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KNOWLEDGE AND RESISTANCE: FEMININE STYLE AND SIGNIFYIN[G] IN MICHELLE OBAMA’S PUBLIC ADDRESS

By

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Abstract:

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This thesis examines the public discourse of the first African American first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama. I argue that Michelle Obama uses the double-voiced discourses of feminine style and African American Signifyin[g] to negate post-race and post-gender mythologies that suggest that American society is "beyond identity". Looking at three of Obama’s speeches: Michelle Obama’s Convention 2008 Democratic National Convention Speech, The Remarks by the First Lady at Memorial Service for Dr. Maya Angelou, and Remarks by the First Lady at Tuskegee University Commencement Address this thesis argues that Michelle Obama performativity interrogates and questions gender and race relations in the United States.
Chapter One: Introduction

Women of color live in the dualistic and intersecting oppressions of race and gender. Patricia Hill Collins (2002) defines oppression as, “any unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society (P. H. Collins, p. 4). Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity among other facets of one’s social location all constitute forms of oppression in the United States; “However, the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another” (P.H Collins, p. 4). Such marginalization underwrites the discursive performances of women of color in the United States (Reid-Brinkley, 2012). Women of color who attempt to rewrite these narratives of oppression are subject to the racism that undermines feminism and the masculinity that is entwined in politics (P. H. Collins). Subsequently, women of color must use tactical and strategic rhetoric in order to challenge White-patriarchy and gain a salient voice in the public sphere.

In contrast, First Ladies of the United States traditionally represent White, middle- to-upper-class, heterosexual versions of American femininity, particularly through their discursive practices (Anderson, 2004). However, following the inauguration of President Barack Obama on January 20, 2009, Michelle Obama became the first African-American First lady of the United States. Michelle Obama’s subject position and public discourse opens the White House to “communities of color and ordinary citizens” (Cooper, 2014, p. 41). Michelle Obama’s position as first lady and as a Black woman forces a reconceptualization of ideal American womanhood as inclusive of marginalized subject positions (Cooper).
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First ladies of the United States occupy a unique rhetorical position because they are representatives of power, but only due to their marital status; they do not actually make political decisions (Parry-Giles & Blair, 2002). This quasi-political status means that first ladies experience extreme scrutiny; subsequently, their political advocacies and public performances play into conceptions of American womanhood.

The first lady of the United States rhetorically symbolizes and acts as a representative of the nation (Campbell, 1996). Subsequently, Karrin Vasby Anderson (2004) argues that discourses about first ladies “function to culturally shape notions of femininity and so both foster and constrain women’s agency” (Anderson, 2004). Examinations of the first lady’s public discourse are both rhetorical and gendered because of her symbolic influence. Michelle Obama’s rhetorical performance is important to study because it reconstitutes Black femininity in ways that both expand and constrain the agency of women of color in the United States.

Michelle Obama rhetorically reconstructs the role of American first lady through her use of feminine and African American dialectic traits and her frankness about issues of race and gender inequity in the United States. I contend that Michelle Obama’s rhetorical performance juxtaposes feminine style and Signification, which I will discuss later, as resistive tools to address the simultaneous competing demands of marginality and power as a first lady of color.

I first offer contextual information and biographical information about Michelle Obama. I then detail the academic work concerning Mrs. Obama in communication studies and review literature defining and applying feminine style and Signification. Then I turn to an overview of my prospective artifacts and I will conclude with a précis of chapters.
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Context and Background

Michelle Obama

First lady Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama is an Ivy League educated lawyer, philanthropist, and devoted wife and mother; “she has become a role model for women and an advocate for poverty awareness, higher education, and healthy living” (whitehouse.gov, 2015). Throughout her upbringing, early career, and role as first lady, Michelle Obama has navigated the interacting oppressions faced by women of color all over the world.

Michelle Obama was raised in a working-class, African American neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago (whitehouse.gov, 2015). She attended public school before attending Princeton University, as a first generation college student, where she pursued an undergraduate degree in sociology and African American studies (L. Collins, 2008; whitehouse.gov, 2015). Both growing up in a Black community and her collegiate pursuits of African American studies situate Michelle Obama in African American linguistic and rhetorical traditions. For example, Michelle Obama’s senior thesis, which was widely scrutinized during the 2008 presidential campaign, focused on “the ways in which attending Princeton affected Black alumni’s sense of connection to the Black community” (L. Collins). In her thesis, Obama discussed the lack of support for Black, first generation students attending Ivy League universities (L. Collins, 2008). Michelle Obama’s reflection on race in White spaces suggests, not only her remarkable intelligence, but also the critical perspective she brings to intersectional and often conflicting social positions she currently faces as first lady.

After earning her bachelor’s degree, Obama went on to study law at Harvard University. Obama graduated law school in 1988 and joined the Chicago law firm Sidley & Austin, where she met her future husband Barack Obama. As a lawyer, Michelle Obama was invested in
community issues. She served as assistant commissioner of planning and development in Chicago’s City Hall (whitehouse.gov, 2015). Then she helped found the Chicago chapter of Public Allies, a public service AmeriCorps program (whitehouse.gov, 2015). Eventually, in 1996, Mrs. Obama served as the Associate Dean of Student Services at the University of Chicago and then as Vice President of Community and External Affairs for the University of Chicago Medical Center (whitehouse.gov, 2015).

Michelle Obama’s commitment to community issues and skillful participation in the public sphere is reflected in the “stump” speech she wrote and delivered on the her 2008 presidential campaign trail to an African American church congregation in South Carolina (L. Collins, 2008). A New Yorker article entitled “The Other Obama” discusses Obama’s address and notes:

[Michelle] Obama has been open about the value of her ability to speak to black audiences in cadences that reflect their experience, but she makes clear her distaste for the notion that she is a niche tool, wielded by her husband’s campaign to woo black voters solely on the basis of their shared racial identity (L. Collins, 2008).

Obama’s rhetorical skill uses feminine style and Signification predicated on shared experience when communicating with Black audiences amidst White rhetorical spaces.

**Academic Work on Michelle Obama**

Communication scholars who study Michelle Obama agree she inspires renewed meaning of Black womanhood in the United States (Spillers, 2009; Kahl, 2009; King, 2010; Bertaki, 2012). For example, some scholars look at Michelle Obama’s declaration to be Mom-in-Chief (Cooper, 2014) and the first lady’s Let’s Move campaign (Quinlan, Bates, & Webb, 2012) as exemplifying empowered Black motherhood. These scholars identify the challenges Michelle
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Obama faces as the first African American first lady, such as her necessary navigation of race and gender stereotypes and performances.

Some scholarship refers to the mitigating tactics Michelle Obama and her critics use when tackling issues of race and gender. Individuals who speak from positions of difference develop alternative rhetorical patterns as a product of their marginalization and employ tactical rhetorical strategies to moderate their positions of difference. For example, the discourse by and about Michelle Obama utilizes narratives of class as a substitute for race and gender. Joan Faber McAlister (2009) analyzes criticism of Michelle Obama that utilizes “color-blindness,” or in other words, potentially unintended, racist criticism couched through terms that, at a glance, appear banal. For example criticism of Obama’s bringing items from everyday brands like Target and J. Crew into the White House maintain classist attitudes to supplement and disguise racist appraisal. Critics, such as conservative radio pundits, speak ill of Michelle Obama by carefully coding their language to be about anything but race, even though such critiques are ideologically underwritten by systemic racism that link poverty to Blackness. McAllister discusses the way the media treats Obama’s body; some critics suggest that Michelle Obama’s athletic frame violates the “typical American First lady”. In other words, she does not ascetically perform Whiteness. These critiques are gendered, but that they are also classed because they reflect “anxiety over the sight of muscular arms (fit for menial labor, but unfit for display in polite company) on the figure of the First lady” (McAllister, 2009, p.312). McAllister goes on to say that “the role that racist logics play in appraising the first African American woman to serve as First lady is negated and replaced by unabashedly classist standards (McAllister, 2009, p.314). McAllister argues that these acts of “post-racism” perpetuate narratives of White privilege.
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However, Michelle Obama has been resistive to these practices. Ralina L. Joseph (2011) observes Michelle Obama’s tactical and epistemological response to sexist and racist media comments. Joseph argues, that “post-identity,” or the mythology that issues of race and gender oppression are no longer socio-systemic problems in the United States, creates a metaphorical straightjacket for those of difference (whether it be race, gender, class, sexuality, ability or otherwise) to speak out against their oppression. Joseph’s analysis highlights how Michelle Obama responds to the myth of post-identity by strategically choosing when she appeals to issues of class opposed to when she appeals to race/gender. Joseph says, “In the midst of a climate in which frank discussions of difference are verboten, hypervisible Obama must couch her words as she carefully fights her verbal attacks” (p.59). For example, Obama often refers to herself as a “girl who grew up on the South Side of Chicago,” which utilizes 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” (Joseph, p. 68). Michelle Obama creates a counter narrative to regain control of the image of Black womanhood through alternative ideological codes, i.e race and class. As Joseph concludes, Michelle Obama is able to “speak back” to coded racist/sexist verbal attacks and claw her way out of post-identity representations (p. 72).

While McAllister (2009) and Joseph (2011) discuss how Michelle Obama and her critics couch race and gender through coded language, they do not account for the rhetorical process or tactics Obama uses to do so. Sara Hayden (in press) speaks to these strategies in her discussion of Michelle Obama’s use of maternal persona. Hayden argues that Obama uses strategic ambiguity to code messages intended differently for Black and White audiences. I contend that the post-identity framing used by Obama and articulated by Joseph (2011) exemplifies the
strategic ambiguity articulated by Hayden (in press).

I intend to expand our understanding regarding Michelle Obama by arguing that she deploys selective feminine and African American linguistic tropes to redirect post-identity dismissals of racial and gender difference. I argue that these tactics can be understood using the combined theories of feminine style and African American Signifyin[g]. Both feminine style and Signification are predicated on a “double voice”, or a dualistic deployment of language intended to convey multiple meanings to multiple audiences, simultaneously. From the extremely public platform of first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama uses the rhetorical resources of feminine style and Signification to denote difference, elevate marginalized epistemological perspectives and resist post-identity mythologies.

Review of Literature and Theoretical Framing

Feminine Style

According to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1989), feminine style developed as a rhetorical strategy to “cope with the demands of the podium” and arose out of women’s historical exclusion from the public sphere (Campbell, 1989). In nineteenth century America, women increasingly involved themselves in social and political issues such as the abolition of slavery, temperance, and ultimately, woman suffrage. Such political involvement required women to take on public speaking roles, which had previously been assumed only by men. Thus feminine style developed as a rhetorical strategy to couch women’s public discourse; it allowed women to assume the public speaking role while still appearing feminine (Campbell, 1989).

Gender scholars argue that while gender is a culturally fluid, socially constructed performance, stereotypes are associated with such performances (Tong, 2009). Cultural stereotypes acculturate people into gender. Social scientists tend to define “masculine” and
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“feminine” as cultural stereotypes; thus “to be masculine in middle-class, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant United States, is, among other things, to be rational, ambitious, and independent, and to be feminine is, among other things, to be emotional, nurturant, and dependent” (Tong, 2009p. 36). Feminine style is not restricted to use by women and has been deployed persuasively by men in many contexts (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996). Therefore, when communication scholars refer to a “feminine style” they are drawing on cultural discourses about gender. There is no singular “feminine style;” rather there is an array of feminine styles that account for divergent rhetorical perspectives informed by difference, specifically race and gender (Reid-Brinkley, 2012).

Feminine style is composed of “personal tone, references to personal experience, inductive reasoning, the use of anecdotes and examples as evidence, audience participation, and identification between the speaker and audience” (Gibson & Heyse, 2010, p. 328). Rhetoric is a craft, a learned skill that takes practice and development and feminine style applies craft learning to rhetoric (Campbell, 1989). Campbell’s 1998 discussion of “Hillary Hate,” referring to the American public’s reaction to Hillary Clinton during the 1996 presidential election, further details the elements of feminine style. She writes:

In rhetorical terms, performing or enacting femininity has meant adopting a personal or self-disclosing tone (signifying nurturance, intimacy, and domesticity) and assuming a feminine persona, e.g., mother, or an ungendered persona, e.g., mediator or prophet, while speaking. It has meant preferring anecdotal evidence (reflecting women's experiential learning in contrast to men's expertise), developing ideas inductively (so the audience thinks that it, not this presumptuous woman, drew the conclusions), and appropriating strategies associated with women—such as domestic
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metaphors, emotional appeals to motherhood, and the like—and avoiding such
"macho" strategies as tough language, confrontation or direct refutation, and any
appearance of debating one's opponents. Note, however, that feminine style does not
preclude substantive depth and argumentative cogency. (Campbell, 1998)

Therefore scholars looking for rhetorical evidence might look at nurturing language, maternal
personae, and acts of concordant discourse. Moreover, Campbell’s caveat that feminine
arguments should not be understood as simple or unintelligent arguments is extremely valuable
because it emphasizes that feminine rhetorical strategies are different rather than lesser ways of
knowing.

Feminine style is extensively studied as a rhetorical strategy among feminist
communication studies scholarship. Many studies, in the vein of Campbell’s (1989) initial work,
focus on applications of feminine style as a way for women to mitigate their performance of a
traditionally masculine public speaking role (Foust, 2004; Kimble, 2004; Mattina, 1994;
at feminine style in a historical context and include work on nineteenth century women like Mary
Harris “Mother” Jones (Tonn, 1996), Jeannette Rankin (Hayden, 1999), and Emma Goldman
(Rogness & Foust, 2011). Scholars also look at nineteenth century women’s rhetoric, such as the
*Ladies Home Journal*’s role in World War II peace making discourse (Kimble, 2004) and
activism surrounding women’s health (Hayden, 1997), specifically discourse surrounding the
abortion debate (Dubrivny, 2005; Zurakowski, 1994).

Other scholars extend feminine style beyond the performative and into the political. Such
frames are essential to my analysis of Michelle Obama because they account for the political
function of her discourse not just as a public figure, but also as a woman of color who is required
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to employee strategic rhetoric to re-center her discourse from marginality. While Tammy R. Vigil (2014) alludes to Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style in her 2008 and 2012 Democratic National Convention addresses, further analysis is warranted to view Obama’s performances through an intersectional lens that accounts for race, which I will explain later.

Bonnie J. Dow and Mari Boor Tonn (1993) extend feminine style by arguing that the traits of feminine communication should not be limited to women couching their performances, as is the case in Campbell’s (1989) historical arguments, but as a part of political communication more broadly. The characteristics of feminine style as a rhetorical tactic apply to analyses of contemporary discourse because “while the historical conditions of women have changed in many ways, their primary social roles have not” (p. 287). This study emphasizes feminine style as a strategy for articulating and elevating feminine value systems (or epistemologies). In their analysis of the campaign rhetoric of Texas Governor Ann Richards, Dow and Tonn suggest elements of feminine style are identifiable in mainstream political discourse and feminine style is not solely a strategy for audience empowerment, but also a strategic critique of political judgments. In this context, feminine style is a synthesis of form and substance that “works to promote an alternative political philosophy reflecting traditionally feminine vales” (Dow & Tonn, p. 287). Thus feminine style elevates culturally stereotypical feminine political ideologies.

