman, 2011).

Though criticism of the first family is a day-to-day feature of the White House, Michelle Obama was in a delicate position as re-election approached in 2012. With the economy continuing to struggle, media reports of her expensive "vacations" and clothing easily indicated to some audiences that she was insensitive or out of touch with the needs of the average American. Likewise, her cultural insensitivity and missteps with "proper" enactment of the first lady role—such as her portrait controversy, threatened to override the traditional and feminine image she worked hard to create on her own terms at the 2008 DNC. With her judgment in question, a second appearance at the DNC provided her an opportunity to address these concerns, as well as speak on behalf of her husband. This time, Michelle Obama's public image of

femininity and domesticity would be just as relevant as her ability to stay sharp minded and logical in answering the criticisms of her first four years in office.

Leading up to the 2012 DNC

In the months leading up to the DNC the 2012 election offered a number of significant controversies and issues that would need to be addressed. While Barack made changes to universal healthcare, conservative groups and activists fought hard against policies surrounding contraception coverage. After Mitt Romney became the front runner for the Republican Party and the eventual nominee, he and President Obama became occupied with the alleged “war on women.” As Democrats sought to win back a key group of voters for the 2012 election—women—they highlighted congressional Republicans’ controversial policies. However, a slow economy and distressing job loss threatened Obama’s successful bid for re-election.

*Health Care Controversy.* As the Republican primaries began to wind down in early of 2012, President Obama made headlines after making revisions to his proposal for universal healthcare coverage (often referred to as “Obamacare”) regarding contraception (CNN Wire, 2012). Previously mandating that all employers provide free access to contraceptives for female employees, Obama declared that religious affiliated universities and hospitals would no longer be forced to offer contraception coverage to their employees; however, insurers would still be required to offer complete coverage free of charge to women working at these types of institutions. Responding to the outrage he faced after creating the mandate, he hoped this amendment would appease conservatives and religious groups nationwide who felt the law was violating their first amendment right as well as infringing upon religious liberty. Despite the liberal push for expansive contraception coverage, which they proposed was simply grounded in

gender equal healthcare, some political analysts believed the controversy would cost Obama votes in the 2012 election, especially in key swing states like Pennsylvania and Ohio. Others insisted it would instead harm the Republican Party and their appeals to suburban women voters (CNN Wire, 2012). Instead, it generated a lasting and controversial theme of the 2012 election.

*The War on Women.* Shortly after this revision in early March, conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh fueled the debate over contraception when he called Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown Law student, a “slut” on his national radio talk show (Negrin, March 2, 2012). Fluke, who testified on behalf of full contraception coverage to Congress, argued that birth control should be covered by health insurance. After the Senate chose to shut down a Republican effort to free employers of having to cover contraception in health care plans, Limbaugh further infuriated the left noting that Fluke was “having so much sex she can’t afford her own birth control pills and she agrees that Obama should provide them, or the Pope” (Negrin, March 2, 2012, p. 2). He also mocked President Obama after his efforts to reach out to Fluke and commend her on her testimony regarding a culturally important issue. This controversy marked a turning point in the election season, igniting not only a debate over contraception, but what some called a “war on women.” As Negrin (2012) noted, the “...so called war on women has plagued Republicans since the primary spun into the orbit of Sandra Fluke, birth control and abortion, distracting from the all-important issue of the economy” (p. 1).

Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum remained embattled through the Republican primaries; neither picked u momentum among women. The Obama administration continued its efforts to “woo” women—whether the war was “real” or not. In April of 2012, President Obama invited women from across the country to the White House to discuss what was important to them as

voters. This “White House, Women, and the Economy Forum” confirmed what many had been predicting—that women were becoming a key voting bloc of the 2012 election (Hartman, 2012). With Obama and other democrats publicly aligning themselves with women, Republicans continued to attack Obama over the economy. They claimed that despite the addition of 120,000 jobs in March, the number was still fewer than expected and would hurt women in particular. Sharon Day, the co-chairwoman on the Republican National Committee also noted that the numbers of women currently employed continued to drop in March while the number of women who left the labor force increased (Negrin, April 6, 2012). Unfortunately the GOPs efforts did not seem to stick as well as Obama’s. One attendee of Obama’s forum, Cristinia Afaro, a Communications worker for McDonald’s, commented on her experience at the White House noting how many minority groups were gaining unprecedented access to the administration; she commented: “people feel like they’re being heard...it does make a difference” (Negrin, April 6, 2012, p. 2). Likewise, polls continued to show a widening gender gap between the President and the likely Republican nominee, Mitt Romney (Hartman, 2012).

Negrin (April 6, 2012) noted that while Republicans continued their efforts to turn the spotlight back on the economy, Democrats began to view women as a voting base they could regain. After facing devastating losses, especially with women, in the 2010 midterm elections, Democrats hoped that women would move back from the GOP due to social issues. They continued to push the narrative that the GOP launched the “war on women” after congressional Republicans narrowed in on contraception, ultrasounds prior to abortion, and Romney’s pledge to “get rid of Planned Parenthood” (Hartman, 2012, p. 1). Despite Republicans’ stance that the “war on women” was simply a talking point and noting that Democrats have always had more support from female voters, they began to admit some concern over the widening gender gap. In

support of their concern, a March 2012 *USA Today*/Gallup Poll gave Obama a confident 18 point lead over the presumptive GOP nominee Mitt Romney in 12 key swing states (Negrin, April 6 2012).

*Romney vs. Obama.* On Tuesday April 10, 2012, Rick Santorum officially withdrew his bid from the primaries, leaving Mitt Romney the likely GOP nominee for the upcoming election (Rajwani, 2012). Though Romney had a clear lead over Santorum as far as delegates, he continued to struggle to gain support from conservative voters (Cohen April 13 2012, Steinhauser, 2012). As many conservatives expressed concern with his moderate decision making as the Massachusetts governor, Romney promised to attract some of Santorum's evangelical and socially conservative supporters by appearing with the former candidate. Likewise, after being backed by two leading national anti-abortion organizations including National Right to Life and the Susan B. Anthony List, Mitt was pressured to align with the conservative base after the organizations highlighted his "prolife positions" and commitment to selecting a prolife running mate, despite his continued struggle with female voters.

A day later, Cohen (April 11 2012) reported that the war on women was kicking off the Obama-Romney race, and was expected to last the duration of the election season. Seeking to reverse the gender gap, Romney attacked Obama's economic policies as "bad for women." Despite trailing Obama 57%-38% (*Washington Post*/ABC News poll) in support from women, Romney claimed that "The real war on women is being waged by the president's failed economic policies" (Cohen, April 11 2012, p. 1) and that Obama made the recession last longer, thereby impacting women through lost job opportunities.

Unfortunately, around the same time Romney faced yet another setback when one of his advisers hesitated when asked if Romney supported the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act that expanded workers' rights to sue in cases of gender pay discrepancies; "We'll get back to you on that..." (Cohen April 11 2012, p. 2) stated Lanhee Chen, Romney's Campaign Policy Director, to reporters. Although Romney's camp issued a later statement that Romney did back the Act, there was not a clear sense of whether or not he backed the 2009 Letbetter law. David Axelrod, Obama's senior advisor called it a "tough day" for Romney after Obama's camp fired back with a statement from Lilly Letbetter herself, admonishing Romney's failure to stand up for women. Axelrod called Mitt's efforts to repair damage with women: "Mitt Rehab with Women Tour" on his twitter account (Cohen, April 11 2012).

As Obama continued to push for tax measures that would ensure millionaires, like Romney, pay a higher tax rate than middle class workers, Republicans continued to push more tax cuts for the wealthy. A frustrated Obama responded: "In America, prosperity has never just trickled down from the wealthy few" (Cohen, April 11, 2012, p. 3). Additionally, he continued to make comments at campaign rallies regarding the wealth distribution of the nation, noting that he "wasn't born with a silver spoon" (Aigner-Treworgy & Wallace, 2012, p. 1) in his mouth and "neither was Michelle," (p. 1) but rather someone gave them a chance. Though these types of comments were typical of Obama's rhetoric and he never mentioned Mitt Romney by name, they took on new meaning in light of his opponent's enormous wealth (Aigner-Treworgy & Wallace, 2012). Meanwhile, Mitt Romney handed his wealth with some awkwardness along the campaign as he addressed Obama's plan to enact the "Buffet Rule" which mandated that if you make over one million dollars a year, you should pay the same income tax percentages as the middle class (Aigner-Treworgy & Wallace, 2012).

