Gendered Performances of the Costumed Bodies of Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama

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American Journal of Sociology

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Abstract

The first lady is positioned in American political culture as the embodiment of American womanhood. In the aftermath of the defeat of Hilary Clinton to Donald Trump in the 2016 November presidential election and at the end of the Barrack Obama presidency, this article reflects on the gendered performances of former first ladies Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama. The central claim of this article is that each women, because of their costumed bodies, stored different sociological meanings that were much deeper than first apparent. In generationally positioning themselves within the demands and idealization of being the universal and authentic site of American womanhood, texts of body, race, national identity, feminism and class variously complicate the preferred and discursive narrative of the gendered performance of first ladies.

Introduction

The first aim of this article is to review how the costumed bodies of first ladies Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama provide insight into the discursive nature of the imagined site of American womanhood that first ladies signify. Clinton and Obama, as with first ladies before them, occupied a symbolically significant place in American society solely by virtue of their marriages (Seals Nevergold & Brooks-Bertram 2009). Historically, the American public were resistant to a first lady being actively and publically involved in anything more than ceremony (Oles-Acevedo 2012, p. 35). If she did appear to exert influence it was to be done within the social bounds of an appropriately dressed body (Entwistle 2000b, p. 338). With her costuming widely scrutinised for its attractiveness and appropriateness, self-identity is subsumed within the constructs of body and costume as well as within the constructs of wife and mother (Watson
2003; Sheeler 2010). To be seen as authentically performing her public role, the first lady is required to normatively perform gender. Made more difficult, her gender performance is done in a very public way on a very public stage and it must be done in ways that conform to the notion of the “ideal women” (Kahl 2009, p. 316). To not perform this way, risks social sanctions. There are discursive expectations that first ladies perform what is pretended to be a “single universally accepted ideal for US womanhood” (Kohrs Campbell 1996, p. 191) denoting that the first lady is a site of authentic American womanhood and motherhood (Vasby Anderson 2004). As a result of these historical and social constructs, each first lady has served as a “metaphor for her generation of women” mirroring the notion of the existence of an ontologically authentic modern American woman (White 2011, p. 11). Yet, the idea of there being one authentic modern American woman is one that has never existed (Kohrs Campbell 1998, p. 15). Regardless all first ladies, variously, have become this imagined ‘site’. Judith Butler’s notion of gender performance is insightful in understanding why.

The second aim of this article is to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates about how the female body is socially, politically and culturally constructed and processed via costume and how costume acts to signify a women’s status and morality. The costumed body, rather than their fashion, is used in this analysis because costume denotes the idea that the dressed body of first ladies can be read as performing on a political stage, much like an actor, with costume giving meaning to the performance. As Entwistle (2000b, p. 325) argues the costumed body is a “presentation” imbued with discursive meanings. Studying the costumed political bodies of Clinton and Obama allows for an understanding of how the female body is constructed and given meaning processed via costume and how costume acts to signify a women’s status and morality. The female body is not negated in this approach rather the body and the costume operate dialectically because the costume works on the body, imbuing it with social meaning. In turn the body is a dynamic field that gives life and fullness to the costume. Because both the
costume and the body operate in concert, by implication the costumed body is a key site for interrogating gender performance and its articulation of an idealised identity of womanhood (Entwistle 2000b, pp. 327-328). For Finkelstein (1991, p. 128) how we dress is a sign of identity hence how we dress is seen as “symbolic of the individual’s status and morality”. Clothing, or costume, as a sign of identity and the social meanings embedded in the costumed body, informs this analysis of Clinton and Obama. The final aim of this article is to reconceptualise Judith Butler’s theories of gendered performance in relation to American first ladies, positing the value of gendered performance as an ongoing and insightful framework to examine how women are framed in American politics.