Furthermore, Bonnie J. Dow (1995) uses feminism(s) of difference to critique the use of feminine style by rhetorical scholars. She contends, in chorus with Campbell (1989), that feminine style is not reserved to the discourse of women, but rather is a strategic rhetoric designed to address societal disempowerment. Dow’s argument is predicated on feminization rather than being feminine or female. Dow argues that any group (she specifically suggests African Americans) that faces marginalization might utilize inventive and
interesting rhetorical strategies, such as feminine style, to overcome rhetorical obstacles. Therefore, feminine style is an important methodological frame when analyzing intersectional oppression and tactical responses to marginalization, and specifically for this study, the rhetoric of Michelle Obama. Rhetorical performances of feminine style go beyond a mere couching of women’s public performance and use personal tone and experiential knowledge epistemically and resistively to elevate feminine(ized) ways of communicating and knowing.

The Epistemological Function of Feminine Style

Epistemology is the theorization of knowledge and feminist epistemologies are non-generalizable, experientially rooted knowledge(s). Feminine style uses individual experiences shared by a rhetor to elevate the audience as peers, creating identification and experiential epistemologies. Tasha N. Dur briwny (2005) argues, through feminine style, experiences transform the personal into the political. I contend Michelle Obama’s experiential reflections on race and gender endorse counter hegemonic ways of knowing and patriarchal knowledge production, elevating feminine communication, particularly for women of color.

Sara Hayden (1997) articulates the epistemological function of feminine style in her analysis of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective’s *Our Bodies, Our Selves*. She argues the women of the collective used medical knowledge in conjunction with experiential knowledge about their bodies to alternatively communicate about women’s health. The preference of experiential knowledge by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective creates a new epistemology aimed at critiquing dominant theories of knowledge production and practices related to women’s health and is consistent with the methodology of feminist critical consciousness raising groups in the 1960s. The use of feminine style by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective elevates and validates the experiences of women as knowledge.
Dubriwny (2005) extends Hayden’s (1997) theory in her discussion of the Redstocking’s abortion speak-out; she suggests that consciousness raising is political; it is not just the experiences of women, but the rhetorical articulation of those experiences within a community women that transforms the personal into the political (p.401). It is not just the use of feminine style and articulation of personal experiences that creates knowledge and elevates women’s perspectives, but the action of sharing itself is a form of empowerment. In this sense, personal experiences function politically when translated to a wider audience. When feminized people speak from their experience of marginalization their narratives become observable and identifiable, generating opportunities for resistive political stances.

While Durbriwny (2005) argues that experiences as meaning-making theoretically expands collective rhetoric, I argue that in discussing individually articulated experientialist knowledge as epistemic is valuable, particularly in regard to first lady rhetoric and Michelle Obama. Because the first lady represents ideal American femininity, her shared experiences need to be rooted not just in herself, but in the collection of women she represents. When Michelle Obama speaks from her personal experience, she is speaking in chorus with the experiences of others and potentially gives voice to marginalized people. This process uses experiential narratives to enable women and people of color to resist dominant narratives and ideologies aimed at marginalization.

Furthermore, marginalized groups other than women use experiential knowledge as a strategy to frame their public discourse and communicate alternative ways of knowing. White communication patterns are taken as the norm, while those of “Others” are marked. However, by joining Signification, a rhetorical strategy attributed to African American speech communities, with feminine style, which as articulated above historically focuses on speech patterns of White,
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middle/upper-class women I engage an intersectional understanding of Michelle Obama’s public address.

**African American Rhetoric(s): The Epistemology of Afrocentricity**

Much like women, Black people have historically been excluded from the public sphere and public discourse because of the history of American slavery and systemic racism. African American dialect patterns and resistive rhetorical strategies emerged for Black people during American slavery; subsequently, “African-Americans developed their own signification patterns—black tropes” (Sullivan, 1993). These tropes comprise a number of different African American/Black dialects and rhetorics. The study of these linguistic tropes interrogates White normativity.

Whiteness is the social and systemic normalization of racialized identities where the White (male) body is read as normal and preferable. Whiteness is a system of privilege(s) rather than a system of racial identification. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek (1995) argue that Whiteness is a discursive space that influences identities and wields power that goes largely unarticulated (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). If normalized communication patterns are contrived by Whiteness, then scholars interested in interrogating the power of Whiteness should use alternative lenses to look at marginalized communication styles.

Subsequently, analysis of African American discourses “requires scholars to generate new theoretical frameworks” (Sullivan, 1993, p. 2). Increasingly, scholars of communication studies, conscious of African American cultural difference and significance, use alternative forms of rhetorical theory that resist Whiteness and study African American Rhetoric through a variety of Afrocentric lenses.
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Afrocentricity studies explore African phenomena. Afrocentricity entails placing African, rather than White EuroAmerican ideas at the center of any analysis that involves African (American) culture and behavior. This epistemological and philosophical orientation toward the world is applied as a theoretical frame used in a variety of disciplines and incorporates African ancestral traditions and belief systems into analysis. Afrocentric methodologies are important because they place descendants of African slaves as agents of change in their own histories (Jackson II & Richardson, 2014).

Afrocentric rhetorical criticism is predicated on the orality of texts. Molefi Kete Asante (2011) argues that African American rhetoric is rooted in both African oral tradition and the laws that banned African slaves from learning to read and write. Scholars of African American rhetoric must concern themselves with an extended investigation of orality. Orality is characterized by innovation, individual voice, and indirection (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003).

Innovation is extemporaneous in nature. Just as daily interpersonal communication is unrehearsed “African Americans place high value on spontaneity, inventiveness, and improvisation in language behavior” (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003, p.50). We can look to African American musical traditions for examples of this, such as the improvisation of jazz (Gates, 2014). Individual voice is an important subset on improvisation because even in a group context, one is able to distinguish one’s self individually through improvised acts.

Indirection is another important tenet of orality. African oral traditions are predicated on circumlocution because direct expression is considered unimaginative; this practice has spilled into African American culture (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003) Indirection has historically been treated as a function of speech acts, but not as an independent rhetorical strategy. The
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balance between the explicit and inexplicit communication intrinsic to indirection has numerous strategic advantages. For example, indirection can act as a method of tactical communication that camouflages speech from White listeners. While indirection takes a number of forms, for this study I am concerned with Significationiv.

To signify Signifyin[g]

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2014) argues in the *Signifying Monkey* that Signifyin[g] is a “double-voice” where African-American rhetors communicate and adapt to Black and White audiences simultaneously, yet differently by means of communication not predicated on the dictionary or syntactical definitions of words, but rather on the basis of shared knowledge and communal experiences of the groups (Calloway-Thomas, 2003, p.54).

While some scholars use the term signification (with a lowercase ‘s’), I will use the term Signification as a proper noun. According to Gates (2014), “Signification differs from the linguistic term signification” (p. 50). To signify is the practice of naming aimed at conveying meaning; by contrast, Signifyin[g] is a specific rhetorical strategy used in African American linguistic communities. In English and linguistics, signification describes expressed meaning by the sender, inferred by the receiver. Thus the signifier, Signification is in itself a (re)do doubling of the word and use of indirection. The use of identical terms is intentionally complicated because, “these two homonyms have everything to do with each other and, then again, absolutely nothing” (Gates, p.50) The term can also be spelled as Signifyin’ or, as I will use, Signifyin[g] to reflect the dropped “g” in some African American dialects (see Gates, 2014). Such a paradox creates an aural and/or visual pun meant to unpack the relationship between the sign and the signifier. Therefore the use of the term Signification, is an act of Signifyin[g].
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Gates (2014) employs multiple definitions of Signifyin[g] to highlight the lack of static meaning associated with the practice, but ultimately, defines Signifyin[g] as “the black rhetorical difference that negotiates the language user through several orders of meaning” (Gates, p.86). Signification can be employed to insult, make fun, and/or make a point (Gates, p.104). Signifyin[g] is dependent on repetition and revision with difference either in patterns of speech or meaning(s). Gates argues that the emphasis of indirection and implication intrinsic to Signifyin[g] are synonymous with its figurative nature. Therefore, for my purposes, I define Signifyin[g] as the use of figurative language and double-voiced words/form meant to create a bifurcated Black and general (White) audience within a single speech act.

Signifyin[g] is the use of double-voiced language where discourses can be interpreted simultaneously differently based on one’s social-location, i.e race-based epistemology. As Gates (2014) explains, the mastery of Signifyin[g] “creates homo Africanus, allowing…the black person to move freely between two discursive universes” (p. 82). As such, Signification is a mode of linguistic circumlocution; a second language shared with Black people (Gates, 2014, p. 83). Thus linguistic play can highlight the ideological confrontation between Afro-American culture and White American culture (see Gates, 2014).

Signifyin[g] has been minimally explored in communication studies. Patricia Sullivan’s (1993) analysis of the Jessie Jackson’s 1988 run in the Democratic Presidential Primary uses Signification. She argues media and political pundits were frustrated with Jackson’s rhetorical performances because of differences between Black and White communication styles. Thus, she proposes a new theoretical framework for evaluating African American discourse that maps patterns of Signification in order to restore value to African American oral cultural traditions. She contends, “African-Americans were forced to name themselves—to develop a space for
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themselves in language—because their experiences were muted by the dominant white culture” (Sullivan, 1993).

Gunn and McPhail (2015) also take a rhetorical approach to Signifyin[g]. In their analysis, the “radical” rhetoric of Reverend Jeremiah Wright is better understood through the Black vernacular lens of Signification. They contend that media depictions and Barack Obama’s disavowal of Wright deliberately ignored this standpoint in order to misrepresent and diminish Wright’s political perspective. Gunn and McPhail cite Clarence E. Walker and Gregory D. Smithers’ suggestion that “the fantasy of postracialism framed the events leading up to and beyond the Wright/Obama estrangement” (Gunn & McPhail, 2015, p. 20). These critiques suggest that the misunderstanding of Signifyin[g] by White audiences implies that Black discourse cannot sufficiently overcome the barrier of post-identity. However, I argue that when joined with a resistive application of feminine style there is potential to overcome post-identity.

Some scholarship studies the relationship between Signification and feminine style. For example, Shanara Rose Reid-Brinkley’s (2012) analyzes Carol Moseley Braun’s run for president of the United States. Reid-Brinkley uses an intersectional lens and contends that since it is a recognizable rhetorical strategy, “the “double voice” of feminine style can function as a strategy of misdirection to create a cover for African American signification” (Reid-Brinkley, 2012). Sara Hayden (in press) also looks at the relationship between feminine rhetorical tropes, specifically maternal persona, and Signification in her analysis of feminist responses to Michelle Obama. I extend this scholarship by analyzing the rhetoric of Michelle Obama to expand communication scholarship on the process of Signification.
Characteristics of Signification

Signification utilizes classical rhetorical tropes, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony, hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis. Gates (2014) goes on to say, “To this list we could easily add aporia, chiasmus, and catachresis, all of which are used in the ritual of Signifyin(g)” (p.57). However, Gates argues this should not be a debate over whether a speech act is or is not Signification, but that Signifyin(g) is the trope of tropes, “the figure for black rhetorical figures” (p. 57). The figure is the foundation that can be replicated and revised (Gates, p. 114). Therefore a riff, or troping, refers to the altering or changing of a figure (text or form) to fit a dualistic meaning.

Gates’ (2014) most illustrative example of what Signification means occurs within a discussion of what it does not mean. In the 1988 book, The Signifying Monkey, Gates explores several definitions of Signification complied by sociolinguists. These definitions, consistent with those mentioned above, denote verbal bantering and language play as key traits of Signifyin[g]. In contrast, Gates provides the definition provided to (White) linguists Wentworth and Flexner. Gates explains that Signifyin[g] does not mean: “to pretend to have knowledge; to pretend to be hip, esp. when such pretentions cause one to trifle with an important matter” (quoted in Gates, p. 78). Here, the multiple implications and variations of Signification are expressed. Not only does this sardonic “definition” act as a form of verbal play meant to trick a White audience outside of the Black socio-linguistic experience, it also acts to “call-out” and draw attention to such misunderstandings. Moreover the syntactical and dictionary meanings of words and phrases are ironically not represented within the definition. For this study I identify indirection, call and response formulas, intertextual allusion, irony, and figurative language (all to be defined later) as Signifyin[g] elements in Michelle Obama’s public discourse.
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**Theoretical Contribution**

In what follows I argue that Michelle Obama’s rhetorical performance is interesting and worthy of study because of her simultaneous use of feminine style, which appeals to Whiteness, and her use of Signification, which celebrates African American rhetorical tradition. Michelle Obama’s stylistic juxtaposition of Black and White linguistic tropes generates opportunities for resistance through tactical rhetorical strategies. I explore not just the ways that feminine style acts as a double-voice for Signification, but unpack the parallel and sometimes overlapping experiential and epistemological tenets of these rhetorical strategies. This study examines *how* Michelle Obama uses language to breakdown perceptions of post-identity.

Furthermore, Reid-Brinkley (2012) notes, “Such a rhetorical strategy [Signification] is dependent upon a simultaneity: training in black discourse communities, its values, beliefs, and sociolinguistic rituals, but also a mastery of discursive practices of whiteness” (p.39). I argue that Michelle Obama’s rhetoric is particularly interesting for its patterns and applications of Signification. She was a raised in an African American community however she attended predominantly White, Ivy League institutions and is an influential figure in American politics. These circumstances suggest that Michelle Obama is aptly immersed in both black linguistic practices and those of Whiteness. Additionally, the role of first lady requires performances that appeal to White ascetics. This is perhaps the most challenging ambition for this project because, while Michelle Obama graciously stands in two worlds at once, I do not. As a young feminist academic immersed in my own White privilege I must draw on the narratives of those who have experiences outside of my own to tease out evidence of Signification in Michelle Obama’s discourse. Hitherto feminine style has been understood epistemically, but not resistively (excluding Reid-Brinkley notable exception). Likewise, Signifyin[g] has been understood as
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resistance and as epistemology, but I, building on the work of Hayden (in press), explore tactical elements of Signifyin[g] in Michelle Obama’s discourse, .

For this project, I argue that Michelle Obama uses feminine style resistively and to tactically frame her use of Signifyin[g]. The remainder of the chapters comparatively analyze feminine style and Signifyin[g] in Michelle Obama’s rhetoric in her 2008 Democratic National Convention Speech, 2014 Eulogy for Maya Angelou and 2015 Commencement Address at Tuskegee University.

Overview of Artifacts and Précis of Chapters

Chapter two examines Michelle Obama’s August 2008 Democratic National Convention address. In this widely attended and heavily publicized event, Michelle Obama celebrates Barack Obama’s presidential nomination and uses familial and feminine framing to orient herself to the upcoming election. This speech is an important starting point in researching Michelle Obama’s rhetorical performance because it marks the point of transition in her campaign rhetoric as the first post-nomination, nationally publicized address. In this speech Michelle Obama subtly resists traditionally raced and gendered expectations as she auditions for the role of American First lady.