*Rosen's Remarks.* In mid-April of 2012, the “war on women” as perpetuated by the Democrats hit a snag when democratic strategist Hilary Rosen discussed Romney’s use of his wife, Ann, as his guide to women and economic struggles. On Anderson Cooper 360, she noted that Ann Romney was not really equipped to be Mitt’s guide to women’s economic struggles as she has “never worked a day in her life” (Rosen, 2012, p. 1). Rosen generated bi-partisan criticism for her attack on stay at home moms. Ann Romney argued back that her “career choice” was to be a mother. She responded to Rosen on Fox News by noting:

Other women make other choices to have a career and raise a family which I think Hillary Rosen has actually done herself. I respect that. That’s wonderful...but you know there are other people that have a choice. We have to respect women in all those choices that they made. (CNN Political Unit, 2012, p. 2)

The Obama campaign immediately worked to distance themselves from Rosen’s comments, with many high profile people making statements. Stephanie Cutter, Michelle Obama’s former chief of staff and the Obama deputy campaign manager posted that “families must be off limits in campaigns, and I personally believe stay at home moms work harder than most of us do” (CNN Political Unit, 2012, p. 2). Eric Erickson, a CNN political contributor who appeared on the same panel as Rosen on AC 360 tweeted: “If raising 5 sons through breast cancer and MS isn’t a real job, I’m not sure what is” (CNN Political Unit, 2012, p. 5). Even First Lady Michelle Obama commented on the issue, tweeting “Every mother works hard, and every woman deserves to be respected” (Killough, 2012, p. 1). The first lady’s comments in particular seemed to fire up the Republicans yet again; they continued to attack Obama’s anti-women economy.

Despite the condemnation, Rosen seemed to stand by her beliefs, though she did apologize to Ann Romney for her choice in wording. She admitted that it was fine with her if everyone wanted to “play politics” but that Republicans were simply using her misstep as a way to divert attention from their policies that negatively impact women (CNN Political Unit, 2012). In her online article after the comments she commented on Romney’s corporation, Bain Capital, noting that less than 10% of the senior workforce were women and that Romney said in a 1994 senate race it was due to the struggle to find qualified women for the executive positions (Rosen, 2012). Rosen declared:

So it begs the question, is Ann Romney Mitt’s touchstone for women who are struggling economically or not? Nothing in Ann Romney’s history as we have heard it—hard working mom she may have been—leads me to believe that Mitt has chosen the right expert to get feedback on this problem he professes to be so concerned about. (Rosen, 2012, p. 1)

*The State of the Economy.* Throughout the summer months leading up the DNC it became apparent that President Obama’s tenure in the White House was being defined by the economy and the “Great Recession,” with many believing it to be the make or break factor of the 2012 election (CNN Politics Election Center). While his stimulus plan helped to boost the economy temporarily, it failed to impact the growing unemployment rate, which reached a record high 9.1% with disappointing job reports. Economic growth continued to slow over the summer, and consumer confidence was in a downward spiral (Kuhnhenh, 2012). Likewise, the housing market remained in bonds and the impending fiscal cliff created reluctance among business owners to make investments and hiring decisions (Riley, 2012).

However, as some noted, while the economy tended to polarize voters, there were various narrower issues that had the ability to sway voters. Obama had gained headway with small, but critical groups of voters based on his decisions regarding birth control and immigration; likewise he enticed voters who were otherwise waning in support with his backing of gay marriage and willingness to work to decrease student loan rates (Kuhnhenh, 2012).

Both Obama and Romney worked in pivotal states to gain support for their policies regarding renewable energy, coal, and other sustainable projects. While Obama continued to promise wind energy tax cuts *and* coal industry jobs, Romney went on the attack, criticizing Obama for his hostile and anti-coal sentiments; he noted at a rally in Ohio: "...if you don't believe in coal, if you don't believe in energy independence, then say it...coal country stands with Mitt" (Thomas, 2012, p. 1). He and Republicans worked to put Obama on the defensive regarding his record on the shape of the economy. At one Ohio stop along the campaign, Air Force One landed next to hangers with empty military transport planes that Obama promised would be put into use with the Air National Guard Base after working the Department of Defense; Mitt Romney capitalized on these failures as a way to gain voters in key states (Thomas, 2012).

Ultimately, the economy was in rough shape heading into the DNC and expected to continue deteriorating (Logiurato, 2012). Without better job reports and an upward turn in spending, Obama would be forced to ask voters for a second term with unemployment above 8% (Riley, 2012). However, as many were beginning to see, the economy as a whole did not necessarily decide the election. Appeals to specific interests, policies, and tax cuts, also had the potential to rally either campaign (Kuhnhenh, 2012; Riley, 2012). However, regardless of who started the "war on women," female voters were still a key demographic that would help ensure

re-election for Obama and could provide a enough tilt to lose him the election should they side with Romney or the Independent candidate.

Thus, heading to the 2012 DNC Michelle Obama was faced with a brand new set of exigencies. Although her apparent purpose was to yet again serve as a character witness for her husband, that role would take on new heights, as she would need to convince the nation she really has witnessed “hope and change” that they were promised four years before. She would need to appeal to various kinds of female voters who were a key voting bloc in the election, winning them back after disappointing midterm elections. She need to restore confidence in Barack Obama’s plans for the economy, both past and future oriented. Without evidence of effort, and sight of growth, Obama’s chances might fade. Finally, after a successful, yet heavily criticized four years in the White House, she needed to maintain her status as First Lady while simultaneously countering her high profile caricature.

### The Rhetoric of Michelle Obama

Faced with yet another complex situation, Michelle Obama drew on several rhetorical strategies to address the nation at the 2012 DNC. First, through her use of “witnessing” the First Lady was able to strengthen her claims and evidence to the American public by providing specific, concrete examples, made powerful by her added proof of sight. Second, by utilizing an inductive organizational strategy she created an atmosphere absent of hostility, inviting her audience to participate in her logical process of drawing conclusions about Barack Obama’s dedication and work. Third, through her masterful use of hypotaxis, Michelle Obama was able to add a layer of emotion and personal tone to the entire speech, while drawing our attention to her main points and strong claims about Barack Obama’s past and future goals for the nation.

Finally, through her use of language strategies including careful pronoun use, parallelism, and identification, she was able to appeal to various types of women, a key voting bloc in the election; likewise, she was able to enact humility and grace, reaffirming her status in the traditional role of first lady.

### Witnessing

Throughout her 2012 speech Michelle Obama relied on her position as a witness in several of her roles as a way to provide indisputable, concrete proof to her claims. Though some critics commented about her use of this technique, referring to it as a “tick,” the method of offering concrete examples prefaced with “I see,” or “I have seen” adds strength to each of her evidences, as she is not only providing proof, but personalizing it by making it known that she has witnessed the very events, people, places, things, she is discussing. She uses witnessing as a way to make claims outside of her inductive strategy, still diverting hostility and audience disagreement by offering support from her own experience. By sharing the things she has witnessed over the last four years, she asserts that she is not just providing platitudes or hypotheticals but testifies to what she has actually experienced. She has witnessed these events and knows them to be true—the highest form of testimony.

As Michelle Obama opens her 2012 speech, she starts by noting that “as First Lady, I have had the extraordinary privilege of traveling all across this country” (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 1). This line recognizes the role from which she will speak from first and the standpoint from which she will witness. It also serves to create a sense of humility on her behalf for all that the role of first lady has offered her, including the *privilege*, not the *right*, to travel. Michelle Obama makes the claim that in this role, she has “seen the very best of the American spirit” (NPR

Transcript, 2012, p. 1). Making her claim first, she supports it by sharing what she has witnessed:

I have seen it in the incredible kindness and warmth that people have shown me and my family, especially our girls. I've seen it in teachers in a near-bankrupt school district who vowed to keep teaching without pay. I've seen it in people who become heroes at a moment's notice... And I've seen it in our men and women in uniform and our proud military families... (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 1)

Her use of parallelism found in the repetition of variations of "I have seen" constitutes a form of witnessing, emphasizing the idea that she has not simply observed one example, but multiple, consistent cases of what she is claiming. In effect, her well-crafted introduction, including her personal witnessing, positions her not only as Barack Obama's wife, but also as the First Lady, further qualifying her to speak on behalf of her husband's credentials.