**Judith Butler on Gender Performance**

Just as an individual identity is not fixed rather it is negotiated and performed, so to gender is negotiated and performed. Judith Butler, drawing on Michel Foucault’s genealogical exploration of the way institutions and discourses produce particular subjects, argues that gender is performed hence gender is a process. As Butler supposes there is no pre-discursive subject (1990, p. 34). This releases gender from the binary understanding of sex as biological and gender as socially assigned (Cook & Hasmath 2014, p. 977). While bodies are biological, bodies are also shaped and constrained by sociological practices, which means bodies have wider cultural meaning. As Dworkin explains “we think we are really seeing naturally sexed bodies” but rather we are seeing the “effect of internalizing gender ideologies” with bodies “carrying out social practices” (Dworkin 2003, p. 240). The value of Butler’s shift and its ongoing interrogation is that it “moves us away from representational and historical ways of knowing” (Smitheram 2011, p. 56).

Gender freed from biology is able to be seen as a series of repetitive acts, “a copy of a copy” (Butler cited in Salih 2007, p. 58). This position doesn’t suppose that there exist a real or
original gender, nor does it suppose that the subject has ever been free to choose the gender they enact. How gender is performed is predetermined by a regulatory and discursive framework that prescribes social viability and legitimacy. Performance is therefore not a freedom (White 2015, p. 319). When women perform gender they do so within predetermined, constructed historical and political idealisations. This argues White (2015, p. 318) “masks the contradiction and volatile nature” of gender performance. “True gender” is positioned to negate such contradictions. But “true gender” is a “cultural fiction” that forces women to perform and sustain discursive gender roles. To resist performing the idealisation of female gender results in social punishment (White 2015, p. 318).

Butler recasts gender as an expression that doesn’t inform or convey the truth of one’s gendered identity, but is instead accomplished through its enunciation. As Butler (1990, p. 25) argues “there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performativity constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”. Because performance casts gender back to its Butlerian notion of “process” it needs to continually remade and repeated (Smitheram (2011, p. 57). Repeated, these expressions give coherency to a gendered identity, rather than to any ontological truth or fact (Butler 1990, p. 136). Performance is therefore fluid. The body is not just matter, they ‘do’ and they ‘do’ differently from “contemporaries and predecessors” (Butler, 1997, p. 404; Tate 2012, p. 232). How Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama enact performance is shaped by the socio-historical conditions they find their bodies in. As such performance is the doing of idealised gender within its socio-historic moments.

Performance is ‘done’ in speech, gesture, behaviour, clothing, and corporeality. Performance reproduces constructed idealisations of women/femininity. For women in public-political positions as first ladies are, to reject gender performance risks their political, social and cultural viability and legitimacy. While gender stereotypes can often be advantageous in that they narrate values, character or aspiration, “when political women attempt to break out of
stereotypically perceived roles and characteristics, they often incur the criticism of the media and the public” (Bystrom et al. 1999, p. 86). Yet, as with others required to perform gender, what cost is it to one’s sense of self and identity? As Butler answers (1993, p. 115) “the subject produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity”.

The costumed first lady body

All cultures dress the body via clothing, cosmetics, tattooing and body painting transforming the body into a recognisable, meaningful sociological site equated with appropriateness and decency. What constitutes dress varies from culture to culture and conventions of normativity change over time. Dress however remain as a situated bodily practice socially embedded and considered “fundamental to the microsocial order” (Entwistle 2000b, p. 325). Sociologically the costumed body posits the existence of social and political categories and reinforces and sustains views about identities (Douglas 1979). The costumed body is thus socially regulated and prone to moral verdicts about the wearer. What this means is that the body is “heavily mediated by culture” and becomes a “symbol of its cultural location” (Entwistle 2000b, p. 327). Further, the costumed body is not just the place to experience the social world, it is how people come to see and be seen in the world. As Craik (2014, p. 5) observes, dress and costume as fashion “is the body writ large as a social body that announces its location in time and space”. It is also a “communicative device that speaks to observers and demands a response and a connection”. Costume worn on the body thus forms a visible envelope of the self and serves as a metaphor for identity (Davis 1992).