Chapter three analyses Michelle Obama’s touching eulogy for Maya Angelou, given on June 7, 2014 at Wait Chapel at Wake Forest University Winston-Salem, North Carolina (Obama, 2014). While the rhetoric of this speech is targeted at an immediate African American audience, as a prominent figure, the first lady must also include White or generalizable audiences, which warrants her use of feminine style and the need to Signify. Obama reflects on the life and career of the late Poet Laureate and Black feminist scholar by sharing her personal experiences with Black feminism and her encounters with Angelou’s work. The first lady
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recounts the challenges of being the a Black woman under public scrutiny and the ways that Angelou’s poems helped her find harbor in those struggles.

Chapter four looks at Michelle Obama’s commencement address to the Tuskegee University Class of 2015. Obama uses feminine style and Signification as tactics to reflect on her experience with race and gender as the first African American first lady of the United States. She discusses the historically influential Tuskegee University graduates, including the Tuskegee Airmen, Benjamin Carver, and many participants in the American Civil Rights movement (Obama, 2015). This speech is important to my study because, again, Michelle Obama addresses her largely Black immediate audience, yet maintains performances of Whiteness to maintain her first lady persona for the secondary (White) audiences.

In summation I will rearticulate the significance of Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style and Signification. I will then discuss the implications of feminine style when combined with Signification as it appears in Michelle Obama’s public discourse. Next I will turn to a discussion of the limitations of this project and my theorization for future research regarding the combination of feminine style and Signification.
Chapter Two: 2008 Democratic National Convention

“Hope”
and
“Change We Can Believe In”
- Barack Obama
2008 Presidential Campaign Slogan

On the evening of August 28, 2008 the Democratic National Convention (DNC) kicked off with a primetime speaker: Michelle Obama. Introduced by her brother, Craig Robinson, Michelle Obama set the tone for the convention as the first prospective first lady of color to address the DNC. Moreover her speech energized the crowd as they moved into the final steps towards the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first Black President of the United States. In her 2008 DNC address, Michelle Obama offers insight into her life story and the upbringing of her husband. Obama also discusses her husband’s early career choices and their family life as foundational for Barack Obama’s proposed policy actions. Throughout the speech Obama reminds her audience(s) that the American Dream is made out of our improbable journeys intersecting with the crosscurrents of history.

Scholars theorize that Michelle Obama utilizes a feminine style in her 2008 Democratic National Convention speech (Howell, 2009; Vigil, 2014). Howell (2009) finds that Michelle Obama uses feminine style to rearticulate the “American Dream” in a feminine way and Vigil (2014) looks at prospective first lady convention speeches as a feminine style genre and uses Michelle Obama’s 2008 and 2012 DNC speeches as examples. However, in this chapter I extend these observations by offering a my own review of Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style at the 2008 DNC and engaging a discussion of her Signifyin[g] practices.
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Feminine Style in 2008 DNC Address

Throughout Michelle Obama’s 2008 DNC address, she uses feminine stylistic elements. To review, feminine style is a personal and inductive discursive performance, stylized through a feminine persona or references to women’s experiences, such as mothering. Such discourses utilize anecdotal evidence to invite experiential reasoning, promoting audience empowerment and identification (Campbell, 1989; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996). Spousal nominees’ convention speeches often utilize thematic elements of feminine style such as, “speaking about ‘feminine’ topics, establishing a peer-to-peer relationship with the audience, and using personal narratives to encourage identification building” (Vigil, 2014). These themes are often messy and overlapping (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996). The role of first lady is a gendered and raced performance rooted in tradition rather than policy, thus Michelle Obama must use a feminine style to keep with this tradition and appeal to White audiences. I argue that Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style in the 2008 DNC address is represented in 1) her use personal tone and inductive framing; 2) her use of feminine/maternal persona; and 3) her deployment of narrative examples to generate identification with White audiences.

**Personal Tone and Inductive Framing**

In her address, Michelle Obama first establishes her personal tone when she draws on familial narratives about her brother, her father, her mother, her daughters, and most importantly, her husband. For example, Obama begins her address with the story of the first time her husband, Barack Obama, played basketball with her brother, Oregon State University basketball coach, Craig Robinson (Obama, 2008).

Obama uses a personal tone to situate herself within the rhetorical situation when she transitions into the body of the speech by classifying herself in feminine terms.
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_I come here_ tonight as a sister, blessed with a brother who is my mentor, my protector and my lifelong friend. (And) _I come here_ as a wife who loves my husband and believes he will be an extraordinary president. (Applause) _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…

(Obama, 2014, emphasis added)

In this passage, Michelle Obama uses a personal tone, contingent on her use of the phrase “I come here as.” Obama situates herself as a sister, wife, mother and daughter to qualify her authority to speak in a feminine style. Rather than listing her qualifications as a lawyer or community advocate, which would be perceived as masculine, Obama focuses on the feminine familial roles she performs.

Furthermore, Michelle Obama deploys an inductive speaking style that pacifies and softens the political issues later in the speech. Obama front-loads her address with stories and anecdotal evidence about her life and her family and then gradually begins to weave in policy proposals such as healthcare reform and ending the war in Afghanistan, and crescendos her thesis: a call to, “stand together to elect Barack Obama president of the United States of America” (Obama, 2008). As Campbell (1998) argues, developing ideas inductively is a strategic application of feminine style, “so that the audience thinks that it, not this presumptuous woman, drew the conclusions” (p.5). Thus Obama utilizes personal tone and an inductive structure to draw her audience into her speech and generate identification, through feminine persona among White audience members.

**Feminine Persona: A National Mother**

Michelle Obama further utilizes a feminine style through her use of a feminine/maternal persona. First lady/ feminine style scholarship argues that the first lady of the United States must
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symbolically prove their capacity for national motherhood (McGinley, 2009; Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Cooper, 2014). For example, in the early part of Michelle Obama’s speech, addressed above, she generates ethos through a feminine personal tone including identifying as a mother. She says:

I come here as a mom whose girls are the heart of my heart and the center of my world — they're 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. Their future — and all our children's future — is my stake in this election. (Obama, 2008)

First she uses the vernacular and informal, “mom” rather than “mother” to describe herself, making her more relatable. Moreover, Obama expresses maternal concern, not just for her children, but for the nation’s children. She tells us that her children are constantly on her mind and that her worry goes beyond her own children, but to all American children. Here, Obama uses a self-disclosing tone that reflects maternal/ feminine nurturance and by extension establishes her performance of national motherhood. This performance continues later on in the speech when Michelle Obama tells her White audience about the shared values her parents and Barack Obama’s families instilled in them and they pass onto their own children. She explains:

And Barack and I set out to build lives guided by these values, and pass them on to the next generation. Because we want our children—and all children in this nation—to know that the only limit to the height of your achievements is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work for them. (Obama, 2008)

Again, Michelle Obama is demonstrating her capacity for nurturance and for national motherhood, anchoring her feminine persona. Obama articulates such a persona by grounding herself in a traditional feminine sphere and moral framework. She shows that she (and her
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husband by extension) has a clear moral compass that encourages hard work to demolish adversity, which she then extends to a national scale.

**Experiences and Empowerment**

Michelle Obama utilizes anecdotal evidence and experiential reasoning throughout her speech. First, Obama tells the story of her father, a blue color worker on the South Side of Chicago with multiple sclerosis (Obama, 2008). Obama shares:

My dad was our rock. Although he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his early 30s, he was our provider, our champion, our hero. (But) As he got sicker, it got harder for him to walk, it took him longer to get dressed in the morning. But (ya know) if he was in pain, he never let on. 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. He and my mom poured everything they had into me and Craig. It was the greatest gift a child can receive: never doubting for a single minute that you're loved, and cherished, and have a place in this world. And thanks to their faith and hard work, we both were able to go on to college. So I know firsthand from their lives—and mine—that the American dream endures. (Obama, 2008)

In this passage Michelle Obama uses the story of her father to orient her experiences with the world. Scholars who study feminine style suggest that anecdotal evidence invites audience identification (Campbell, 1989; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 1996; Johnson, 2005). By sharing the story of her father’s struggle, Michelle Obama is able to anecdotaly frame one of the key themes of her speech, the endurance of the American Dream. As a result, Obama is able to make an argument about poverty and (dis)ability through storytelling, rather than statistics or other
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masculine types of evidence which invites audience members with similar experiences to identify through their own struggles, but also couches her critique of difference to a White or hegemonic audience.

Obama also uses anecdotes and experiences to endorse her husband in a feminine style. As previously discussed, Michelle Obama sanctions Barack Obama’s moral creditability by proxy in her performance of morality and motherhood, but she also expressly reflects on his character through anecdotes about their community and social justice work. For example Obama shares the story of when she first met Barack, how their friendship grew, and how when he graduated from law school rather than heading to Wall Street, he moved to Chicago to help communities devastated by the closing of steel mills. Obama describes the people who came to hear Barack Obama speak:

The people gathered together that day were ordinary folks doing the best they could to build a good life. They were parents [tryn’ to get by living paycheck to paycheck; grandparents trying to get [it together] by on a fixed income; men frustrated that they couldn’t support their families after their jobs [had] disappeared. [You see,] Those folks weren’t asking for a handout or a shortcut. [See] They were ready to work — they wanted to contribute. They believed — like you and I believe — that America should be a place where you can make it if you try (Obama, 2008).

In this passage, Michelle Obama’s anecdotal evidence accomplishes several things. Some, White, audience members might hear a moral appeal that endorses the creditability of Barack Obama as a worthy presidential nominee. However, Michelle Obama is also able to make another argument about poverty coded in experiential knowledge targeted for her Black audiences. Obama notes that hard working yet impoverished Americans are “ordinary folks”
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“trying to get by”. Obama emphasizes the hard working efforts of these individuals, which appeals to all audiences through an American Dream narrative off hard work, yet more specifically she negates stereotypes that poor (Black) people are not hard working. Therefore Obama uses feminine style to simultaneously a moral appeal that endorsees her husband and the hard working people of Chicago.

Throughout these anecdotes, Obama also uses personal and collective pronouns to invite certain audience members into her speech and compares her own experience to the experiences of many of them. These stories allow her to promote empowerment among disenfranchised parts of her audience and identification, which serves the greater goal of identifying with Barack Obama. By extension White audiences comes to identity not just with Michelle Obama’s life, but also with Barack Obama and his vision for the presidency.

Similarly to feminine style, African American rhetoric utilizes narratives and storytelling as evidence (Sullivan, 1993; Jackson II & Richardson, 2014). In her 2008 Democratic National Convention Address, Michelle Obama shares a number of stories that center on three major themes: her own improbable journey as it intertwines with Barack Obama’s, specific moments that highlight the crosscurrents of history, and how the “American Dream” endures. However, Michelle Obama is not just appealing to a White or national audience through feminine style to generate identification; she must simultaneously connect with her Black audience. I argue she does this through African American Signifyin[g]

Signifyin[g] in the 2008 DNC Address

Signifyin[g] is use of double-voiced words or language forms intended to bifurcated Black and White audiences within a single speech act simultaneously, yet differently. Identification with meaning is thus predicated on African American communal cultural
experiences. In her 2008 DNC address, Michelle Obama performs Signification through induction and call and response formulas.

Specifically, Indirection as a Signifyin[g] practice uses allusion while avoiding specific articulation of a subject. Gates (2014) draws on the work of Abraham (1976) to describe indirection as a subtle type of Signify[g] meant to “call out” a person or a group without ever directly addressing them. Furthermore, indirection becomes a formal stylistic element where the message said and the message intended exist in tandem (Gates, 2014, p. 93). In reference to indirection, Gates, quoting Mitchell-Kernan says, “The apparent meaning of a sentence signifies its actual meaning” (quoted in Gates, 2014, p. 93). Gates (2014) argues that the most important features of Signifyin[g] are indirect intent and metaphorical reference (p 93). Gates (2014) articulates a number of rhetorical devises that can be deployed to invoke these practices, including, metonymy, or the literary devise where the part comes to represent the whole. I argue that Michelle Obama uses figurative language where audiences, through related experiential knowledge fill in the blanks, thereby Signifyin[g].

Indirection: Intentionally Indirect

Joseph (2011), as discussed in chapter one, argues that Michelle Obama uses class narratives as a rhetorical stand-in for racial experience to engage a White (male) audience disillusioned by the post-identity fantasy; or as I argue, Michelle Obama uses her own class narrative to frame her raced experiences as a Signifyin[g] practice. A specific rhetorical tactic employed by Obama to indirectly address race is metonymy, or the rhetorical devise where a part represents a whole. For example, in the early framing of the address, Obama describes family and up-bringing: “And I come here as a daughter — raised on the South Side of Chicago
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(Applause) by a father who was a blue-collar city worker and a mother who stayed at home with my brother and me” (Obama, 2008).

Obama locates herself within the context of a specific cultural experience because the South Side of Chicago is a working class, African American neighborhood, yet she mentions class, she does not name, or explicitly talk about race. “The South Side of Chicago” is an enthymematic allusion to race that utilizes metonymy. The place name, or part, represents the racial marginality of those who live there, the whole.

Class as a substitute for race is furthered in Obama’s enthymematic description of her father as “blue-collar.” “Blue-collar” indicates, through metonymy, the class circumstances Obama’s family faced. Moreover, class serves as a substitute for race that reflects Michelle Obama’s own class struggles, yet situate her improbable journey in a way that is relatable to Black and White audiences simultaneously, yet differently. Social location influences how audiences will understand these messages. This potentially creates identification for individuals from “blue collar” background, regardless of race. However, if a Black audience is reading class as a stand in for race, race complicates Obama’s improbable journey without offending White audiences because overcoming class struggle is an important part of the American Dream narrative.

Another example of metonymic facilitation of indirection in Michelle Obama’s address comes in her description of first meeting Barack Obama. The First lady says:

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
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folks just like my parents, and by a single mother who struggled to pay the bills just like we did (Obama, 2008).

Obama uses the term “funny name” to describe her husband. Barack Obama’s Kenyan name drew much speculation during his campaign (and into his presidency) and was used by political opponents and pundits alike to speculate about his religion, citizenship, and generally deployed as a racial micro-aggression against him. Moreover, in Barack Obama’s 2004 DNC address, he identified himself as the “kid with the funny name.” Michelle Obama alludes to these conversations and uses Barack Obama’s “funny name” as a metonymic substitute for a discussion of ethnicity, rather than directly calling out questions of Obama’s ethnicity or nationality. While a White audience might not receive this as a critique of micro aggressive behaviors, a Black audience potentially identifies with these verbal slights.

Call and Response Formulas

Sullivan (1993) describes the influence of African American oral culture on the practices of Signifyin[g]. She contends that oral cultures rely on “dynamic” or stylized language to emphasize meaning and notes the value of mnemonic form where rhythm can aid recall and set expressions are repeated to invite Black audience participation. African-American oral tradition hinges on the rhetor’s capacity to relate knowledge to human experiences rather than a written text. In oral traditions, knowledge is not grounded in statistics or facts; there is no knowledge divorced from human activity or human life.