Noting again her humbleness in her current role: "serving as your First Lady is an honor and a privilege," (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 1) she draws a connection to her 2008 address, reminding the audience that "when we first came together four years ago, I still had some concerns about this journey we'd begun" (p. 1). After choosing to elect Barack Obama, her use of the pronoun "we/we'd" symbolizes that the audience has now become a part of the journey, instead of vicarious observers. The statement also works to place the audience in a position of power as they too have made the choice to "join" the journey. Enabling the audience to consider their own agency also works to prime them for strategies of identification and inclusive pronoun use.

Michelle Obama next shifts into the role of mother, as she expresses her concern about her children moving to Washington: "...like any mother, I worried about what it would mean for

our girls...” (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 1). In the 2008 speech, Michelle Obama spoke last and most briefly from her position as a mother; however, four years later, this role holds extra weight with her national audience. Recognizing that women of all types were a key audience to address, Michelle Obama appealed to the traditional ideology of motherhood by recognizing her concern for her daughters through a period of change and transition. In sharing her memories before beginning life in the White House, she draws on the feminine style, sharing examples that embody the feminine ideals of family and nurturance; once again she makes an appeal to traditional gender norms, noting the simple joys of soccer games and grandma’s house, and how “a date night for Barack and me was either dinner or a movie, because as an exhausted mom, I couldn’t stay awake for both” (NPR Transcript, p. 2, 2012). This strategy of identification reached out to mothers across the nation who share her concerns and understand what it is like to be an “exhausted mom” (p. 2).

Similar to her 2008 speech, Michelle Obama began her address focusing on herself and her role as First Lady. This role builds confidence in her ability to testify to Barack’s character, to which she must now attest given the purpose of her speech. Using her perspective as a mother, she notes: “And the truth is, I loved the life we had built for our girls...and I didn’t want that to change if he became President” (p. 2). Her use of the pronoun “we” and “our” to refer to she and Barack Obama’s children subtly switches the spotlight onto him. Using her position as a witness, she reminds the nation of their history and shared values. She delicately appeals to the hardships the nation is facing economically by drawing on examples that suggest modesty and struggle of their beginnings:

You see, even though back then Barack was a Senator and a presidential candidate...to me, he was still the guy who’d picked me up for our dates in a car that was so rusted out,

I could actually see the pavement going by through a hole in the passenger side door... You see, Barack and I were both raised by families who didn't have much in the way of money or material possessions but who had given us something far more valuable... (p. 2)

In this passage Michelle also inverts her role with audience and shifts her witnessing from "I have seen" to "You see." This rhetorical strategy is consistent with her organizational structure of inviting audience participation to draw conclusions with her as she reasons inductively—literally inviting the audience to "see" Barack as she does.

The previous passages also asserted a key question that was asked and answered throughout Michelle Obama's 2012 address: is Barack Obama the same man he was four years ago? Appealing to stability in a time of great challenge, Michelle hopes to reassure the nation that despite hardships, whether in the past or present, Barack Obama remains resolute in his promises. However, now that Michelle Obama has shifted the focus onto her husband, she must actively work to engage and persuade an audience who has felt the current hardships of the recession and are skeptical if they should elect Obama to another term. To combat these issues, Michelle Obama relies on an organizational strategy based on induction.

### Inductive Organizational Strategy

In 2012, four years had passed since her compelling address at the 2008 DNC, in which she masterfully and on her own terms created a persona from which she answered multiple audiences, as well as testified to her husband's candidacy. Now, she was called on once again to serve as a character witness for Barack Obama in a way that reflected sensitivity to the issues that arose throughout the 2012 campaign against Republican nominee Mitt Romney, as well as

her own criticisms as First Lady. After a tough four years in office, the economic recession Barack Obama promised to bring “hope and change” to had done little more than deepen; and the nation was not in the same optimistic mood they held four years earlier. Thus, Michelle Obama needed a way in which to offer concrete evidence that President Obama was *still* their best bet for a better future.

Inductive processes are based on the logic of going from specifics to a general conclusion. A rhetorical strategy based on induction reflects a speaking process that offers multiple, specific pieces of evidence before drawing a general conclusion based on those proofs. In essence, an inductive structure attempts to recreate for the audience the cognitive process by which the rhetor arrived at their conclusions (Campbell & Huxman, 2009). By streamlining the thought process, it gives the listener a sense of how a speaker drew their conclusions. This strategy is an excellent way to increase audience participation since the audience is invited to participate in drawing similar conclusions based on the evidence given. This organizational structure also works to decrease and minimize audience hostility; because proof is being offered before a claim is being made, there are fewer opportunities to disagree and dispute the conclusions being drawn—as often times the audience is making the same general conclusions. Because the audience must listen and follow closely so that they do not misinterpret the speaker’s purpose, the rhetor must actively engage the audience with their proofs.

Michelle Obama uses an inductive structure in two ways. First, she used this strategy to make smaller and general claims throughout her speech. Second, each of these smaller claims also helped to build up to her final claim, that Barack Obama was still the best choice for President.

Although Michelle Obama had begun to move towards discussing her husband, she shifts her focus momentarily to her father as a way to build up momentum for her inductive arguments, but also to remind the nation that she understands their struggle. Revealing once again his battle with MS and his determination to live life and provide for his children, Michelle begins to offer specific pieces of evidence, her first use of the inductive organizational strategy. She notes that:

...despite these challenges, my dad hardly ever missed a day of work...and when my brother and I finally made it to college...my dad still had to pay a tiny portion of that tuition himself. And every semester, he was determined to pay that bill right on time, even taking out loans when he fell short. He was so proud to be sending his kids to college. (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 2)

Then she makes her claim: “You see, for my dad, that’s what it meant to be a man “(p. 3).

Though subtle, this approach allows the audience to hear the examples and digest the evidence before the claim—allowing them to more easily accept it as truth. This truth is particularly important as it also is an appeal to traditional gender norms reflective of mainstream America.

This organizational strategy continues throughout her speech. As a way to reaffirm her values and connect them with Barack’s, Michelle Obama reminds us through multiple, specific examples of how she and Barack learned from their families’ example, she notes:

That’s how they raised us...that’s what we learned from their example. We learned about dignity and decency ... We learned about honesty and integrity... We learned about gratitude and humility ...and we were taught to value everyone’s contribution and treat everyone with respect.

After listing her evidence, she makes her claim: “Those are the values Barack and I – and so many of you – are trying to pass on to our own children. That’s who we are” (NPR Transcript,

2012, p. 4). Using the inductive strategy, she offered a number of emphasized, paralleled examples of how she and Barack “learned” to become who they are. By offering the proof first, Michelle strengthens the claim, as it now stands on its own. The audience has engaged in her use of parallelism, processed the evidence, and is more easily able to approve of the conclusion. Finally, this strategy works to answer her running query about whether Barack is still the same man. By reaffirming their shared values, Michelle is offering evidence that he still lives his life, guided by these principles.

Likewise, as Michelle Obama continues to make a case for her husband, she uses the inductive organizational strategy to highlight what Barack Obama *has* accomplished during his first four years in office, diverting attention from what has not been done or what has failed. She offers as evidence that Barack has:

...signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act to help women get equal pay for equal work...cut taxes for working families and small businesses and fought to get the auto industry back on its feet...he brought our economy from the brink of collapse to creating jobs ...refused to listen to all those folks who told him to leave health reform for another day...believes that women are more than capable of making our own choices ... has fought so hard to increase student aid and keep interest rates down...” (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 4-5)

before making the claim that: “in the end, for Barack, these issues aren’t political – they’re personal. Barack knows the American Dream because he’s lived it...and he wants everyone in this country to have that same opportunity...” (p. 5). By listing the proof of these claims first, Michelle has taken the audience on her logical, cognitive process, arriving at her conclusion

with them. As her evidence mounted, it became more difficult for the audience to refute her claim, as they have already heard the proof she offered.