Sociological understandings of the costumed bodies of American first ladies are proved insightful in recognising self-identity, social identity and national identity. Jackie Kennedy is a case in point. With the election of John F. Kennedy in 1961, Jackie Kennedy adopted a ‘look’ that sort to “show the world that despite its reputation of being a rustic, uncultured country,
[the] United States was a nation of elegance, poise, an culture” (Bond 2012, p. 133). This costuming acted to image a new era of American modernity by embracing European-chic fashion (Lauret 2011, p. 99). As a result, Jackie Kennedy became the first modern fashioned political body (Entwistle 2000a). Similarly, Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama adopted costuming to situate them authentically in American social and cultural life. For Clinton, with her role as first lady occurring in a period of advancing feminism, her ‘look’ was likely informed by her desire that even as a first lady she was going to have an “independent life” (Hillary Clinton cited in Vasby Anderson 2004, p. 17). Her eclectic style of multi-coloured, mixed textures and ostentatious jewellery and accessories may have also been an active choice to mark her as different to the more conservatively dress Republican women that came before her. Her style however proved problematic in the public’s assessment of her as an authentic representation of American womanhood, particularly in her ongoing and persistent desire to wear pantsuits (Oles-Acevedo 2012, p. 35).

Both Jackie Kennedy’s modernist self-representation and Hillary Clinton’s costuming to posit her feminism and difference, sit in contrast to Michelle Obama’s positioning of herself as a postfeminist symbol of “optimism and change” that heralded in Barrack Obama’s election in 2008 (Bond 2012, p. 133). For Michelle Obama, as the first African American first lady, her race inscribed body immediately challenged the idealisation of the first lady as a “symbol of traditional white middle to upper class femininity in America” (Vasby Anderson 2004, p. 18). Perhaps responding to this, Michelle Obama sought to define herself within the socially acceptable frameworks of family and domesticity (Dillaway & Pare 2008). Her costuming combined off-the-shelf department store fashion with “hyphenated Americans” designers like Jason Wu and Narciso Rodriguez (Tate 2013, p. 231; Brown 2012, p. 248). Perhaps demonstrating the fractious identity of Michelle Obama she also blended mass produced and
high end fashion, as evident in *Vogue* (2013) were she wore an off the rack sweater with a formal full-length ball skirt with the image titled “American Ideal”.

**Race**

Michelle Obama’s body, more so than any other first lady, is framed as atypical. As an African American woman Michelle Obama doesn’t embody the somatic norm of a first lady. As Tate (1997, pp. 232-33) explains,

…the white body continues to be the somatic norm, even if it is no longer juridically or constitutionally supported, because the racial contract demarcates and reserves space for its first-class citizens. Michelle [Obama] causes severe disorientation because, as a member of the abject outside that is America’s racialized internal colony, she is now inside the First Lady space. As a body out of place Michelle Obama shows us how Anglo-whiteness is being sustained as the proper location of the First Lady even though the American dream insists ‘anyone can get there’.

Michelle Obama’s “bodily hexis” enables her to belong. However, her body “disturbs the traditional imagining of her position and will always encounter the questioning, categorising gaze of whiteness, of ‘what is she doing here?’” It is a gaze through which “the force of the racist episteme is imprinted on the body” (Puwar 2004, p. 41). For Tate (2012, p. 231) the …gaze is disorientated by her black body because at the same time that it is trying to fix her as ‘other’ she asserts equal membership and a right to belong. In doing this she becomes a menacing presence because her body refuses the false claim to universality that the racially unmarked appellation.

Conversely, in part because she is African American, is the problematic discussions of parts of her body rather than her whole body. Michelle Obama has been described as having an “uncommon figure for an American First Lady”, characterised by a “long, lean, athletic frame” and the “buff biceps” revealed by the sleeveless dresses she favours. Commentary has framed her arms in particular within hyper-discourses variously referred to as “Sleevegate”, “The Right to Bare Arms”, and “The Upper Body Stimulus Plan” suggesting that “a little more [clothing] coverage is appropriate”. As McAllister (2009, p. 312) argues the “bodily standards by which [Michelle] Obama is being measured are clearly gendered, but they are also classed, animated
by anxiety over the sight of muscular arms (fit for menial labour, but unfit for display in polite company) on the figure of the First Lady”.