Repetition of form is an important Signifyin[g] element of African-American oral culture that references to the antiphonal structure (call and response) of the Afro-American sermon. Theses “call and response formulas” are integral Signifyin[g] formulaic practices that intertextually weave words and phrases from “context to context and from communication
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situation to communication situation” to denote shared concerns among listeners (Sullivan, 1993, p.6). Thus, call and response is a Signifyin[g] form where phrases and language are repeated for emphasis and rearticulated to generate new meanings.

Michelle Obama establishes three call and response formulas in her address through three metaphorical themes: “improbable journeys,” “the world as it should be” and significant moments in the “crosscurrents of history.” I argue that Obama’s repetition of set expressions transforms them into call and response formulas creating rhetorical identification among Black audience members.

First Michelle Obama establishes the theme of “improbable journeys.” Obama begins her speech by thanking her brother for introducing her she says:

And he's been there for me every step of the way since that clear February day 19 months ago, when—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. (Obama, 2008, emphasis added)

Obama reflects on the support she received from her family throughout her life and as she campaigned for Barack Obama, on “this improbable journey.” A generalizable read of this passage might suggest that she is alluding to the unlikely circumstances and surprising success of a first term senator’s nomination for president of the United States; however when joined with the narrative of the improbable journey in the context of race, Obama is able to potentially Signify indirectly to her Black audience her celebration of the first Black presidential nomination in American history. Michelle Obama repeats this set expression in the next sentence when she says, “But each of us also comes here tonight by way of our own improbable journey” (Obama, 2008). Obama uses the frame of the “improbable journey” to set up her personal story. Obama
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repeats and revises the set theme of an improbable journey. At first the term is used to refer to the Obama campaign, however, the second usage Obama extends the phrase to invite audience participation. When joined with the following statements about Obama’s personal improbable this can be read as an invitation for audiences of difference to identify. While the reiteration of key phrases might be insignificant to a White audience, or simply a marker of themes in the speech, to an African American audience the repetition and revision of key phrases references the antiphonal structures of Black church settings (see Gates 2014).

Later in the speech, Michelle Obama transitions into a discussion of amazed she was by her first meeting of Barack Obama. She describes his work and speeches in impoverished Chicago communities. Michelle Obama describes the kind of people who came to hear Barack Obama speak. She says that they were “ordinary folks” “tryn’ to get by.” She also describes watching Barack Obama speak:

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 (we) 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. (He said) 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? (Obama, 2008)

In this passage, Michelle Obama establishes a set formula to be repeated and revised in the rest of the speech: “the world as it should be”. Obama establishes a moral imperative to take action based on values and aspirations and not settle for the world as it is. Moreover, she alludes to the
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narrative of the American dream when she articulates this optimistic worldview as part of the “Great American Story.” Michelle Obama then alludes to social activism as an element in the American dream, and indirectly alludes to the role African American activism played in that history. Obama says that the Great American Story is:

the story of men and women gathered in churches and union halls, in town squares and high school gyms — people who stood up and marched and risked everything they had — refusing to settle, determined to mold our future into the shape of our ideals. (Obama, 2008)

Because Obama is using indirection, the audience is left to fill in the images of these people. A White audience might see themselves or people they identify with working in activism, as would a Black audience, but in a more specific context considering the organizing strategies of the African American Civil Rights movement. Obama is Signifyin[g] through an indirect allusion to the American Civil Rights movements. It is from this frame that Obama is able to set up her next call and response formula. She says:

It is because of their will and determination that this week, we celebrate two anniversaries: the 88th anniversary of women winning the right to vote, and the 45th anniversary of that hot summer day when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. lifted our sights and our hearts with his dream for our nation (Obama, 2008). 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. (Obama, 2008)

By repeating references to the American dream, Obama utilizing call and response and establishing the “crosscurrents of history” as a second set formula to revise later in the speech, I argue that Michelle Obama is Signifyin[g] through her allusions to intersectional oppression. In
the later passage, Obama directly references to the American Woman Suffrage Movement and African-American Civil Rights movement and places herself within the crosscurrents of those histories. Obama Signifies through a transition from the indirect to the explicit. An African American audience many have understood Obama’s discussion of activism from a Civil Rights perspective all along, but in the later passage Obama opens that viewpoint to a White audience. This double voiced approach allows Obama to simultaneously address race and social activism to some audiences, while masking it to others. Moreover Obama places herself within the interacting oppressions of race and gender when she says she is at the crosscurrents of history between the fight for women’s rights and for equity of African Americans, thus she highlights her intersectional positionality.

All of these call and response formulas come together later in the speech, when Michelle Obama says:

All of us driven by a simple belief that the world as it is just won't do — that we have an obligation to fight for the world as it should be. That is the thread that connects our hearts. That is the thread that runs through my journey and Barack’s journey and so many other improbable journeys that have brought us here tonight, where the current of history meets this new tide of hope. That is why I love this country (Obama, 2008).

Michelle Obama again references the world as it “should be” and articulates that motivation as the thread of connection of Barack Obama’s, her own, and many other’s improbable journeys. Obama then ties these journeys to the current moment, the nomination of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States, as a ripple in the crosscurrents of history. This repetition alters the original utterance because the battle for the world as it “should be” is shifted into the content of her and her husband’s struggles, not just the people who they were helping. Moreover,
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Michelle Obama situates Barack Obama’s nomination with in the crosscurrents of history tied into Barack Obama’s campaign rhetoric of “hope”. She alludes, through enthymeme, to the significance of the first Black presidential nominee and argues that this is the basis of which she “loves this country” where she recalls the American dream narrative established elsewhere in the text.

The multiple interpretations Obama’s formulaic approach to these themes suggests the Signifyin[g] significance. A generalizable audience hears allusions to campaign rhetoric and the repetition of phrases creating narrative fidelity in the speech and generating identification with the policy goals proposed by Barack Obama. However, an African American audience could recognizes the stylistic repetition of key words and phrases or repetition of form, like references to the antiphonal structure (call and response) of the Afro-American sermon. Additionally the repeating of set phrases draws her African American audience in and creates identification through shared cultural knowledge represented in her Signifyin[g] speech pattern. Repetition and revision, particularly in this stylistically formal way, represents skill in African American speech communities. Therefore, Michelle Obama is able to subtly generate identification among her Black audience, without violating classic (White) rhetorical performance because of her allusions to the American dream and other tropes of White American political discourse.

Conclusions From Obama at the DNC

In Michelle Obama’s 2008 DNC address she utilizes feminine style and Signifyin[g] to create audience identification of several levels. Michelle Obama’s feminine tone is expected considering the rhetorical situation that prospective first ladies undertake when they speak at national nominating conventions (Vigil, 2014). However, such an anticipated feminine style
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creates not only the need, but also the opportunity to Signify, because it is a performance of Whiteness (Ried-Brinkely, 2012; Hayden, in press).

Michelle Obama’s uses double voiced forms in combination create opportunities for resistance. For example, Obama’s use of maternal persona casts an alternative/resistive narrative of positive Black maternity Michelle Obama is a woman of color, and her rhetoric cannot be understood outside of an embodied context, where the Black body interacts with the White ascetic of first lady. Michelle Obama’s rhetorical performance cannot explicitly violate the expectations of White audience members where first ladies are expected to project a sense of national motherhood (McGinley, 2009; Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Cooper, 2014). Yet, the meaning of motherhood is transformed when women of color celebrate raising their own children.

Michelle Obama, who early on in her husband’s campaign insisted that raising her daughters would be her number one priority, utilizes stories about her own children to frame national issues that affect children. Scholars such as Joseph (2011), Cooper (2014), and Hayden (in press) argue that Michelle Obama’s empowered maternal persona is essential in mitigating historically racist depictions of Black motherhood, as the mammy or the matriarch (P. H. Collins, 2002). This is especially true in Michelle Obama’s 2008 DNC address. The goal of a prospective first lady at a nominating convention is to act as a rhetorical proxy for her husband and as an audition for her future position. Therefore, through Michelle Obama’s performance as a “good mother” and more importantly, a capable national mother, she rhetorically validates her own Black maternity.

Secondarily, when elevated performances of Black motherhood are joined with a feminist read of Obama’s performance, we can see the epistemic function of such performances. Michelle Obama expresses an epistemology through her performance of motherhood. The post-feminist
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narrative of femininity posits a double bind; women are told that they can “have it all,” yet women who choose to have a career are characterized as “bad mothers” and women who choose to prioritize motherhood are deemed “bad feminists” (see Hayden, in press). Michelle Obama’s use of a feminine style underwrites this double bind because she elevates motherhood as a responsibility to ensure the success of the future. Thus, Michelle Obama is celebrating motherhood as a feminist act, but in particular Black motherhood.

Michelle Obama’s American Dream rhetoric is also a resistive combination of feminine style and Signifyin[g]. Michelle Obama use the prospective first lady’s expected performance of American patriotism, a performance of Whiteness, critically when she expresses difference through Signification. For example, throughout the speech Michelle Obama uses tropes of the American Dream, from anecdotes about her father as a hard worker, her references to impoverished workers in Chicago and allusions to American protest movements. In these references Michelle Obama uses a White feminine style to engage tropes of patriotism, however, they also Signify. Obama does this through subtle, but critical applications of the American dream to situations applicable to her Black audience, such as her references to the Civil Rights movement.

Moreover, if the prospective first lady’s convention address is a rhetorical proxy for the integrity of her husband, then Obama especially must perform nationalism (see Vigil, 2014). Michelle Obama’s performance of Whiteness, through feminine style, serves as an endorsement of Barack Obama’s capacity to perform Whiteness, thus appeasing White audiences. However Michelle Obama while minimally addressing race by utilizing indirection to discuses oppression through classed terms and she celebrates the achievement of the first Black presidential nominee,. While one read of these performances assumes that Michelle Obama has succumb to
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White performances, a Signifyin[g] read suggests that she not only reconstructs what it means to be first lady as a woman of color, but she also opens the possibility for American Dream narratives to account for improbable journeys of those who face oppression regardless of race or gender. Because Michelle Obama is a woman of color, and her rhetoric cannot be understood outside of an embodied context, she never has to explicitly violate the expectations of white audience members. Her performance of Whiteness assumed by the position she speaks from calls for the need to Signify.

The juxtaposition between Michelle Obama’s performance of race and gender, with expected performances of the first lady has changed over her tenure in the White House. To further exemplify Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style and Signification as rejections of post-identity and celebrations of difference it is useful to examine other performances to see how time and audience influence her use of feminine style and Signify[g], which I do in the following chapters.
Chapter Three: Remembering Maya Angelou

It's in the arch of my back,

The sun of my smile,

The ride of my breasts,

The grace of my style.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me

_Phenomenal woman_ by Dr. Maya Angelou

After the passing of Dr. Maya Angelou in May of 2014, people all over the world felt a sense of loss. Angelou’s work, through poetry, song, film, and literature speaks to the experiences of African American women in many ways. Angelou’s messages of spirituality, self-love, and individual beauty resonate throughout her work and in the spirit of those who celebrate it.

On June 7, 2014, Michelle Obama gave a eulogy for Dr. Maya Angelou at the Wait Chapel at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The remarks by the _First lady at Memorial Service for Dr. Maya Angelou_ deserve to be studied because Obama speaks to the influence of Maya Angelou’s work in empowering women of color. This narrative of empowerment provides a unique rhetorical space to evaluate the epistemological components of feminine style and Signification. Furthermore, this speech is significant to this study because of the occasion and the audience. Michelle Obama’s address to a largely Black audience, in a church setting, invites the use of African American dialectic tropes and the epideictic nature of
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the speech creates a unique rhetorical space to talk about issues of race and gender inequity because of Angelou’s significant contribution to African American feminist scholarship.

However, Obama’s public persona as the first lady means that her speech performance must be tempered and generalized for a White audience, inviting the use of feminine style and Signifyin[g].

Feminine Style

Feminine style utilizes experiential epistemology and warrants arguments through anecdotes and examples, invites audience participation, and identification between the speaker and audience. Traditionally, feminine style is rooted in White femininity, however Michelle Obama’s use of such a speaking in her celebration of Maya Angelou’s life and feminist work both couches Obama’s performance of race and expands feminine style to include the experiences of Black women. Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style in her eulogy for Angelou emphasizes the interconnected feminine relationships between mothers and daughters as phenomenal women. Throughout Michelle Obama uses a personal tone through anecdotal evidence and invitation of audience participation.

Anecdotal Evidence

In Michelle Obama’s eulogy for Maya Angelou she demonstrates feminine style by emphasizing female familial relationships within her narrative examples. Obama opens her speech with a story about her mother. She explains:

My mother, Marian Robinson, never cares about anything I do. (Laughter.)

But when Dr. Maya Angelou passed, she said, you're going, aren't you? I said, well, Mom, I'm not really sure, I have to check with my schedule. She said, you are going, right? (Laughter.) I said, well, I'm going to get back to you but
I have to check with the people, figure it out. I came back up to her room when I found out that I was scheduled to go, and she said, that’s good, now I’m happy (Laughter.) (Obama, 2014).

Michelle Obama’s opening demonstrates the significant influence of Maya Angelou in a humorous and inductive fashion. In the story about her relationship with her mother, Obama demonstrates one of the major themes of the speech: Maya Angelou’s powerful, multigenerational reach among Black women.

Michelle Obama use of anecdotes frames her orientation to Maya Angelou’s scholarship. She explains: “The first time I read Phenomenal Woman, I was struck by how she celebrated black women’s beauty like no one had ever dared to before” (2014). Here, Obama expresses her personal experience in order to frame her larger argument: that Angelou’s work was an anthem for Black women’s God-given beauty. Obama then continues her story by saying:

And, oh, how desperately black girls needed that message. As a young woman, I needed that message. As a child, my first doll was Malibu Barbie. (Laughter.) That was the standard for perfection. That was what the world told me to aspire to. But then I discovered Maya Angelou, and her words lifted me right out of my own little head (Obama, 2014).

Obama uses an inductive and anecdotal example from her childhood to make a larger argument about the significance of Maya Angelou’s influence on young Black women. These themes continue in Michelle Obama’s story of the first time she met Angelou. She says:

I first came into her presence in 2008, when she spoke at a campaign rally here in North Carolina…She took the stage, as she always did, like she'd been born there. And I was
so completely awed and overwhelmed by her presence I could barely concentrate on what she was saying to me. But while I don't remember her exact words, I do remember exactly how she made me feel. (Applause.) She made me feel like I owned the place, too. She made me feel like I had been born on that stage right next to her. And I remember thinking to myself, "Maya Angelou knows who I am, and she’s rooting for me. So, now I'm good. I can do this. I can do this." (Applause.) (Obama, 2014)

Once again, Obama uses her personal experience to exemplify Angelou’s greatness. Obama emphasizes Angelou’s commanding presence and her own feelings. All of these anecdotes emphasize Black women’s empowerment as an essential element in Maya Angelou’s work. Subsequently, these testimonial expressions highlight Obama’s embodied participation in feminine and feminist value systems. When Michelle Obama uses anecdotal evidence about her empowering experiences with Angelou, she is able to generate audience identification based on a shared or similar experiences her largely Black immediate audience. Such audience identification lays the foundation for audience participation in Michelle Obama’s speech.