Michelle Obama also delicately addressed several key audiences in her strategic use of evidence. By mentioning the Lilly Ledbetter Act and Obama's belief that women can make their own choices she displayed attention to women's issues that had been growing throughout the campaign; by mentioning health care, she was able to qualify the controversial choice by noting how Barack "didn't care whether it was the easy thing to do politically...—he cared that it was the right thing to do;" (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 4) and by reminding the audience that she and Barack's student loan bills "were actually higher than our mortgage," (p. 5) she makes the claim that the issues are "personal" easily understandable to her audience. Essentially, her organizational pattern works to create identification with the audience while simultaneously supporting her husband's re-election. Between her inductive claims, Michelle Obama also draws on another strategy known as "hypotaxis" through which she adds context and important emotional undertones to her address.

### Hypotaxis

Hypotaxis is a powerful grammatical strategy Michelle Obama used in constructing her 2012 DNC speech. Hypotaxis refers to the arrangement of clauses or phrases in a dependent relationship; this subordination helps to make it clear what the audience should be focusing on in a given sentence. Because each part of the sentence relies on the previous part, hypotaxis creates an expressive, dynamic tone and points to what should be read or heard with the most weight, while offering scene and context. By stacking up the clauses and suspending completion, hypotaxis also creates a craving for completion and incredible force when it occurs (Fish, 2011).

Michelle Obama used hypotaxis in two significant ways during her 2012 DNC address. First, on the most basic level, Michelle drew upon hypotaxis to add depth and context to examples and narratives throughout her speech. Sentences constructed with hypotaxis can be seen throughout her speech and work to give the audience dramatic and stimulating illustrations. Second, Michelle Obama used hypotaxis in a more sequential strategic way to build a case, piece, by piece, for her final claim. In asking the audience to stand together and elect her husband for a second term, she is essentially making a claim that Barack will continue to be the best hope for the nation in the *future*—a claim that is difficult to demonstrate with concrete evidence. Thus, using hypotaxis, she works throughout her speech to build upon each example of Barack’s work and dedication, ultimately creating a dramatic suspension and incredibly powerful force in her concluding statement that we should stand together to elect Barack Obama as President of the United States.

In her first and most basic use of hypotaxis, Michelle Obama crafts artful proofs and examples. Because she must offer evidence *before* making claims, hypotaxis allows her to craft well supported examples, and more suspenseful conclusions to her statements. For example, in asserting that Barack Obama wanted everyone to have a chance at the American dream, she stated: “...And he believes when you work hard, and done well, and walked through that doorway of opportunity...you do not slam it shut behind you...you reach back, and you give other folks the same chances that helped you succeed” (p. 3). Noticing that each clause depends on the previous, and builds to her ultimate point, Michelle used hypotaxis to highlight the metaphorical process of achieving success and passing it on. Though her underlying point is that Barack is committed to keeping the American dream “open” and alive for all, the use of hypotaxis creates a dramatic build up and closing to her point.

This passage leads into another use of her inductive organizational strategy. Using parallelism to repeat for emphasis the sense of continuity in his behavior—the same man—she begins to stack the evidence:

He's the same man who, when our girls were first born, would anxiously check their cribs every few minutes to ensure they were still breathing... the man who sits down with me and our girls for dinner nearly every night, patiently answering their questions about issues in the news... the man I see in those quiet moments late at night, hunched over his desk, poring over the letters people have sent him. (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 5)

She also adds a witness's perspective from her perspective as wife, with the repetitive appeal to the human sense of seeing and hearing:

I see the concern in his eyes...and I hear the determination in his voice....I see how those stories – our collection of struggles and hopes and dreams – I see how that's what drives Barack Obama every single day.

With this evidence, she is finally able to draw her conclusions concerning his consistency as a candidate in controversial times:

I love that he's never forgotten how he started...I love that we can trust Barack to do what he says he's going to do, even when it's hard – especially when it's hard...I love that for Barack, there is no such thing as “us” and “them”... And I love that even in the toughest moments...Barack never lets himself get distracted by the chatter and the noise. (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 6)

While these conclusions do not resemble specific campaign promises or arguments, they do reflect Barack Obama's commitment to making this nation great—his commitment to working across party lines and ability to move past the criticism. Likewise, Michelle Obama's reference

to the fact that things take time and that “change is hard, and change is slow, and it never happens all at once,” (p. 6) seeks to reassure the nation that her husband continues to strive for their future, faithfully stating that “eventually we get there, we always do” (p. 6). The repetition of phrases, what Campbell and Huxman (2009) refer to as parallelism, establishes and emphasizes consistency in character.

Before Michelle concludes her speech, we see another powerful example of hypotaxis at work. In this particular example, hypotaxis is used to build suspense to address a key point and a running theme. Stringing together a long list of subordinate clauses, Michelle Obama describes the start of America—and makes a final argument for the American Dream, advocating for many of the smaller voting blocs as she progresses to her final point:

If farmers and blacksmiths could win independence...if immigrants could leave behind everything they knew...if women could be dragged to jail for seeking the vote...if a generation could defeat a depression...if a young preacher could lift us to the mountaintop with his righteous dream...and if proud Americans can be who they are and boldly stand at the altar with who they love...then surely, surely we can give everyone in this country a fair chance at that great American Dream. (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 7)

Though subtle, she publicly nods to many groups of Americans who Barack Obama has worked to support in his first four years as President; she mentions immigrants, women, African American communities, and even to gay rights. And while these appeals to different groups may not seem like much, it is important to remember that their support helped keep the vote in Obama’s favor while diverting attention away from the more intricate economic problems. The use of hypotaxis in this passage creates a dramatic “if-then” appeal which sets up her conclusion.

As Michelle Obama begins to conclude, she re-visits the idea of the American Story, demonstrating to America that she identifies with their struggles—urging them to realize that the American story is “the story of unwavering hope grounded in unyielding struggle,” implying that hope and change are promises that take time (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 7). Then she moves to close her speech the same way she closed her 2008 address. Noting that she says “...all of this tonight not just as First Lady...and not just as a wife,” but as her “most important title,” “mom-in-chief” she gives a remarkable nod to moms across the nation, and reaffirms the traditional boundaries of her role. Though many were surprised by her “mom-in-chief” comment, rhetorically, it functions to draw attention to the fact that her daughters are her future, they are “still the heart of my heart and center of my world,” thus to place her trust in Barack Obama, again, is to place her daughter’s future, and all children’s future, in his capable hands; for she notes that she has “...none of those worries from four years ago about whether Barack and I were doing what's best for our girls” (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 7).

In her concluding remarks, Michelle Obama brought her strategies full circle, and used hypotaxis in its second form. Her efforts until this final moment have worked to lay the foundation on which she can place her final claim. Michelle has used hypotaxis throughout her speech as a way to offer the audience rich, factual evidence before drawing conclusions—but her final effort relied on the compilation and suspension of those previous claims. Because there is not factual evidence to support future claims, Michelle must use the weight of the past, subordinate truths, to make a plea for a final, future one. She states that “from experience,” (p. 7) referencing her countless examples of witness testimony, that:

...if we want to give all our children a foundation for their dreams and opportunities worthy of their promise...if we want to give them that sense of limitless possibility – that

belief that here in America, there is always something better out there if you're willing to work for it...then we must work like never before...and we must once again come together and stand together for the man we can trust to keep moving this great country forward...my husband, our President, President Barack Obama.

Her use of “we” includes all Americans, unifying across party lines as she speaks as a mother, not as a party member. She alludes for the final time, to the American Dream, noting that “we must work like never before...and we must once again come together...” in order to achieve it (p. 7). The repetition of her conditional phrase “if then” works to create a dramatic closing—each phrase a hope, only fulfilled by the final line. Her use of hypotaxis builds up to her final claim, creating desire for closure, supported by a speech full of smaller, more intimate conclusions, to her point: we can trust Barack Obama to move us forward.

#### Rhetorical Objectives

Leading up to the 2012 DNC, Michelle Obama was faced with a new set of exigencies calling forth her rhetoric. First, she needed to once again serve as a character witness for her husband and his attempt at re-election. After four years of a tough economy and lack of “change” that was promised, Michelle Obama needed to reassure the nation that Barack Obama was working hard to keep the American Dream alive. Second, in an attempt to sway a key voting bloc of the 2012 election, Michelle Obama would need to make various appeals to women across the nation. Finally, she needed to uphold her status as the First Lady while showing humility after a somewhat high profile first four years. To accomplish these strategies, Michelle Obama relied on her use of witnessing, an inductive organizational strategy, hypotaxis, and embedded use of pronouns, parallelism, and identification strategies.