**Audience Participation: Empowering Phenomenal Women**

Obama invites audience participation by articulating Maya Angelou’s maternal-like power and emphasis on women’s empowerment. Obama first discusses Maya Angelou’s capacity for authenticity and explains that when people give her the compliment “authentic” Obama takes it with great pride because she is following in Angelou’s footsteps. Obama then extends this narrative to her audience by explaining:

But for Dr. Angelou, her own transition was never enough. You see, she didn't just want to be phenomenal herself, she wanted all of us to be phenomenal right alongside her. (Applause.) So that's what she did throughout her lifetime — she gathered so many
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of us under her wing. *I wish I was a daughter,* but I was right under that wing sharing her wisdom, her genius, and her boundless love. (Obama, 2014, emphasis added)

Obama utilizes maternal narrative to create identification with her audience, by expressing her desire to be a daughter of Angelou. Michelle Obama tells us that she wishes she were a daughter, but also stresses that a familial relation is not what motivates Maya Angelou’s love.

Michelle Obama’s eulogy also discusses Maya Angelou’s narrative of Black women’s empowerment. Obama describes her own discovery of Angelou’s work as an essential in her own empowerment. Moreover, Obama articulates that Angelou’s work was influential in shaping many phenomenal women. For example, Obama explains:

> And that’s really true for us all, because in so many ways, Maya Angelou knew us. She knew our hope, our pain, our ambition, our fear, our anger, our shame. And she assured us that despite it all — in fact, because of it all — we were good. And in doing so, she paved the way for me and Oprah and so many others just to be our good, old, black-woman selves. (Applause.) (Obama, 2014).

Obama reflects on the “knowing” in Angelou’s work. Feminine style is grounded in women’s experiences as a means of knowing. Here, Obama expresses this sense of collective knowing through her use of collective pronouns: “our.” By characterizing pain, ambition, fear, anger, and shame as collective emotions, Obama invites audience participation and identification by equating her own experiences and the experiences told in Angelou’s work for Black women. Moreover, Obama celebrates this feminine way of knowing. She tells us that Angelou’s work reminds us that because of “it all—we were good.” Experiences indicative of women’s oppression and subsequent empowerment fuel phenomenal women to their greatness. In this sense, Michelle Obama expands the collective knowing consistent with an epistemic feminine
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style to a Black audience, where women of color are invited to celebrate their own femininity, thereby expanding feminine style to Black women and creating opportunities for resistance.

Signifyin[g]

Michelle Obama’s eulogy for Maya Angelou articulately weaves in African American vernacular through figurative language. Specifically, she establishes a Signifyin[g] rhetorical frame through her use of intertextual revision that references the work of Maya Angelou and use of figurative language such a metonymy (when a part replaces the name) and enthymeme (arguments when the premise is not explicitly stated).

Intertextuality

Michelle Obama’s use of intertextuality distinguishes her speech as an act of Signification of form and cues the Black audience to hear double-voiced meaning in the language of the speech. Intertextuality is the relationship between texts. Gates (2014) argues that intertextuality, by definition, is dependent on repetition and revision (p.66) and invites audience participation similarly to the “set expressions” as “call and response formulas” addressed in the previous chapter. Intertextuality as a Signifyin[g] practice negotiates oral and written forms of communication and therefore highlights the confrontation between Afro-American oral culture and White American written culture. Michelle Obama’s repetition and revision of significant texts suggests she is Signifyin[g] and through intertextual allusions to Angelou’s work, Michelle Obama establishes her credibility with her Black audience, while a White audience perhaps just hears literary allusions.

Throughout the speech Michelle Obama utilizes allusions to Angelou’s work as the basis for repetition and revision. As articulated above, Michelle Obama shares her experience reading the poem, “Phenomenal Woman” for the first time and realizing its celebration of Black
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womanhood. In the original work, Angelou speaks in the first person and describes her own beauty saying, “The stride of my step… The grace of my style” (Angelou, 1978). Obama riffs off of these verses and she says, “Our curves, our stride, our strength, our grace. Her words were clever and sassy; they were powerful and sexual and boastful” (Obama, 2014). This is an example of Signification, as Gates argues, that represents a Black literary intertextuality through repetition with a difference. Obama revises the original poem to her own terms. Gates (2014) argues that African American writers and rhetoricians repeat and repurpose formulaic phrases with difference to express creativity. Much like jazz, which takes familiar forms and improvises upon them, African American rhetoric can employ a text and change it to fit a new purpose (p. 66-67). Moreover, it is the revision, rather than the repletion that makes intertextual allusions significant. In this passage Obama revises Angelou’s work from singular personal pronouns “I” to the collective pronoun “our.” I argue that this revision universalizes the text and Signifies upon Obama’s identity as a Black woman by placing herself in the collective.

Michelle Obama next extrapolates the narrative of “Phenomenal Woman” as a greater metaphoric theme in her address. As articulated elsewhere, a central tenant of Signification is metaphor. Intertextual references to “Phenomenal Woman” are metaphorically articulated in Obama’s text to represent the value and beauty of Black womanhood. For example when Obama discusses the reaching influence of Angelou’s work she says: “You see, she [Angelou] didn’t just want to be phenomenal herself, she wanted all of us to be phenomenal right alongside her” (Obama, 2014). Obama draws on the “Phenomenal Woman” metaphor for a third time towards the end of her address when she says:

    She showed us that eventually, if we stayed true to who we are, then the world would embrace us. (Applause.) And she did this not just for black women, but for all women,
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for all human beings. She taught us all that it is okay to be your regular old self, whatever that is — your poor self, your broken self, your brilliant, bold, phenomenal self (Obama, 2014).

This passage extends the meaning of Angelou’s text, no longer about one Black woman being empowered, but reflecting Obama’s empowerment and the empowerment of others. Obama furthers the “Phenomenal Woman” metaphor when she articulates Black women’s empowerment stemming from “just being yourself.” Such similarities and differences between Angelou’s original text, and Obama’s repurposing, construct the simultaneous and dualistic perceptions intended for Black and White audiences. A White audience might hear this as a misquote of Angelou’s work (see Sullivan, 1999). However for Obama’s Black audience these revisions reflect creativity of the speaker and create creditability for her African American listeners. The Black and White audiences are invited in identify with Obama’s speech through allusions to familiar text, yet a Black audience that is culturally attuned to repetition and revision is invited to interpolate new meanings rooted in Black women’s experiences that go beyond Angelou and Obama as individuals.

Figuratively Speaking

Since Signification is predicated on indirection, it often utilizes classical rhetorical tropes as expressions of figurative language, rather than direct expression. While there are numerous tactics that constitute Signifyin[g] practices, I argue that in Michelle Obama’s eulogy for Maya Angelou she relies on metonymy, when a part of something comes to represent the whole, and, as discussed in chapter two, enthymematic allusions to racial inequity.
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Metonymy

Gates (2014) argues that metonymy, the use of a part to represent the name of something, is a classical western trope parallel to the Signifyin[g] practice of “Calling out”. Calling out (of someone’s name) is an indirect method of challenging someone or something (p. 95).

Throughout the speech, Michelle Obama repeatedly discusses the empowerment she gained through Angelou’s celebration of women of color. This praise is intertwined with reflective statements about Obama herself and figurative language that uses metonymy. Obama says:

Dr. Angelou's words sustained me on every step of my journey — through lonely moments in ivy-covered classrooms and colorless skyscrapers; through blissful moments mothering two splendid baby girls; through long years on the campaign trail where, at times, my very womanhood was dissected and questioned. For me, that was the power of Maya Angelou's words — words so powerful that they carried a little black girl from the South Side of Chicago all the way to the White House. (Obama, 2014)

This passage utilizes metonymy in several ways. First, Obama encapsulates her experience with marginality and success as steps on a journey, which sets up the figurative frame for the passage. She then discusses, “lonely moments in ivy-covered classrooms and colorless skyscrapers.” Ivy-covered classrooms metonymically allude to Michelle Obama’s time at Princeton and Harvard, both Ivy League institutions. Colorless skyscrapers could be read as a metonymic reference to her time working at Chicago-based international business law firm Sidley & Austin, where she met Barack Obama (whitehouse.gov, 2015). However, I argue that these figures of speech Signify something more.
During the 2008 election season, Michelle Obama’s undergraduate thesis was called into question and she was asked to release it to the public. Her senior sociology thesis, entitled “Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community,” focused on the difficult and alienating experiences of Black students looking for community in the Ivy-League environment (L. Collins, 2008). Thus lonely moments in ivy covered classrooms Signifies Obama’s feelings of alienation shared by other Black people attending elite institutions. Moreover, Obama uses the descriptor, “colorless” to describe her time in the corporate world. One reading of this term would suggest that colorlessness refers to the bland drudgery of working for a mega corporation where professionalism overrides personality. However, I argue that this could also be read as a reflection on Whiteness, or the absence of people of color in her corporate work that motivated her move to community and non-profit work.

Additionally, Obama expresses that Maya Angelou’s work was so powerful that, “they carried a little Black girl from the South Side of Chicago all the way to the White House.” This passage is also a type of metonymy. The South Side of Chicago is a working class African American neighborhood. This terminology utilizes an inverted metonymy because the name, or part represents the marginality of those who live there, while the White House represents power and is metonymic of her status as first lady. Thus, Obama reflects on her literal experience of transcendence as a metaphorical extension of the empowerment she drew from Maya Angelou’s work. As cited previously, Joseph (2011) argues that Michelle Obama, “speaks back to” post-race and post-gender terminology through resistive reiterations of post-identity logic. The potential, multiple, and polysemous readings of the passage are evidence of Michelle Obama’s use of figurative language, inviting double-voiced interpretations, or Signifyin[g]. I argue that her metonymic phrasing utilizes the Signifyin[g] practice of “Calling
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out” to highlight issues of systemic racism in the United States. While she is not specifically calling out a person in her audience, she is calling out an ideology: Whiteness. Because Signification is dependent on a shared cultural knowledge a White audience outside of that cultural experience, or even geographic location might not understand the figurative language that potentially alludes to race. White audiences outside of the African American cultural experience are excluded from the second meaning because their orientation to the language, or maybe even the geography is different. Experiential knowledge of racism in school or the workplace, or an understanding of the circumstances of intercity systemic racism and poverty inform the later reading of the text. Shared experience constitutes Signifyin[g] in this way because a White audiences may just hear elegant phrasing, while a Black audience potentially hears experiences they have in common with Michelle Obama, created by systemic racism.

*Enthymematic Allusion*

Furthermore, Michelle Obama uses enthymematic language to talk about race. Within the text Michelle Obama never uses the term “race” to describe ethnicity or skin color, yet she engages an ideological critique of Whiteness and celebrates the identity of Black women. Such is the case in the aforementioned example about a little Black girl being carried to the White House. Obama tells us that on the campaign trail, her very womanhood was dissected. Here she literally refers to speculations about her sex, such as the Internet rumors claiming Michelle Obama is in fact a man because of her physically fit appearance (Cooper, 2014). But this also alludes to Black women’s historical exclusion from femininity and womanhood because of the history of slavery (Cooper, 2014).
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By not explicitly engaging race inequity but using enthymematic phrases Michelle Obama Signifies through indirection and circumlocution. An example of this occurs when Michelle Obama discusses Angelou’s expression of God-given beauty. Again, as Obama tells us:

And, oh, how desperately black girls needed that message. As a young woman, I needed that message. As a child, my first doll was Malibu Barbie. (Laughter.) That was the standard for perfection. That was what the world told me to aspire to. But then I discovered Maya Angelou, and her words lifted me right out of my own little head (Obama, 2014).

Obama shares that her first doll was a Barbie and her audience responds with laughter. Obama goes on to say that this was the standard for perfection until Maya Angelou gave her an alternative narrative. Obama never addresses Barbie as White, or as a symbol of Whiteness; instead she leaves her audience to fill in the blank. Thus Barbie, with her disproportionate plastic frame, Signifies the way White beauty myths are received by women of color. Moreover, Obama’s use of experience to frame her argument seeks audience identification, a central tenant of Signification through form. African oral traditions are predicated on circumlocution because direct expression is considered unimaginative; this practice has spilled into African American culture (Garner & Calloway-Thomas, 2003) The balance between the explicit and inexplicit communication intrinsic to indirection has numerous strategic advantages. For example, indirection can act as a method of tactical communication that camouflages speech from White listeners.

In sum, Michelle Obama Signifies in both form and language use. Obama utilizes intertextuality to reference Maya Angelou’s poetry and she engages the double-voice of figurative language through metonymy and enthymeme.
Conclusions for Remembering Maya Angelou

Michelle Obama’s eulogy for Maya Angelou is touching, empowering, and critical. These tones are accomplished through her combined use of feminine style and Signification to engender audience identification among African American women and celebrate their experiences. Michelle Obama speaks in a rhetorical situation that encourages connection with her largely African American audience and her feminist audience. Obama is able to speak to issues of race and gender inequity to highlight post-identity myths and celebrate women of color.

Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style is evident in a number of capacities. Obama uses anecdotal evidence about life, family, and Angelou herself within her speech. While anecdotal evidence is anticipated in a eulogy, Michelle Obama is able to use her narrative to celebrate Angelou’s influence for women of color around the world. Obama also resistively critiques assumptions about performances of race and gender through couched, yet illuminating experiences with race and gender discrimination. Obama’s invitation of audience participation for women of color further exemplifies the resistive and empowering content within Obama’s address. Not only does she celebrate her own experiences as a woman and as a person of color, Obama invites those of difference within her audience to celebrate their social locations as well.

Michelle Obama further utilizes audience connection among Black listeners when she Signifies, which demonstrates the epistemic and resistive qualities of the practice. Obama uses African American rhetorical tropes such as intertextuality, where she draws on Angelou’s work as the basis for repetition with a difference and figurative language, which facilitates double-voiced critiques of racism predicated on communal/experiential knowledge. Through Signifyin[g], Obama is able to tactically interrogate post-identity mythologies that reject the
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realities of racism and sexism and celebrates Black rhetorical practice, without offending the sensibilities of a generalizable audience of what should constitute first lady rhetoric.

Finally, the combined relationship between feminine style and Signifyin[g] in Obama’s eulogy for Maya Angelou allows for such resistive practices to manifest. Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style would be less resistive if the Black body politic did not contextualize it. Likewise, Michelle Obama’s Signifyin[g] practices would have less of an impact if not for her platform as First lady of the United States.
Chapter Four: Tuskegee Commencement Address

One ever feels this two-ness, --

an American, a Negro;

two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings;

two warring ideals in one dark body,

who dogged strength alone keeps

it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, 1994, p. 2).

Founded July 4, 1881 as the Tuskegee Normal School for Colored Teachers, Tuskegee University is the second oldest historically Black university in the United States (Gary, 2008). Tuskegee’s rich history includes advancements in agriculture and science and active participation in the American Civil Rights Movement (Gary, 2008). Historic leaders from Tuskegee, include Booker T. Washington, Benjamin Carver, and the Tuskegee Airmen, including Charles DeBow. Tuskegee University graduates have and continue to play a significant role in African American History.

In 2015, after receiving an honorary degree Michelle Obama delivered the commencement address at Tuskegee University. Obama’s speech discusses the history of and many famous students from Tuskegee. Considering the university’s history as a Black college, Obama’s rhetorical situation is shaped by her appeals to an immediate African American audience. In this address Obama explicitly discusses racial adversity in three ways 1) historically when she discusses great graduates from Tuskegee University; 2) by articulating personal experiences of racial adversity and the oppressive narratives imposed on both Barack and Michelle Obama; and 3) in the lives of the graduates
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themselves. In *Remarks by the first lady at Tuskegee University Commencement Address*, Obama uses feminine style and Signifyin[g] to reflect on her successes and encourage the successes of her audience.

Feminine Style

Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style in her commencement speech at Tuskegee University is less pronounced than in the two speeches analyzed thus far. While Michelle Obama is addressing an immediate Black audience, she must still temper her language to account for the White ascetics of the first lady and any spill over that comes from the public platform she speaks from. Therefore, the elements of feminine style are present in the framing of the speech and when read in conjunction with raced body politics exemplify the resistive potential of a feminine rhetorical style. Michelle Obama’s use of feminine style in her 2015 Tuskegee commencement address emphasizes audience identification and maternal persona.

**Identification**

After her expression of gratitude for her honorary degree and congratulation of the graduates, Obama begins her address with a discussion of the history of Tuskegee University. She talks about the university’s seminal role as a Black institution and the subsequent struggles of people like the Tuskegee Airmen and George Washington Carver. Obama then alludes to the potential pressure that such legacies impart on Tuskegee’s graduating class. Obama then relates her experience as first lady to such pressure, articulating identification between speaker and audience. She says: “I understand that kind of pressure. (Applause.) I’ve experienced a little bit of it myself. You see, graduates, I didn’t start out as the fully-formed first lady who stands
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before you today” (Obama, 2015). Such identification creates a platform for Michelle Obama to articulate her choices as first lady of the United States; moreover, Obama is able to deploy feminine style as a celebration of her experiences as a woman of color. Obama explains the racist and sexist comments made at her expense and subsequently shares her feelings of confusion, grief, and insult. Obama explains:

And all of this used to really get to me. Back in those days, I had a lot of sleepless nights, worrying about what people thought of me, wondering if I might be hurting my husband’s chances of winning his election, fearing how my girls would feel if they found out what some people were saying about their mom (Obama, 2015).

Obama uses feminine style by expressing an explicitly emotional response, resonating with cultural stereotypes of femininity that emphasize women as feeling beings. In particular, Obama expresses these emotions in relation to her husband and daughters as markers of her personal experience and familial priorities, both of which are characteristic of feminine style aimed at audience identification based on communal experiences with wives and mothers. However, Obama reframes the use of feminine style when she redirects her emotions to feelings of empowerment and resistance. She explains that, eventually, she realized that she was going, “to ignore all of the noise and be true to myself—and the rest would work itself out.” (Applause.) (Obama, 2015).

Obama explains that the first step was to ask herself “Who am I? No, really, who am I? What do I care about?” (Obama, 2015). Obama begins to shift her use of feminine style, while she continues to use personal tone and references to personal experience, these experiences are deployed to draw attention to her empowerment process. Michelle
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Obama uses maternal persona as part of her performance of feminine style when she expresses empowered motherhood. Michelle Obama’s feminine style performativity solidifies her role as Mom-in-Chief. This grounds her performance as epistemic because her performance of femininity functions politically.

Maternal Persona

Michelle Obama’s resistive feminine style is further emphasized in her use of a maternal persona. In the aforementioned passage, Michelle Obama uses a maternal persona when she expresses concerns about her children’s perceptions; however, Obama also celebrates motherhood. Obama says:

And the answers to those questions have resulted in the woman who stands before you today. (Applause.) A woman who is, first and foremost, a mom. (Applause.) Look, I love our daughters more than anything in the world, more than life itself. And while that may not be the first thing that some folks want to hear from an Ivy-league educated lawyer, it is truly who I am. (Applause.) So for me, being Mom-in-Chief is, and always will be, job number one (Obama, 2015).

Obama articulates herself as a mom, first and foremost, even in opposition to some feminist critiques that suggest motherhood should not be prioritized by someone with so much education and experience (S. Hayden, in press). Obama expresses the intrinsic value of motherhood and its significance in shaping her approach to being first lady. Moreover, Obama celebrates her choices as her own. She contends that while some said these choices were not “bold enough,” she is indifferent because they were her choices. In this sense, Michelle Obama alludes to and reframes the culturally significant feminist
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<choice> ideograph, thus celebrating the act of mothering as a feminist epistemology and a resistive act (see Hayden, 2005). Obama extends this theme when she recalls the policy actions she has endorsed and advocated for that are central to families and kids. She notes planting a garden and hula-hooping at the White House, she celebrates “Mom Dancing on TV” and hanging out with Kermit the Frog, and advocates College Signing Day. Michelle Obama then goes on to further articulate the epistemological journey of resistive femininity. She explains:

And at the end of the day, by staying true to the me I’ve always known,

I found that this journey has been incredibly freeing. Because no matter what happened, I had the peace of mind of knowing that all of the chatter, the name calling, the doubting-- all of it was just noise. (Applause.) It did not define me. It didn’t change who I was. And most importantly, it couldn’t hold me back. I have learned that as long as I hold fast to my beliefs and values--and follow my own moral compass--then the only expectations I need to live up to are my own. (Obama, 2015)

At one level, this passage reads as feminine style. Obama uses personal tone, talks from her anecdotal experiences as evidence and through her initial comparison invites audience identification. However, the explicit tone and deductive argument evident in this passage suggests that these are much bolder applications of feminine style. Michelle Obama’s narrative focuses on her resilience and strength, which suggest empowerment.

Campbell’s (1989) original conceptualization of feminine style include couched,
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deferent, apologetic, and White performances regarding women acting simultaneously in the public and private spheres. Hayden (1997) and Dur briwny (2005) note that feminine style can be used in feminine knowledge validation and production. However, I argue that Obama’s use of feminine style is evident in her articulation of self as a woman using feminine experiences and narratives of self-discovery to denote empowerment and are therefore resistive to cultural stereotypes of femininity. Such empowerment goes beyond the previously cited experiences, as these theories do not account for the resistive elements in Michelle Obama’s performance of femininity, as a performance of Whiteness is contextualized when speaking to a Black audience. Moreover, such resistive elements in Obama’s gender performance inform and set up her performance of race. Thus I argue that Michelle Obama’s empowered and resistive performance of gender in conjunction with her Black audience generates an opportunity to Signify.

Signifyin[g]

In Michelle Obama’s rhetorical performance during her 2015 commencement address at Tuskegee University she uses Signifyin[g] as a discursive practice that disrupts underlying racial and epistemic assumptions of Whiteness associated with the First lady of the United States.

Michelle Obama first creates identification with her predominantly Black immediate audience through the use of African American Vernacular. She uses colloquial and informal terms such as “folks” and “A’ght?” (noted on the transcript as “all right?”), and she uses a form of call and response when she chants the Tuskegee “T-U!” and her audience responds with, “You know!” (Obama, 2015). However, these are just foundational elements of African American rhetoric in Obama’s speech. In the Remarks
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_by the First lady at Tuskegee University Commencement Address_ Michelle Obama

Signifies through the use of figurative language, especially metaphors, intertextual references to important African American literary texts, and performative revisions of racial tropes.

**Metaphors and Meaning**

In her commencement address, Michelle Obama uses figurative language, specifically metaphors, to Signifyin[g]. Obama begins the main argument of her address with a reflection on Tuskegee’s history and alumni. Obama explains that Tuskegee’s history is full of men and women who came to the University to seize their futures and shape African American history. Specifically, Obama reminds her audience of honored administrators and of those who survived the billy clubs and the tear gas of Bloody Sunday in Selma. Then Obama turns to a discussion of some of Tuskegee’s most famous graduates: the Tuskegee Airmen.

Obama reminds her audience that, “Back then, black soldiers faced all kinds of obstacles” (Obama, 2015). She explains that while the Airmen selected for the program were highly educated and many already had college degrees and pilots licenses, “they were presumed to be inferior” because of race and the belief that African American’s were less intelligent than their White counterparts (Obama, 2015). She also expresses that this believed inferiority resulted in verbal abuse, unreturned salutes and harassment by police when they went off base.

Obama asks her audience to imagine what it was like for these highly educated and spectacularly trained young men operating the most sophisticated technology of their time; yet “when they hit the ground, folks treated them like they were nobody--as if their
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very existence meant nothing” (Obama, 2015). Michelle Obama’s protracted description of the history of Tuskegee and the racism faced by the Tuskegee Airmen suggests she is opening her speech to a White audience because the graduates in her audience presumably are familiar with experiential racism. However, Obama’s discussion of racism includes metaphors, an African American linguistic trope that creates the double voiced potential that can be read as Signifyin[g]. As an example she says:

Now, those Airmen could easily have let that experience clip their wings. But as you all know, instead of being defined by the discrimination and the doubts of those around them, they became one of the most successful pursuit squadrons in our military. (Applause.) They went on to show the world that if black folks and white folks could fight together, and fly together, then surely--surely--they could eat at a lunch counter together. Surely their kids could go to school together. (Obama, 2015)

Obama establishes several metaphorical frames in this passage. First she suggests that the racism the Airmen faced could have easily “clip their wings,” yet they persevered. The wings of the Tuskegee Airmen then become a central metaphor in Obama’s address. Furthermore, Obama uses the success of the Tuskegee Airmen’s pursuit squadron as a metaphor for American integration because if “folks could fight together and fly together” during World War II, then the Civil Right’s movement fight to overcome segregation in businesses such as lunch counters and public institutions such as public schools is a logical progression.

Obama’s use of figurative language continues along with her discussion of the Airmen. Obama shares the story and quotes Charles DeBow, who said every take off was
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“a never-failing miracle” where all “the bumps would smooth off… [you’re] in the air… out of this world… free (Quoted in Obama, 2015). Obama then deploys this quotation as a metaphorical marker of racial progress in the United States. She says:

And in so many ways, that never-failing miracle--the constant work to rise above the bumps in our path to greater freedom for our brothers and sisters--that has always been the story of African Americans here at Tuskegee. (Obama, 2015)

Obama Signifies, as she repeats and revises De Bow’s words as figurative language referencing a uniquely African American experience both in the language form that uses metaphorical revision and in the content where she alludes to shared racialized experiences of oppression. Not only does this metaphor become the basis for one of the central themes of the speech it also generates audience identification among African Americans predicated on racial shared experience, while simultaneously making racism explicit for the generalizable (i.e White) audience.

One example of Michelle Obama’s use of flight as a metaphor for overcoming racial adversity is evident in her description of African American collegiate education pioneer, Booker T. Washington. Obama shares Washington’s story of adversity and triumph. When Tuskegee had no money for bricks for school dormitories, he pawned a pocket watch for a kiln to fire bricks so that the students could build their own buildings.

Obama also shares the story of George Washington Carver who had no laboratory equipment and had to go through trash to find materials like jars to substitute as beakers. Obama goes on to say:

Generation after generation, students here have shown that same grit, that same resilience to soar past obstacles and outrages--past the threat of countryside
Michelle Obama uses flight as a metaphor for progress, she suggests that Tuskegee students know how to soar past racial obstacles and work in their communities to lift others up as well. Moreover, she continues this theme in the conclusion where she tells the graduates that the world will not always see them in their caps and gowns and that they have a social and civic responsibility to rise above as well. She says:

Those Airmen who rose above brutal discrimination--they did it so the whole world could see just how high black folks could soar. That’s the spirit we’ve got to summon to take on the challenges we face today. (Obama, 2015)

Michelle Obama echoes the flight metaphor she beings earlier in the speech and continues to interweave the theme in the conclusion of her address; she argues that transcendence of racial adversity occurs through motivation for helping others. She calls her audience to over come.

In this passage Obama inverts the stories told previously in the speech and continues the use of the flight metaphor for racial progress today. Such revision implies Signification because Obama deploys metaphorical styling. While a White audience might just hear this as narrative fidelity within the address, I argue that the repetition and revision Michelle Obama uses creates a level of identification for the Black audience, suggesting the presence of Signifyin[g]. In and of itself the use of metaphors is not equal to Signification. Rather the metaphors are a performance of African American rhetorical
tropes that create an identification with the immediate Black audience and lay the foundation for Signifyin[g]. Such performativity of African American rhetorical style when discussing adversity lay the foundation for Michelle Obama’s other Signifyin[g] practices such as her discussion of the Airmen’s “double duty” as an intertextual allusion to African Americans’ performances of double consciousness.

**Intertextuality**

As defined in chapter three, intertextuality is the interdependent relationship between texts (artifacts), where meaning is constructed through allusion to or parody of an original text and is intended as a form of call and response to cue an African American audience to hear double-voiced meaning in the language of a speech.

**Double Duty**

Building on the previously analyzed discussion of the Tuskegee Airmen, Michelle Obama uses intertextuality to further highlight African American performances of race. After she describes the immense knowledge the men possessed, but still endured racist aggressions Obama explains:

> You see, those Airmen always understood that they had a “double duty”--one to their country and another to all the black folks who were counting on them to pave the way forward. (Applause.) So for those Airmen, the act of flying itself was a symbol of liberation for themselves and for all African Americans. (Obama, 2014)

Obama tells her audience that the Tuskegee Airmen performed a “double duty,” of both being American, but also for all other Black people. Obama suggests that people of color in the United States live in two worlds, and yet belong to neither in totality. She explains
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that the Airmen lived in the world of their country and in the world of people of color, simultaneously, yet differently.

In this passage Michelle Obama uses intertextuality to invoke the trope of double consciousness as coined by W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois’ work influences much of African American literature and political thought, including the work of Henry Louis Gates (2014). Du Bois (1994) argues that Black people in the United States people live in a world of double consciousness. By this Du Bois means that people of color, Black people, are

born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world—a world which yields no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelations of the other world. It is this particular sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 2)

In her proclamation that the Tuskegee Airmen performed a “double duty,” Michelle Obama Signifies through intertextual allusion to Du Bois’ double consciousness. Such allusion to a trope of an African American academic becomes the basis for Obama’s riff, which her highly educated, African American, Tuskegee faculty and graduate audience would likely recognize.

Obama says that the Tuskegee Airmen’s flight was an act of liberation for themselves, but also for all African Americans. This sentiment utilizes repetition and
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revision to call upon the words of Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; 1994). As quoted in the introduction to this chapter, Du Bois explains, “One ever feels this two-ness, ---an American, a Negro” as ununited souls. Obama says that the duties of the Airmen included “one to their country and another to all the black folks who were counting on them to pave the way forward” (Obama, 2015). She mirrors the language of Du Bois. Furthermore, Obama specifically uses the term “Black folks” when linguistically delineating African Americans. This is an important element in Obama’s identification with her audience. While one audience might read this term as simply colloquial or even as African American slang, a polysemous reading alludes to Du Bois.