Michelle Obama drew on the strategy of witnessing as a way to provide concrete, personal examples of her husband's work over the last four years. Because the nation had faced hard times, she needed a way to speak freely of what had been accomplished and what still needed to be done without stirring up ill feelings towards Barack. By offering her personal accounts of what she had witnessed across the nation, Michelle Obama provided irrefutable examples, that left a lasting impression on the audience due to her strategy of parallelism.

As a way to combat potential hostility from her audience, Michelle Obama relied on an organizational structure based on inductive logic. This strategy allowed her to offer proof and evidence of the claims she was making, prior to making them. This encouraged the audience to participate in her cognitive process through which she arrived at her general conclusions. Because she wanted to draw attention to the positive aspects of Obama's work, she offered examples and evidence based on his accomplishments and efforts to move the nation forward—making it hard for the audience to refute her claims. This strategy also worked on an overarching level throughout her speech to mount evidence that the nation should stand together to re-elect Barack Obama.

Finally, as a way to create context and add vivid imagery and suspense throughout her speech, Michelle relied on the use of the grammatical strategy of hypotaxis. By stringing together subordinate phrases and clauses, Michelle drew attention to her main points while adding emotional and personal tones throughout her speech. Combined with her use of personal pronouns and parallelism, this strategy worked to create identification as she was able to integrate various examples and stories while also making her central arguments.

## Summary

This chapter provided a historical context for Michelle Obama's speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention. It also provided an analysis of her speech. Although it will be further discussed in the final chapter, this analysis has demonstrated that the first lady was able to draw on multiple rhetorical and grammatical strategies including witnessing, inductive structure, and hypotaxis in order to address the exigencies brought forth by the 2012 election. Her performance, which also drew on language strategies including identification, parallelism, and careful pronoun use, helped convince the nation that progress had in fact been made over the last four years, and that hope and change were a timely process. Chapter five will next offer a discussion of the research questions and analysis, a summary of the findings, in addition to limitations and future research.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS

This chapter closes this study of Michelle Obama's speeches at the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Conventions. To begin, I first offer a brief review the previous four chapters and their purposes. Second, I present the research questions posed for this study and discuss the findings. Third, I discuss the limitations to the study. Finally, I will examine ideas for future research regarding first lady rhetoric and the rhetoric of Michelle Obama.

This study has examined Michelle Obama's address at the 2008 and the 2012 Democratic National Convention. It has explored the ways in which the role of the first lady both constrained her rhetoric and provided an opportunity to craft agency on her own terms in order to address multiple, conflicting audiences. Chapter one discussed the history of the role of First Lady. Throughout this first chapter, a chronological description of first ladies, grouped into key time periods, was provided as a way to understand the women who served in the position as well as highlight major developments in the role. It also offered a rationale for the study, noting that by examining Michelle Obama's rhetoric on a national stage, we are best able to see her addressing her multiple audiences. Chapter two presented the theoretical lenses for the study. They included the feminine perspective, a critical approach based on Campbell's study of women's liberation rhetoric, in addition to several elements from Neo-Aristotelian criticism. Within the second chapter, a discussion of the media's framing of feminism as well as Jamieson's double binds also took place to provide context to first lady rhetoric. Chapter three served two purposes; first, it provided the historical context from the months leading up to the 2008 Democratic National Convention; second, it analyzed Michelle Obama's performance at the 2008 DNC based on the theoretical lenses discussed in Chapter two. Afterwards, Chapter

four offered a similar design for the 2012 address: the historical context to the first lady's first four years in office as well as from the months leading up to the 2012 DNC, followed by an analysis of the First Lady's performance. The analysis and findings from chapter three and chapter four have brought us to the fifth and final chapter. In the following section, I will review the research questions and summarize their findings.

### Summary of Findings

The research questions posed for this study were as follows:

RQ1: How does Michelle Obama craft a persona through which she can address criticisms from multiple audiences?

RQ2: In comparing Michelle Obama's performances in 2008 and 2012 what are the rhetorical strategies she uses to navigate Jamieson's double binds for female public leaders?

In response to RQ1, Michelle Obama relies heavily on her organizational strategy as a way to craft a persona through which she is able to address criticism from multiple audiences. In her 2008 DNC address, this organizational strategy drew on perspectives, or familiar divisions, to which the audience could relate. Michelle Obama choose to speak from four roles that she played in her life, including sister, daughter, wife, and mother. From these roles Michelle was able to address her various audiences. For example, from her perspective as a sister, Michelle worked to create identification with her audience, drawing on mainstream traditions such as her family's first encounters evaluating Barack Obama as a suitor for Michelle. From her role as a daughter, she reached out to blue collar democrats who can relate to her father's story. When she spoke from the persona of wife, she was able to offer first hand examples of the dedication and hard work Barack Obama has done for the nation; and when she closed her speech as a

mother, we feel the full weight of her decision to trust in him to guide her daughter's future, and the urge to her audience to do the same with the future of the nation's children. Additionally, by choosing to speak from perspectives that are inherently domestic, she created a non-controversial persona that reassured Americans that she was ready and able to play the traditional role of First Lady.

In 2012, faced with a new set of audiences, Michelle Obama drew on an organizational pattern based on inductive reasoning. This strategy required the First Lady to first provide several pieces of evidence *before* making a claim or drawing a conclusion. This organizational pattern allowed the audience to participate in her cognitive process of reaching a conclusion based on the evidence provided. Because she faced a nation who had lived through four tough years of an economy that her husband promised to change, Michelle crafted a strategy that deferred hostility and invited audience participation. For example, by offering illustrations of how she and Barack were raised and highlighting their specific values, Michelle Obama was able to draw the conclusion: "That's who we are" (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 2). Likewise, as a way to address the various achievements Barack Obama *had* made in office, and to appeal to various interest groups, Michelle Obama first offered a long list of accomplishments and choices already made, before then concluding: "...for Barack, these issues aren't political—they're personal" (p. 4). This organizational strategy also allowed Michelle Obama to build up to her final claim—offering evidence throughout each part of her speech—that the nation should stand together again to re-elect Barack Obama.

The two different organizational strategies Michelle Obama crafted housed a variety of sub-strategies that also worked to foster identification, and address her audiences. However, the overarching commonality was her use of the feminine style as a way to neutralize her previously

“harsh” persona and invent a new sense of agency on her own terms. The feminine style was developed to account for the rhetoric of the Women’s Liberation Movement (Campbell, 1973). Because women were expected to adhere to the domestic ideals of the private sphere while still making cogent and substantive arguments, they relied on a variety of techniques that allowed them to make arguments and offer support, while remaining within the boundaries of the private sphere of the home.

In her 2008 speech, Michelle Obama used an organizational strategy based on perspectives. It is important to note that she chose four personas that were inherently domestic and feminine in nature. Though she could have spoken about her experience as a Harvard trained lawyer, or as an African American female, she chose to showcase her roles as a sister, daughter, wife, and mother. These non-controversial roles were part of her identity, could not be refuted or denied, and above all, allowed her to re-image her identity with the American public in a way that was non-threatening. Choosing roles that fit within the boundaries of the *private* sphere, she *publicly* made claims about her family, her husband and herself, offering logical and compelling evidence. Though she did not speak directly about issues of race, or her own employment, it is essential to realize that Michelle Obama, in creating this new identity on her own terms, used the feminine style as way to recognize these aspects of her life, while enacting the traditional norms called for in the performance of the role of first lady. She used her training in argumentation as a lawyer, to weave together coherent claims and back them with the appropriate evidence for her audience. Likewise, she respected her specific cultural traditions through her stories about her brother and her father. Relying on narrative, private, concrete examples, in addition indirect strategies, Michelle Obama answered each of her audiences and critics through her artful use of the feminine style.

Four years later, Michelle Obama had proven to the nation that she could play the role of first lady. However, she was called on to address a skeptical nation hit hard by a recession, and key groups of voters, including women, that Barack Obama was still moving the country forward. Once again, Michelle drew on the feminine style to organize her speech in a way that defused hostility, was laced with emotion and narrative, yet still functioned as a persuasive and masterful use of argument and language strategies. Through her use of witnessing, she was able to support her claims and offer the best form of private, concrete examples: those she had seen for herself. Speaking as the First Lady, she used her witnessing of people and places all over the country, as well as from right inside the White House, to create a vivid reminder for her audience that Barack Obama had not changed and was still committed to hope and change. Likewise, through her use of hypotaxis, Michelle Obama was able to use Barack's past efforts as a way to prove his future ones; her use of subordinate clauses, piled up, one after the other, led the audience to powerful conclusions about Barack's steadfast character, and their family's commitment in Washington.

In answering RQ2 regarding Michelle Obama's rhetorical strategies used to navigate Jamieson's double binds for female public leaders, it is necessary to highlight these binds in the context of the 2008 and 2012 election. Prior to speaking at the 2008 DNC, Michelle Obama was criticized for her rough personality, earning her the label of an "angry black woman." Though she committed more voters at rallies than Barack, and gave informative stump speeches about tough issues such as education, Michelle battled to convince the nation that she was able to portray the historical gender norms and meet the antiquated requirements of the role of first lady. In essence, she was faced with the feminine/competence double bind: a woman cannot be both feminine and competent. Truth in this argument can also be found in the immediate, negative

reactions following her 2008 DNC speech, in which she is criticized again—this time for playing down her wit and giving in to the grooming of public relations. Likewise, it was the more general highlighting of Michelle’s hesitation to support her husband’s run for the White House that points to the womb/brain double bind. This bind, which suggests that women can only utilize their maternal qualities *or* their brains, worked to keep stories of Michelle’s reluctance on behalf of her daughters in the media, and her missteps as a mom as evidence of her inability. Leading up to the 2012 DNC, Michelle Obama continued to struggle with the double binds as the attention surrounding her toned arms, latest outfit choice, and birthday bangs continued to outweigh her projects aimed at childhood obesity and military families in the media. Likewise, she had conflicting exigencies heading into the 2012 DNC: she needed to showcase her concern for women voters, as well as maintain her status in the traditional role of first lady, while making rational arguments for her husband’s re-election—technically her speech, at the most fundamental level—was a political oration in support of a candidate. According to the double binds, success in all of these objectives was not possible.

In recognizing the double binds Michelle Obama faced for her 2008 and 2012 performance, it is also fitting to mention Jamison’s discussion of antecedent genres. Jamieson, (1975) who noted that “antecedent genres are capable of imposing powerful constraints” (p. 414) recognized that a rhetor’s available means of persuasion were not always a free choice when their rhetoric was constrained by a previous address. This antecedent constraint is applicable to Michelle Obama’s unique position to speak at two consecutive nominating conventions. In discussing Michelle Obama’s ability to address the double binds on a national stage, not just once, but twice, attention must be paid to her ability to do so in an authentic way.

Before the 2008 and 2012 speech Michelle's authenticity was jeopardized.

Fundamentally, both speeches were political orations which functioned to provide personal testimony on behalf of a candidate; thus, Michelle's focus was not supposed to be herself, but rather building a case for her husband. However, in 2008 this presented a type of double bind constraint for Michelle Obama. As part of her rhetorical situation, she was expected to make amends for past blunders, and establish a stable identity with the American public. Likewise, in 2012, Michelle's authenticity was further constrained by her 2008 performance—a powerful enactment of femininity, in addition to her first four years in the White House. She could not simply make new choices concerning her audience; she had to take into account her choices in 2008, as well as during her time in the White House. Thus crafting a persona that was “authentic” to her internal identity, the one she had established after 2008, and one that answered the situational exigencies of her situation was at stake.

As Jamieson (1995) notes, double binds can be combatted through a number of solutions. First, those who are vulnerable to this bind can minimize it by simply acknowledging it in their public address and after; likewise those who have overcome it add to the number of voices condemning it. Second, as women move into leadership positions, their diverse styles widen the lens through which women are seen, while their obvious competence works to splinter the bind. Thus, as women continue to take on leadership positions and engage in public address, a variety of methods and styles are sure to ensue. Exposure to this diversity helps society to explore nuances in gender roles exhibited by these women.

However, explicitly drawing attention to these double binds publicly was problematic for Michelle Obama. If she chose to acknowledge them directly, it would have drawn attention to the issues she confronted throughout the campaign and place the spotlight back on herself,

undermining the rhetoric objective of creating unity in the Democratic Party and support for her husband. Thus, she chose to operate indirectly in crafting strategies to combat the double binds associated with public female leadership, while still remaining genuine. In 2008, she created a persona on her own terms, a difficult feat in politics. Prior to the address, Michelle had been quoted saying that she was "...trying to be as authentically me as I can be...My statements are coming from my experiences and my observations and my frustrations (Saulny, 2008, p. 1). This authentic persona respected her upbringing in an African American family, relied on a logical organizational strategy to make arguments, utilizing her training as a lawyer, and recognized her improbable journey—all while making indirect addresses to the criticism she faced during the campaign. In essence, her address signified awareness of the double binds but did not directly acknowledge them. Evidence for this claim can also be seen in her choice to save her perspective as a mother for the end of her speech—demonstrating her ability to craft a masterful use of multiple personas, drawing on the feminine style, and then directly speaking as a mother, assuring the nation she *can* do both. This assurance was also based on the fact that she *did* do both in her everyday life—this was the real Michelle Obama. She remained authentic to herself in a situation filled with conflict between her public and private identifies; instead of addressing each version of her persona, she re-invented her it to ultimately reflect her goals: getting Barack Obama elected and portraying her readiness to serve as First Lady. In doing so, she offered a model of authenticity and rhetorical agency for women called upon to play more than one role, who must learn to function in the private and public sphere, reconciling both personal and public mistakes.

Similarly, in 2012 Michelle Obama returned to the DNC to express humility to a nation that brought her family to the White House. She responded gracefully to the expectations of the

role of first lady by artfully enacting the tradition of femininity, while still remaining true to her intelligence by crafting a strategy to combat hostility and support Barack; and it is important to remember that this performance was constrained by the choices she made for her address in 2008. By demonstrating her ability to incorporate herself, her struggles, and her fears about the past four years while drawing on the feminine style to do so, Michelle is remaining authentic to both her performance in 2008 and her current position.

Michelle Obama acknowledged that she *is* capable of both femininity and competence; and in doing she works to sever the binds. Using hypotaxis to coordinate her many roles and create a way to respect and acknowledge each of them, she remains honest with herself and the nation. In these ways she masterfully navigates the double binds reflective of her position. It is also important to note that as an African American woman her binds will still reflect her position as a woman in leadership and politics, but have also have an added expectation that she will not even be able to perform a role crafted by generations of white, majority women; thus there is even more pressure to conform. The confidence and accuracy in which she responds to the binds showcase Michelle Obama's expert ability to make the role of first lady her own, while still mastering its inherited traits.

Finally, in 2012, it was interesting to note that she began the speech in the role of a mother and closed the speech in the same role. This was a strategic move as well as a personal one. It was strategic because from her role as a mother Michelle Obama was best able to make claims about the future. Convincing the nation to re-elect her husband after four rough years was challenging, but by placing herself as a mother, she conveyed to them her sincere trust in her husband to look out for their daughter's future. Likewise, it was both strategic and personal because it contributed to her authenticity as a rhetor. In 2008 she closed her address in the role

of a mother, thus opening the 2012 speech in the same role not only fulfilled rhetorical form, by acknowledging the antecedent rhetoric, but also conveyed a sense of stability in the identity she crafted in 2008. She used her role as a mother to close out her 2012 address and noting that “mom-in-chief” was *still* her most important role—signifying to her audience that the role of the first lady has become a part of her life, but it did not comprise her entire identity; thus, she had remained authentic.

Analysis of these speeches also lends to the larger conversation regarding candidates’ spouses as rhetorical and campaign resources. As discussed in chapter one, speeches given by a candidate’s spouse at nominating conventions have begun to shed light on the gendered expectations our society holds and the double binds women face in political leadership. First Ladies and their non-incumbent counterparts encounter pressure under a national microscope to give performances that satisfy traditional gender norms while also fulfilling prescribed rhetorical form—a speech in support of their spouse. As Campbell (1998) implied in her exploration of Elizabeth Dole and Hillary Clinton’s performances in 1996, it is the public who must learn to appreciate the various styles and contributions of women in leadership. However, pragmatically, the women speaking must also respond to their current and existing exigencies.

Though some may contend that Michelle Obama’s masterful performances of femininity do little to push the rhetorical boundaries for women, I would argue that her addresses both in 2008 and 2012 offered hope to both women and a nation struggling with gender expectations. Crafting a persona from which she can remain authentic *and* fulfill expected rhetorical form showcased her expert ability as a rhetor, an understanding of her constraints, but also a contribution to weakening those constraints. By competently responding to her exigencies through use of language and organizational strategies, she transcended a number of gender binds.