Moreover, Michelle Obama’s performance itself also engages a “double consciousness.” As articulated in chapter one, the first lady of the United States occupies a quasi-political role in and of itself. She exists in a liminal space between figurative and literal power, both in and yet not of the world of policy making. Obama’s role as the first lady contrasts her performance of race and gender as a woman of color. Expected performances of the first lady of the United States are steeped in Whiteness, however, Obama’s experience is not. Thus Obama’s performance of first lady engages in a double consciousness where the “ununited souls” and performances of Whiteness intersect with the black body. Such two-ness speaks to the resistive power of Signifyin[g]. Furthermore, Obama’s engagement in “double consciousness’ both through her Signifyin[g] nod, and through her embodied rhetoric, acts epistemologically. Obama suggests that “two-ness” is a way of knowing the world for Black people like herself, for Tuskegee Airmen like Charles De Bow whom she mentions, but also metaphorically through the lived experiences of the graduates.
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*Invisible Man*

Michelle Obama also engages intertextuality with references to Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Michelle Obama says:

> And all of that is going to be a heavy burden to carry. It can feel isolating. It can make you feel like your life somehow doesn’t matter--that you’re like the invisible man that Tuskegee grad Ralph Ellison wrote about all those years ago. And as we’ve seen over the past few years, those feelings are real. They’re rooted in decades of structural challenges that have made too many folks feel frustrated and invisible. And those feelings are playing out in communities like Baltimore and Ferguson and so many others across this country. (Obama, 2015)

Obama Signifies in several ways here; first, she uses allusions to Black literary traditions through the work of Ralph Ellison. A generalizable read would suggest that she is referencing a famous Tuskegee alumnus similarly to those she mentions in the beginning of the speech. However, a double-voiced read of this passage notes Obama’s suggestion that racism often goes unseen and invisible. Ideologies of a post-racist society construct violence against the Black body as invisible. If racism does not exist, then violence perpetrated on people of color is not visible through the lens of power. Moreover, Obama extends this narrative beyond her own experiences and those of her audience, drawing the decades of structural violence inflicted on people of color, but Obama, as discussed in chapter three, uses enthymematic allusions to race. She says “made too many folks feel frustrated and invisible.” Obama is able to draw on Ellison’s original context and transform it to fit the current socio-political context with references to the racialized
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violence in Baltimore and Ferguson through her comparisons to police brutality in the United States.

**Trope o’ Tropes**

Rhetorical performance cannot be separated from the body, which constrains and informs rhetorical situations for women of color. Cooper (2014) argues that Michelle Obama, like Sojourner Truth, uses her body as part of her argument, a practice of embodied rhetoric. Gunn and McPhail (2015) argue Signifyin[g] through the practice of preformative tropes, such as “the angry Black man” and the rhetorical tropes of the “good speaking man” draws attention to the stereotypes that inform these tropes and performance of such tropes can provide commentary on their underlying raced assumptions. I argue that Michelle Obama’s embodied rhetorical performance in her Tuskegee address is used to highlight and critique racial stereotypes. Throughout her address, Michelle Obama names and tropes upon stereotypes of Blackness in several ways. Namely, she discusses stereotypes of first lady femininity and Black women imposed upon her, and she discusses contemporary and historical racism imposed on the Black body, even when said body is exceptionally educated like a Tuskegee graduate.

**Racist Stereotypes**

Unlike the previously analyzed speeches, Michelle Obama explicitly (rather than through enthymeme) discusses the raced politics of her performance as a First lady of the United States. For example, Obama talks about the first time she was on a magazine cover, “with a huge afro and machine gun” (Obama, 2015). She also references the “celebratory fist bump” shared between the Obamas that was referred to as a “terrorist fist jab” (Obama, 2015). Obama alludes to racial stereotypes that equate the Black body
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with violence exemplified in the association between African American hairstyles and gun violence, and the ignorant mythology that Barack Obama is a Muslim terrorist. She goes on to say:

And over the years, folks have used plenty of interesting words to describe me. One said I exhibited “a little bit of uppity-ism”. Another noted that I was one of my husband’s “cronies of color.” Cable news once charmingly referred to me as “Obama’s Baby Mama” (Obama, 2015).

Obama uses racist tropes to highlight the prolific elements of cultural racism. Obama “calls out” the tropes of the “angry” or “uppity black women” and the “unwed mother” impressed upon her (P. H. Collins, 2002). Obama Signifies through the notation of these tropes because they bifurcate her audience. A Black audience might experience identification with racism, while a White audience is either informed of these acts of racist aggression or those who perform such aggressions are indirectly “called out”.

Beyond the Black Body

Michelle Obama extends her use of embodied rhetoric to include the experiences of people of color in the United States generally and her audience specifically. She Signifies when she expresses the racist tropes imposed upon them. After the previous discussion of Obama’s experiences with racism as the first lady, she goes on to highlight fears of racist experiences among her audience. Obama says that the world will not always see the Tuskegee graduates in “those caps and gowns” (Obama, 2015). She explains that the hard work, academic excellence and community and family support practiced by the graduates is often seen secondarily to the performance of the Black
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body. Obama then goes on to express more racial stereotypes potentially imposed on her immediate Black audience. She says:

And I know that these little indignities are obviously nothing compared to what folks across the country are dealing with every single day--those nagging worries that you’re going to get stopped or pulled over for absolutely no reason; the fear that your job application will be overlooked because of the way your name sounds; the agony of sending your kids to schools that may no longer be separate, but are far from equal; the realization that no matter how far you rise in life, how hard you work to be a good person, a good parent, a good citizen--for some folks, it will never be enough. (Obama, 2015)

Michelle Obama tropes, or jokes upon, racist tropes. She lists and describes many examples of ongoing racist manifestations in the everyday lives of Black people in the United States. She is Signifyin[g] because these expressions of racist perceptions, juxtaposed with lived realities creates identification with an African American audience. First, she is extending her own experiences with racism and drawing comparisons with the potential experiences of her audience. Thus Obama uses experiential knowledge to frame her argument. Then Obama uses personal pronouns that individualize the experience, even though she is talking to many people. Yet, Obama does not use the term race. She engages in mimetic allusions to racism, such as having a job application overlooked because of your name. Moreover, this commentary of racism is perceived differently by a White, possibly post-racial minded audience member who is forced to confront narrative of everyday experiential racism, moreover it is an opportunity to learn
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and/or be called out. While for Black audience members, it’s an opportunity to identify and commiserate.

Conclusions for the Tuskegee Address

Michelle Obama’s commencement address at Tuskegee University in 2015 is a bold and empowering example of feminine style and Signifyin[g] speech. While Michelle Obama’s public discourse has taken many forms over the past eight years, I argue that this speech in contrast to the other speeches examined in earlier chapters, most explicitly interrogates race and gender oppression. Michelle Obama’s rhetoric actively celebrates her own identity as a woman of color, and as the first lady of the United States. Obama resists stereotypes of femininity when she demonstrates the epistemic power of womanhood and feminine gender performances. Michelle Obama uses a feminine style resistively to create identification and a maternal persona to reframe perceptions of Black motherhood. Moreover, Obama explicitly tackles the challenges of racism that have historically followed Tuskegee graduates and places her own adversity on a similar plane, but as first lady. By calling out racist tropes, Michelle Obama draws attention to them, and then is able to critique and disrupt them.

Michelle Obama’s performance of feminine style in her commencement address at Tuskegee is exemplified in her use of audience identification and maternal persona. Obama invites her generalizable audience into her speech through stories of her personal experiences and struggles. Such expressions of vulnerability and emotion generate the identification necessary for the larger messages within her speech that critique and make explicit institutionalized racism in the United States. Moreover, Michelle Obama, as in
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the other speeches analyzed, utilizes an empowered and resistive maternal persona. Obama reflects on the epistemic power of motherhood through a discussion of choice.

Such epistemological celebrations of femininity expressly through feminine style function resistively because these performances elevate feminine ways of being and equate them with strength. Such performances negate the kind of feminization that equates all things culturally stereotyped with femininity as bad or weak or insufficient. Michelle Obama’s explicit rejection of this categorization and celebration of feminine traits such as motherhood, and nurturing resist these ideologies without dismissing or rejecting a feminine gender performance. Obama’s message is simple: she did not have to change who she is to be powerful and successful and women like her shouldn’t have to either.

If an essential function of the rhetorical first lady is to shape traditions and representations of American femininity, then Michelle Obama’s departure from oppressive femininity as obligation to femininity as choice is a radical act. Such performances utilize alternative epistemologies to empower not just Obama, but all women. These resistive and empowering messages lay an important foundation for Michelle Obama’s use of Signifyin[g]. One of the main overlaps between feminine style and Signifyin[g] is the use of narratives and experiential knowledge to warrant claims. The previously discussed self-empowerment narrative shared by Obama can also be viewed through the epistemic lens of Signifyin[g].

As suggested in chapter one and in the “double duty” passage within this chapter, the “twoness” of African American experience is an important influence in Gates’ (2014) discussion of Signifyin[g]. Gates argues for “doubled meanings” or doubled voice as a
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mechanism to Signify intended to invoke double consciousness. Obama Signifies through her use of figurative language and metaphor to exemplify the African American rhetorical tradition, encouraging audience identification and inspiring them to “soar.” She uses intertextual allusions to works by influential African American intellectuals to express the double consciousness present within her audience. Additionally, Obama Signifies by noting tropes that hold racist logic, through ironic juxtaposition and thus the challenges of socio-systemic racism in the United States. Subsequently, Michelle Obama’s speech becomes a narrative of empowerment through her celebration of femininity and of African American cultural identity.

Overall Michelle Obama is critical of post-race, post-gender mythologies through her pronounced rhetorical performances of feminine style and Signifyin[g] in her 2015 Tuskegee Commencement address. In the final paragraph of her address, Michelle Obama returns to the soaring achievements of the Tuskegee Airmen. She says:

And if you rise above the noise and the pressures that surround you, if you stay true to who you are and where you come from, if you have faith in God’s plan for you, then you will keep fulfilling your duty to people all across this country. And as the years pass, you’ll feel the same freedom that Charles DeBow did when he was taking off in that airplane. You will feel the bumps smooth off. You’ll take part in that “never-failing miracle” of progress. And you’ll be flying through the air, out of this world--free. (Obama, 2015)

Not only does Obama denote the epistemological values of feminine and African American standpoints, she performativity celebrates these positions of difference as essential elements in social activism and changing the world around us. Obama reminds
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us of our need to play a part in the progression of history predicated on celebrations of
difference.
Chapter Five: Conclusion s and Implications

Michelle Obama’s rhetorical significance is manifold. As the first African American first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama’s public discourse reshapes the rhetorical traditions of the first lady to include women of color and creates new discursive space for other marginalized bodies. Michelle Obama uses double voiced discourses to denote epistemological differences, particularly pertaining to race and gender. Michelle Obama uses feminine and African American discourses to celebrate difference and highlight marginality, ultimately resisting American post-identity mythologies. Moreover, the multiple and intersecting demands that shape Michelle Obama’s rhetorical situation(s) such as race, gender, and her post as first lady create opportunities for creative and resistive rhetorical strategies such as feminine style and Signifyin[g], as well as the intersection and interaction of both rhetorical strategies.

Feminine Style

Scholars have argued that feminine style uses performances of stereotypical femininity to couch women’s public discourse (Campbell, 1989), elevate feminine ways of political thinking (Dow & Tonn, 1993; Dow 1995) and emphasizes feminine epistemological orientations to the world (Hayden 1997; Dubriwny, 2005). This projects bolsters feminine style scholarship by articulating its resistive potential as an extension of its epistemological function. I contend that feminine style should be considered a form of resistance, as exemplified in Michelle Obama’s public discourse. Obama uses tropes of feminine style and first lady rhetoric such as maternal persona, addressing of feminine topics, inductive organization, and most consistently experiential knowledge. Obama’s feminine style is resistive because it utilizes stereotypical performances to reward, celebrate, and elevate feminine gendered performances.
Michelle Obama’s 2008 DNC address utilizes feminine style through inductive argument structure, heavy use of personal tone, feminine persona through depictions of her childrearing with her audition for the role of national mother, and extensive use of anecdotal and narrative experiences as evidence. The prospective first lady is expected to perform femininity. Michelle Obama’s feminine style uses these expectations of stereotypical gender performances to invite audience identification. However, Obama’s use of anecdotal evidence, particularly her use of parenting stories, serves a resistive function. Michelle Obama shares her hopes and dreams for her children in tandem with all the children in the United States and discusses motherhood with equal reverence to policy proposals. Obama’s feminine style changes within a raced context because she simultaneously performs the feminine style of the first lady, but also presents the possibility of a prospective Black first lady and empowered Black motherhood. Obama’s resistive use of feminine style is evident in other speeches analyzed in this thesis.

Michelle Obama’s 2014 Eulogy for Maya Angelou exemplifies celebrations of femininity through feminine style. Obama uses feminine style when she deploys anecdotal evidence about her experiences with Angelou’s work and invites audience participation predicated on a celebration of phenomenal womanhood as expressed by Angelou. Michelle Obama uses her own personal experiences as a woman of color to build her speech. She also reflects on Angelou’s influence on women through experience, which invites the audience to relate and identify with Obama. Obama demonstrates the resistive potential of feminine style in the eulogy by celebrating womanhood and elevating femininity. However, in this speech feminine style also serves a resistive function in conjunction with Obama’s discussion of race. Obama’s performance of femininity celebrates Black womanhood on multiple levels. First she discusses the generational effect of empowered Black women by sharing anecdotes about her mother and her
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daughters. Obama also celebrates the empowerment she gained from Angelou’s work and extends those experiences by inviting her audience to participate in them so that they might feel like phenomenal women too. The powerful and public platform of first lady allows Michelle Obama to create a rhetorical space centered on the experiences of women of color, which not only rewards feminine epistemological perspective, but also resistively operates outside of hegemonic norms as a message by a Black woman, tailored for Black women.

Michelle Obama’s 2015 Commencement address at Tuskegee University, like in the previously analyzed speeches, utilizes feminine style through anecdotal evidence, creating audience identification and celebrating Black femininity through a maternal persona. However, Obama uses feminine tropes to resist stereotypes of femininity when she demonstrates the epistemic power of womanhood and feminine gender performances. Through the sharing of personal experiences, Obama articulates and critiques sexism and racism and provides empowering inspiration for the graduates in her audience. Moreover, Michelle Obama’s focus on identity as a woman of color, and as the First lady of the United States, allows her to demonstrate the epistemic power of womanhood through feminine gendered performances. In particular, Obama reframes perceptions of Black womanhood by speaking back to racist and sexist media coverage and critiques of her choice to prioritize motherhood through sharing her experiences. This elevates her choices and experiences as her own epistemological perspective.

Michelle Obama’s discourse enacts feminine style as a celebration of femininity and maternity, elevating women’s perspectives. These performances resist the diminishing of motherhood in American culture and create opportunities for understanding feminine style as a form of resistive rhetoric (Hayden, in press). While it has been established that speaking from feminine perspectives in a feminine style serves an epistemic function where feminine
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communication contributes to ways of knowing and acts as a political stance (Hayden, 1997; Dubrwiny, 2005) my analysis of Michelle Obama’s discourse adds to the scholarship regarding feminine rhetorical performances as resistance to patriarchal norms (Dow & Tonn, 1993; Hayden, 2003).