She constructed her performances in part from her “role” as the first lady—but also from the numerous roles that make up her identity. She used part of her role as a sister, wife, daughter, mother, lawyer, African American, former working class citizen, and woman, to create a persona that honored her identity as a whole. While her “role” as first lady prescribed her duty to support her husband on a national stage while adhering to societal norms, it did not prescribe abandonment of her identity. Thus, by incorporating her authentic self into her performance, Michelle Obama was able to perform her “job” as a rhetorical resource for her husband on her own terms. Her creativity in constructing these performances will further be discussed in evaluation of her addresses.

### Evaluation

In evaluating Michelle Obama’s rhetoric at the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Conventions at least two standards seem worth considering. First, Campbell and Huxman (2009) note that the *effects standard* evaluates “...a rhetorical in terms of the response that it evokes” (p. 249). This criteria “...reflects the demand that rhetoric be pragmatic” (p. 249)—every rhetorical performance must communicate, encourage participation, and impact perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes. In examining Michelle’s two addresses, it can be argued that according to these standards, she performed successfully; the audience cheered and clapped at the end of her speeches, and Barack Obama was elected President in both 2008 and again in 2012. However, to better appreciate the nuances of her rhetorical strategies and her masterful crafting of a first lady persona, it is arguably better to judge her rhetoric based on a second option, an aesthetic standard.

According to Campbell and Huxman (2009) “the artistic or aesthetic standard is a measure of how well a rhetorical act succeeds in alternating perception, creating virtual experience, attracting and holding attention, and inducing participation and identification. It is a measure of how well an act achieves its purpose, of how creatively a rhetor responds to the obstacles faced, of how inventively a rhetor fulfills the requirements or expectations of form” (p. 247). According to this standard, a rhetor must enact competence in their response to challenges and creativity in generating identification with the audience. After analysis of Michelle Obama’s 2008 and 2012 speech, I argue that Michelle satisfied the audience’s aesthetic expectations for rhetorical form by competently responding to her role as a character witness. In both addresses, she responded accurately and fully to her complex exigencies, and creatively invited audience participation. Finally, she created an exciting virtual experience; sophisticatedly navigating the challenges with which she was faced with.

As discussed previously, Michelle’s ultimate purpose in both her 2008 and 2012 DNC addresses was to serve as a character witness for her husband, Barack Obama. In an astonishingly subtle way, Michelle achieved balance between this expectation and her own goal/exigency of establishing and maintaining stable identity with the nation. Thus, she fulfilled the audience’s expectation for rhetorical form, while responding to her situational exigencies. In 2008, her perspectives approach worked to shift her focus from herself and her values, to Barack Obama and his promises for America. Without learning too far either way, Michelle effortlessly supported Barack throughout her entire speech while maintaining authenticity as a unique individual. Likewise in 2012, Michelle crafted an address that minimized hostility from the audience—a complex situational factor, while offering numerous pieces of evidence to support Barack Obama’s commitment to the nation, both past and future oriented.

In 2008 she used a metaphorical “journey” to invite audience participation in her improbable voyage and successful achievement of the American dream. Likewise, in 2012 she relied on an inductive organizational pattern which invited the audience to participate in drawing conclusions about Barack Obama based on the evidence Michelle first offered. Both of these techniques which invited the audience to actively engage in her rhetoric also simulated an exciting, virtual experience, which included each individual to participate on Michelle Obama’s journey in 2008, and make their own informed decisions in 2012.

Michelle Obama also used an expert sense of timing as a way to help her audience navigate the content and messages of her speech. Her understanding of timing is translated to her knowledge of what must come first, second, and so on and is seen in both her organizational strategy and language strategies. In 2008, she is able to move the audience through her speech with her organizational strategy based on perspectives. The order in which she speaks allows the audience to first get to know her and Barack in a very general sense, providing answers to doubts raised throughout the campaign, and then offers testimony for Barack in a more political sense. Similarly, in 2012, she understands that her audience does not want to hear bold claims and excuses for slow progress. Thus, she implements a strategy which allows the audience to sequentially make these claims with her by stacking vivid, indisputable evidence and then drawing a conclusion from it. Both in 2008 and 2012, Michelle Obama’s understanding of timing helps to satisfy the audience’s need for a speech that supports the candidate in artistic ways, while drawing on proper rhetorical form.

## Limitations and Future Research

This study has sought to examine the intricate role and rhetoric of the first lady on a national stage. As with all research endeavors it was presented with limitations. There are three major limitations to this study. The first limitation was that this study did not include speeches from first lady candidates and first ladies other than Michelle Obama. Though we are able to gain insight on the strategies and methods used by Michelle Obama in particular, understanding the constraints and responses of other first lady candidates is unattainable without comparative analysis of more speeches. Future research should take into consideration a larger quantity of speeches by various first lady candidates and first ladies on a national stage like the DNC. Additionally, to learn more about the rhetorical role of the first lady, speeches selected from a range time periods should be analyzed.

In the past two elections the Republican Party has also called on the wife of their presidential nominee to speak at the Republican National Convention. In 2008, Michelle Obama was countered by Cindy McCain, wife of Republican Presidential nominee John McCain, who took the stage at the RNC in support of her husband's candidacy. Likewise, in 2012, Ann Romney, wife of Presidential nominee Mitt Romney, delivered her version of a convention speech. This increase in rhetorical spousal support on a national stage offers a unique opportunity for comparative future research regarding the strategies these women use to appeal to voters, establish identity, and overcome double binds.

For example, in 2008, both Michelle Obama and Cindy McCain took the stage in the hope of building support for their husband's candidacy; moreover, both made references to the cultural narrative of the "American dream" as a way to identify with voters. From the analysis of Michelle Obama's 2008 DNC speech presented in Chapter three, we learned that Michelle

Obama risked a potentially un-relatable enactment of the American Dream when she chose to share her own story on stage. She relived her parent's struggle to pay the bills and the values she adopted from her modest beginnings. Through her use of weaving she tied her American story to her theme of "journey," uniting her American dream with her husband's. Ultimately, Michelle highlighted that she and Barack's American Dream had been fulfilled in that very moment she spoke of it—and renewed faith in a long standing cultural narrative.

Cindy McCain also mentioned the cultural allusion to the American Dream. However, it can be argued that her use of this narrative was less appealing in its attempt to draw on a more narrow version of the American West:

I was born and raised in the American West and will always see the world through the prism of its values. My father was a true "Western gentleman." He rose from hardscrabble roots to realize the American dream. (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 3)

Though ostensibly both women used the American dream to describe their family's values and share a piece of their upbringing, it is interesting to note the lack of depth and description that Cindy McCain used in describing her father's "American dream." Though she sees the world through "the prism of its values" (p. 3) we, the audience, are left unsure of what those values are—and what her father's realization of the American dream was.

Though she did not use the American dream in the more encompassing way Michelle Obama did, her lack of commitment to the allusion highlights Michelle's artful construction of a unifying narrative. Likewise, it draws attention to Michelle Obama's careful use of "weaving" as an effective method of combing two distinct, yet related elements into a coherent "whole." Cindy McCain's use of the cultural narrative leaves her relationship to the American dream, and how it informs her position in society unanswered and likely unconsidered. Though she and

Michelle Obama come from very different beginnings, it is interesting to see how this sense of agency is played out through their attention and lack thereof to detail with this metaphor. At least this study has shown that, arguably, Michelle Obama’s speech attempted to draw in women of color and the larger African American community in more sophisticated ways with the references to values of African American working class.

Likewise in 2012 Ann Romney, like Michelle Obama, sought to appeal to women across the nation—a key voting bloc of the election. In one attempt to appeal to women, mothers in particular, Ann makes the following remarks during her speech:

Sometimes I think that late at night, if we were all silent for just a few moments and listened carefully, we could hear a great collective sigh from the moms and dads across America who made it through another day...And if you listen carefully, you'll hear the women sighing a little bit more than the men. It's how it is, isn't it? It's the moms who always have to work a little harder, to make everything right. It's the moms of this nation — single, married, widowed — who really hold this country together. We're the mothers, we're the wives, we're the grandmothers, we're the big sisters, we're the little sisters, we're the daughters. You know it's true, don't you? You're the ones who always have to do a little more. (NPR Transcript, 2012, p. 1)

In this passage, Ann attempts to single out the moms of America who “work a little harder,” than their male counterparts, and in their additional roles as wives, grandmothers, sisters, and daughters, always end up doing a little bit more. She makes this claim again a few lines down she notes: “I'm not sure if men really understand this, but I don't think there's a woman in America who really expects her life to be easy. In our own ways, we all know better!” (p. 2).

In Michelle Obama's 2012 speech we also see her making more traditional attempts to gain various types of women voters in the election—few can forget her “mom in chief” comment. However, there is still a notable disconnect between Ann's relationship with the audience versus Michelle's. Michelle Obama works to create identification through her role as a mother and used it to symbolize her trust in Barack for the future, whereas Ann Romney uses the titles *females* and *mothers* hold to craft a less inclusive appeal. Though Ann ostensibly is including various groups of women, she is doing so by simply naming them—and in a rigid and traditional appeal that leaves little room for exceptions. Though Mitt did need to appeal to socially conservative voters, he also had the same bloc of women to convince that he was keeping their best interests in mind. However, Ann's remarks leave a lot to wonder about Mitt's flexibility and understanding of their interests. If men don't understand the women of America work a little harder, how can Mitt work to bridge this gender gap?

Arguably, Michelle Obama's skills in developing identification with voters was more sophisticated than her counterparts; however, it is important to note that these brief analyses are only meant to build ideas for future research. The analyses presented in the current study have only examined Michelle Obama's speeches at the 2008 and 2012 DNC and I have not conducted a full analysis of the speeches by Cindy McCain and Ann Romney. My observations here only point out some of the clearer differences between Michelle Obama's more involved style and her counterparts' rhetorical limitations. Future research is necessary to draw conclusions and might explore the various strategies used by first lady potentials to connect with their target audiences.

A second limitation was that this study did not include consideration of other speeches by Michelle Obama. To fully understand Michelle Obama's rhetorical repertoire, speeches from various events, including smaller, more topic specific addresses should be included. For

example, without an examination of previous speeches by the first lady candidate, we are unable to fully appreciate the strides she made at the 2008 DNC to recreate her image with the American people. Future research should compare and contrast Michelle Obama's rhetoric pre and post 2008 DNC in order to make overarching claims regarding the transformation of her rhetorical strategies. Likewise, as first ladies continue to face double bind situations outside of national elections and conventions, examination of her rhetorical strategies in navigating these binds at smaller or more local events would be useful in continuing the battle to break the binds for female political leaders. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine Michelle Obama's rhetoric outside of the campaign where her own causes are at stake. Future studies might examine her rhetoric regarding childhood obesity, military families, and outreach to young civic leaders across the globe.

Finally, as noted in chapter two, consideration was not given to Michelle Obama's status as an African American rhetor or female. While the present study instead focused on the how Michelle Obama is responding on a more general level to the constraints of the role of first lady, it is impossible to ignore that she is in fact a minority. The role of first lady has been deemed one rich in tradition and historical gender norms, however these qualities are reflective of the majority, white women, who inhabited the role prior to Michelle Obama. As current scholars have begun to explore issues of race in our first African American first lady, future research is needed to understand Michelle Obama's rhetoric as an African American woman. Important implications for minority women and communities are sure to follow, especially given some of the commentary regarding her ability to appeal to the African American working class and her allusion to African American interests that could not be addressed directly without threatening her appeal to mainstream white audiences.

A final suggestion for future research regarding Michelle Obama's address at the 2008 and 2012 DNC includes analysis from a Burkean perspective. In particular, her strategies of identification and enactment parallel Burke's notions of identification and consubstantiality. In *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1950), Burke discusses identification as a form of consubstantiality. To become consubstantial with another is to become joined with that person so that you are "substantially one" with a person other than yourself. However, at the same time, you remain, as Burke notes, "...unique, an individual locus of motives...both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another" (p. 21). In reviewing Michelle Obama's strategies of identification, particularly in her 2008 address, glimpses of Burke's consubstantiality are revealed. For example, take the following passage from her 2008 speech:

And you know, what struck me when I first met Barack was that even though he had this funny name, even though he'd grown up all the way across the continent in Hawaii, his family was so much like mine. He was raised by grandparents who were working-class folks just like my parents, and by a single mother who struggled to pay the bills just like we did. Like my family, they scrimped and saved so that he could have opportunities they never had themselves. (NPR Transcript, 2008, p. 1)

In her attempt to liken Barack Obama to herself, Michelle Obama first notes the ways in which she and Barack are different: "even though he had this funny name, even though he'd grown up all the way across the continent..." (p. 1) thus she remains a unique individual. However, in joining their identities, she points to the places where as Burke (1950) notes, "...their interests are joined" (p. 20): "...his family was so much like mine...he was raised by...a single mother who struggled to pay the bills just like we did" (p. 1). In being identified with Michelle, Barack Obama has been made consubstantial with Michelle. This strategy of identification allows

Michelle to artfully create a sense of similarity between herself and her husband and in turn, her husband and the audience.

A more dramatic method of identification as noted by Burke (1941) involves the symbolic “killing of something” as the “changing of it, and the statement of the thing’s nature before and after the change is an identifying of it” (p. 20). Burke (1941) writes:

The formation of role, however, involves in its working out, a transformation of role. Even if one would symbolically form a role by becoming “most thoroughly and efficiently himself,” he must slough off ingredients that are irrelevant to this purpose...and we detect under various guises the abandonment of an old self, in symbolic suicide...” (p. 38)

Essentially, Burke is suggesting that imagery created by a killing is a special type of transformation. Arguably, Michelle Obama’s 2008 address exemplifies this type of slaying, or more mildly phrased this type of transformation, as it related to her public image. This was particularly effective in addressing criticism that focused on her enactment—sometimes all too well, or other times not well enough—of the complexity and conflicting public and private roles she was called on to fulfill as a first lady. Both in 2008 and in 2012, by crafting a feminine persona from which she was able to non-controversially answer her critics and address her many audiences through multiple perspectives, she “kills” off the former harsh and unidimensional personae of wife, mother, first lady—but never all at once—as a way to transform into those roles necessary to identify with the audience.

Finally, Burke (1941) discusses a symbolic form of enactment seen in an organizational pattern of perspectives. In categorizing different levels of symbolic action he notes:

The personal, intimate, familiar, familistic level. Relationships to father, mother, doctor, nurse, friends, etc... the levels are in fact, but conveniences of discourse, for analytic purposes, and the actual event in a work of art usually contains an intermingling of them all (p. 37)

These relationships Burke mentions are similar to Michelle Obama's use of her roles as a way to assert her identity. They symbolize her enactment of those roles. The intermingling of her personal and intimate roles with more familiar ones, allows her to draw on the many roles she plays in leading a complex public and private life. This symbolic form of enactment allows her to demonstrate to the audience how her identity is constructed of conflicting private and public personas. However, by drawing on all of her roles she enacts a complex rhetorical identity signifying that the conflicting roles function as rhetorical resources for a complex identity. Further analysis from a Burkean perspective is one possible way to more fully understand Michelle's attempt to create an image on her own terms that both appeases her critics and symbolizes her readiness for the role of first lady.

### Summary

This final chapter has offered a concluding examination of the findings and implications from the study of Michelle Obama's performances at the 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Convention. First, it provided an overarching summary of the four previous chapters. Second, I discussed the research questions and summarized the findings resulting from the two analyses. Third, I discussed the limitations to the study, which included a lack of comparison speeches from other first lady candidates at nominating conventions, as well as the exclusion of additional Michelle Obama speeches. Finally, I provided insight on potential future research. This

included a comparison of multiple first lady speeches from nominating conventions as a way to generate broader claims regarding style and structure, as well as an analysis of Michelle Obama's addresses from a Burkean perspective, exploring her use of consubstantiality and identification. In conclusion, perhaps no figure in American political discourse has been more studied than the president (Quinlan, Bates & Webb, 2012). Yet their marriage and political partners represent a vastly understudied and fascinating area of U.S. rhetorical history. As the first lady is not only crucial to the role of the presidency, but a fascinating rhetorical role itself, it is sure to offer scholars insightful opportunities to examine female leadership in political address for many years to come.

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