Signifyin[g]

Signifyin[g] as theorized by Gates (2014) and the scholars who extend his work (Sullivan, 1999; Reid-Brinkley, 2012; Gunn & McPhail, 2015), is a “double-voiced” rhetorical strategy used in African American dialectic communities as a means of resistance and intended to denote epistemological difference. Through Signifyin[g] practices, Michelle Obama uses Black rhetorical tropes and is able to connect with her African American audience, while simultaneously addressing issues of systemic racism in the United States in a way that appeals to her general audience. While communication scholars increasingly discuss Signifyin[g] in the Obama’s public discourse (Gunn & McPhail, 2015; Hayden in press) this study specifically looks at structural tropes of Signification, such as indirection, figurative language, and intertextuality in Michelle Obama’s discourse.

In Michelle Obama’s 2008 Democratic National Convention speech, she uses Signification subtly, but significantly. Obama must engage, to some extent, in White ascetics and traditions of the role and of the speech act of a prospective first lady at a nominating convention. Specifically, Michelle Obama uses indirection to address issues of race inequity in the United States and the historical significance of the first presidential nomination of an African American. Obama uses various forms of figurative language to imply racial difference without ever specifically denoting it. Such indirection is particularly emphasized in Obama’s use of enthymematic allusions like “the South side of Chicago” rhetorically replace race with place and
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class. Furthermore, Michelle Obama Signifies through the form of her speech. Obama repeats various campaign slogans and re-contextualizes and repurposes them within the address. She also generates and repeats phrases in the speech, allowing them to shift context and meaning throughout the address. These formulaic phrases signal the *dynamic* or stylized language celebrated in African American oral culture. The phrases also create double-voiced opportunities for identification. White audiences potentially identify with the campaign slogans repurposed with the DNC address, a Black audience potentially identifies with the African American oral traditions of call and response formulas. Michelle Obama’s Signifyin[g] potential is important because of the rhetorical situation of the potential first lady. Therefore, connection with African American audiences through double-voiced language and form both resists her rhetorical necessity to perform Whiteness, but also generates new traditions that reshape the rhetorical expectations of prospective first ladies to include the epistemic perspectives of women of color. By Signifyin[g], even though Obama occupies a traditionally White space of potential first lady, she is able to expand the expectations of the White House to include women and people of color (Cooper, 2014).

Michelle Obama’s eulogy for Dr. Maya Angelou uses intertextual allusion and figurative language such as metonymy and enthymeme to Signify. Obama’s need for Signification is altered by her rhetorical situation. While her public persona demands a double-voiced performance, Obama uses Signification to connect with her largely African American immediate audience. Obama’s intertextual allusions rework and re-contextualize Angelou’s work to reiterate messages of empowerment for women of color. Moreover, Obama’s use of figurative language allows for a veiled conversation about racism that specifically connects with Black audience members predicated and contextualized through experiential knowledge. In
combination these rhetorical tactics highlight the resistive potential of Signifyin[g] and feminine style.

Obama’s Signifyin[g] tactics are further expressed in her commencement address for the graduates of Tuskegee University. Again, Obama addresses a predominately Black audience, but also rhetorically appeals to a White audience, creating the opportunity to Signify. In the Tuskegee address, Obama Signifies through figurative language, specifically through metaphors, uses intertextual allusions to influential African American scholars such as W.E.B Du Bois and Ralph Ellison, and engages ironic revision of racist tropes. By Signifyin[g], Obama both elevates African American epistemology through performances of Black rhetorical traditions, but also resistively addresses issues of racism in the United States more explicitly than in the previously analyzed speeches.

Michelle Obama adeptly Signifies across these speeches in different ways given the demands of the shifting rhetorical situations. First, Signifyin[g] allows her to maintain a connection and generate identification with the African American audiences based on shared or similar cultural experiences in a way that has never before been part of the role of the first lady. Second, Joseph (2011) argues that Michelle Obama uses the rhetorical tools of post-identity, the conservative post-identity narratives that claim that society is “beyond” racism and sexism, to negate to post-identity itself. Extending this argument I contend that Michelle Obama’s ability to critique post-identity is predicated on Signifyin[g] as a rhetorical process. For example, Joseph argues Michelle Obama uses phrases like “the South Side of Chicago” to denote place or class as a rhetorical filler for racial critique. I demonstrate how phrases and language like “the South Side of Chicago” work as a Signifyin[g] rhetorical devise, to enact identity among her African American audiences and resist post-identity mythologies.
Third, Signifyin[g] may also act as an articulation and constitution of a “fourth persona.” Joseph (2011) contends that Obama’s use of euphemisms and carefully coded language are consistent with Charles Morris III (2002) “fourth person” (p.71). Morris explains the act of “passing,” or a trait of secrecy motivated by dangerous difference marked by one’s skin, behavior, or dress that “motivates some to develop and sustain a double consciousness in order to survive amid and sometimes to resist dominant, oppressive cultural practices” (Morris III, 2002). By extension, rhetorical passing constitutes speech acts that are heard by two audiences simultaneously; one audience remains ignorant and the other hears the “truth”. Morris, drawing on the work of Amy Robinson, argues that such passing requires a dupe, or “one to be fooled” and an in-group to know and remain silent. Such conditions set up the fourth persona, or “a collusive audience constituted by a textual wink” (Morris, 2002, p.230). This positionality is predicated on ideology; however, “passing rhetoric must imply two ideological positions simultaneously, one that mirrors the dupe, and another that implies, via the wink, an ideology of difference” (Morris, 2002, p.230). Joseph (2011) argues that Michelle Obama’s generates the fourth persona “through coding oneself as (an exceptionally glamorous) ‘every mom’ has the effect of winking at the insider audience (of women of color) while fostering an acceptance and even adoration for the outsider audience (of White women)” (p.70-71). When analyzed through a Signifyin[g] lens Obama potentially creates a fourth persona where her Black audience is clued into the textual wink and her “White” audience is the dupe, as evidenced in the comments by White critics saying that Obama is “racist” (see McAlister, 2009). This would not only expand the rhetorical potential of the fourth persona and Signifyin[g], but also creates opportunities to evaluate the epistemological and ideological difference between Black perspectives and those driven from Whiteness.
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Michelle Obama Signifies through language and form across a number of texts and rhetorical situation. Obama aptly crafts language to engage multifaceted audiences through their individual ears. The resistive and epistemic potential of Signifyin[g] has been observed in a number of situations, yet this study looks at the process by which such Signifyin[g] occurs and specifically applies it to Michelle Obama’s public discourse.

Intersections and Interactions

While the presence of feminine style and Signification in Michelle Obama’s public discourse is insightful, these two speaking styles overlap in theoretically interesting ways. First, both rhetorical strategies come from positions of marginality and oppression. Women must rhetorically negate patriarchal rhetorical demands and people of color must negate racist tropes of rhetorical excellence. As a woman of color, Michelle Obama must do both. Furthermore, both feminine style and Signifyin[g] utilize oppression as foundational tools to create identification for women and for Black people. Both rhetorical strategies use narratives and experiential knowledge to connect with the audience based on their own experiences. Both feminine style and Signifyin[g] are epistemic, generating knowledge through experiences of marginalization. Many of the examples addressed in this project could be read as either feminine style or as Signifyin[g]. For example, in chapter four, I discuss Obama’s observation that the Tuskegee graduates might be feeling pressure as a form of audience identification building through peer-like relationships consistent with feminine style. Obama says: “I understand that kind of pressure. (Applause.) I’ve experienced a little bit of it myself. You see, graduates, I didn’t start out as the fully-formed first lady who stands before you today” (Obama, 2015). However, this passage could just as easily be read through a Signifyin[g] lens, where Obama is using intentional understatement (litotes) as a mechanism for ironic, figurative language intended to
create a joke. When used in conjunction, feminine style and Signifyin[g] in Michelle Obama’s public discourse create opportunities to elevate feminine and African American ways of knowing and resist post-identity mythologies.

These overlapping characteristics make Michelle Obama’s rhetorical negation of post-identity possible. In some ways feminine style acts as a cover for Signification, as Reid-Brinkley, (2011) suggests, yet Signification also creates opportunities for Michelle Obama to use feminine style resistively. For example, Obama’s emphasis on motherhood in all of the address not only resists patriarchal demonization of motherhood as a “feminine” trait, they also rewrite narratives of Black motherhood.

Furthermore, through the combination of feminine style and Signifyin[g], Michelle Obama is able to use body politics to create societal commentary on racism in the United States. Cooper, (2014) argues that Michelle Obama uses embodied rhetoric, where her body as a woman of color contextualizes the arguments in her discourse. When Michelle Obama comments on racism or sexism, she negates post-identity narratives through an embodied juxtaposition. Michelle Obama as a first lady of color and as a rhetorical proxy for her husband, a Black president, exposes the contradiction of post-identity that utilizes the Obamas’ success as a warrant for being “post-race.” Moreover, the quasi-political position of the first lady, where she is a woman and only a representative of power, not an arbiter of it, allows Michelle Obama to comment on such mythologies in a way that Barack Obama cannot. Therefore, I argue that Michelle Obama’s use of a resistive feminine style and Signification to dismantle post-identity is an abolition of the White rhetorical presidency/ first lady.

Obama is able to negate post-identity myths through her celebration of her womanhood and her Blackness and uses these resistive celebrations as a lens to understand the historical
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oppression of African Americans and to frame her outlook on American racial progress. Michelle Obama utilizes Signifyin[g] as a rhetorical strategy in all three of the speeches analyzed. The exigencies for Signification are manifold, but it is important to note that it is not just the existence of a White/ generalizable audience or a history of racism that motivates Michelle Obama’s need to Signify. Rather, Michelle Obama Signifies in a way that negates the cultural mythology of post-racism; or the belief that racism does not exists in the daily experiences of people of color. Michelle Obama speaks truth to power and calls out oppression and discrimination, however she couches these arguments through collective pronouns that a) create identification and solidarity with her Black audience b) include her own narrative perspective on race and warrant her claims with experiential knowledge and c) read as feminine style and as a mechanism for Signifyin[g].

Obama uses feminine style and Signification together to resist post-identity mythologies. Not only does she restructure the traditions of the prospective first lady, she celebrates Maya Angelou and by extension, women of color, emphasizing the value of difference and alternative ways of knowing and experiencing the world and invites her audience to celebrate with her. Similarly, because of a predominantly African American audience, these kinds of celebrations are also exemplified in Michelle Obama’s address to the graduates of Tuskegee University. Obama linguistically wrestles the intersections of racism and sexism through feminine style and Signification.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to these theoretical extensions of feminine style and Signification that I would like to address. First, my analysis only extends to Michelle Obama and only a small selection of her public discourse. Further research that combines feminine style and
Signification is necessary for a deeper and more complicated understanding of their respective rhetorical potential and such research should be applied to divergent discourses from various individuals and contexts.

Second, this analysis of Signification is neither holistic nor universal. Signifyin[g] is a vast rhetorical concept stretched through numerous temporal and geographic African American speech communities. While my explanation of the tactics of Signifyin[g] is extensive, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2014) is careful to point out that theorization and application of Signifyin[g] is not interested in “either recapitulating or contributing to this highly specialized debate over whether or not speech act $x$ is an example of this [B]lack trope or that” (p.56). Rather, Signifyin[g] is the trope of tropes and the basis for black rhetorical figures. Similarly in reference to feminist rhetorics like feminine style, Dow (1995) observes, producing something that, “looks like a theory, an explanation for how and why, might come to be understood as a singularity and “we risk limiting our definitions, our audience, and our purposes” (p.108). Therefore, my analysis of how Michelle Obama Signifies is both open to interpretation and should not be understood as a formulaic approach to African American speech. Furthermore, as Gunn and McPhail (2015) argue in their application of Signification to the rhetoric of Rev. Wright and Barack Obama, Black rhetoric is not solely “motivated by (re)signing the Racial Contract, or that it exhibits the properties of signifyin[g]; indeed, we wish to suggest that these practices remain largely constrained by a possessive, psychical investment in Whiteness that at times transcends the color line” (p.17). They go on to argue that even though “African-American rhetoric is organized by the master trope of signifyin[g]” we should not conclude that everything that is figurative is Signification nor that everything that literal is not (p.19). Thus we can only understand Michelle Obama’s potential use of Signifyin[g] tropes within the larger context of
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systemic racism that informs her rhetorical situations.

Future Research

Examining the interacting relationship between feminine style and Signification creates opportunities for other intersections. When feminine style is understood through its resistive potential, scholars are better able to look at instances of women’s empowerment. Moreover, the previously discussed limitations aside, a tactical understanding of Signifyin[g] creates opportunities for rhetorical scholars to identify and theorize instances of African American rhetorical resistance and identification. Moreover, in combination the resistive potential of feminine style and Signifyin[g] invites opportunities for future post-identity research.

Post-identity mythologies contribute to ongoing racism and sexism in the United States. Therefore, those interested in dismantling these systems of power must tactically create counter discourses predicated on the epistemic value of difference. Feminine style and Signifyin[g] performativity negate post-identity through their elevation of difference and thus should be researched further.

In sum, in Michelle Obama’s rhetoric, feminine style and Signifyin[g] work together to create opportunities for resisting the intersecting oppressions of race and gender that women of color face in their daily lives. Through these rhetorical recourses, Michelle Obama is able to tactically and strategically challenge white-patriarchy and solidify the voice and epistemic perspective of women of color in the public sphere.
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Endnotes

i It is important to note that communication scholars who study feminine style warn that these performances are not always empowering and may act to re-entrench patriarchal gender norms. They share concerns that the use of the feminine style could, at times, hinder women’s progress in the political sphere by upholding hegemonic patriarchal perspectives.

ii Critical Consciousness Raising groups arose in the 1960s as a way for women to meet in small groups and compare their experiences of gender oppression. Such groups were widely effective in motivating the early work of second wave feminisms in the United States, but have also been criticized because of their exclusive nature (e.g. predominantly focuses on the struggles of White middle to upper-class women which omitted the effects of patriarchy on working class people, women of color, and men).

iii There are some exceptions, for example in her initial theoretical analysis of feminine style Campbell (1986; 1989) discusses women of color who use feminine and masculine communication styles. She specifically talks about the motives of women like Mary Church Terrell who used feminine style to speak to White audiences.

v For the purposes of clarity I use the terms Black and White as terms of art to articulate different audience perceptions. However, this is not meant to suggest that race exists in a binary, nor do these terms account for the vast experiences racial experiences of people of color, African American or otherwise. Rather these terms are generalization for simplicity to note the bifurcation of the audience based on power and positionality. See Gates (2014) or Hayden (in press) for further clarification.

vi Brackets and Erasures indicate variances between the cited transcript and audio recordings of the speeches.

vii For example a monument on Tuskegee’s campus entitled “Lifting the Veil” honors the university’s founders, nodding to Du Bois’ prolific influence on African American Academics.