The space of the first lady is constructed politically, culturally, structurally, and aesthetically over time as an exclusive place for white bodies to occupy. As an insider (Barrack Obama’s wife) and an outsider (African American), Michelle Obama’s arms in particular unmask the universal somatic norm of the first lady as white and decent (Tate 2012, p. 230; Quinlan et al 2012, p. 123). Commentary on whether Michelle Obama’s gowns (often one-shouldered or sleeveless revealing her biceps) were too “enticing”, “unnerving”, or too “sexy” posit that types of bodies, and even body parts, pose a threat to the social order. Yet anxiety over whether Michelle Obama is suitably attired is underscored by observations that Jackie Kennedy’s sleeveless dresses worn half a century earlier didn’t cause similar controversies (Noveck 2009, online). Tate (2012, p. 233) asks an insightful question

    How does a black woman with a body that is read as masculinised (because of its muscularity), not beautiful (black and dark-skinned), and not slim (by her own admission, she is bottom-heavy) ‘do’ non-ghetto fabulous glamour in twenty-first century America? Indeed, how can black women accomplish glamour without reproducing the Black Venus?

The modern black female body is still one imprinted with “hypersexualization” that fetishises “particular body parts” such as “bottom, breasts…tight, curvaceous, young bodies as we see in video vixens” (Sharpley-Whiting cited in Tate 2012, p. 230). As first lady Michelle Obama is “imprisoned by norms of class and gender, while, as a black woman who must be respectable, she is imprisoned by the imperative to not be the Black Venus. As an African American first lady she has to do glamour to establish her rightful place in the roll” (Tate 2012, p. 234). Within this paradigm what is apparent is that the glamorous costumed and adorned body is valued more than intellect or substance of character.
Michelle Obama’s race needed to be reimagined in the post 9/11 culture were racialized and sexualised “UnAmerican” bodies were narrated as a threat to American identity and security (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo 2010, p. 1). Race and associated representations of the female African American body as either solely domestic, as a Black Venus, or as a physical threat to the norms of American white femininity also provided a sociological framework that impacted on how Michelle Obama performed first lady gender Tate (2012, p. 233). Embedded in these understandings of gendered race frameworks was the whiteness evident in statements that Michelle Obama has an “uncommon figure for an American First Lady” (McAllister 2009, p. 312). One way Michelle Obama sought to overcome race in her performance was to repeat linguistically and stylistically Jackie Kennedy via “black Camelot moment[s]” (Trebay 2008, online).

Far from the post-racial political environment heralded in with the election of Barrack Obama, “if anything, race and racial attitudes have become more salient during the Obama presidency” (Knuckey & Kim 2016, p. 382). For Michelle Obama as the first African American first lady race was an issue in her performance. What Michelle Obama’s skin colour did was call attention to the historical whiteness of the first lady (White 2011, p. 14). With the election of Barrack Obama, Michelle Obama represents a temporality or periodicity that denotes first ladies “before” and first ladies “after” (Spillers 2009, p. 308). Raced first lady performance has no precedence meaning Michelle Obama is imagined to be operating in a liminal and therefore temporal space. While this may open sites of empowerment for Michelle Obama to reimagine American womanhood, it also means she risks alienation if she engages in subversive gender performance.

What Michelle Obama’s role as first lady informs is that the status of women hasn’t been, or is, historically equal and shared among all American women. The referent ‘woman’ in
American culture has traditionally signified “white woman” (White 2011, p. 11). White (2011, p. 12) posits what this means for Michelle Obama.

The Black female/White female dichotomy remains a powerful one, resisting and cultivating stereotypes of White women as feminine, hidden in the domestic sphere, pure, pale, delicate, emotionally and physically restrained and Black women as public, exposed, hypersexual, abnormal, degraded, and bitchy. The divergent statuses of Black and White women produce a major chasm between the established spaces of White and Black femininities – a chasm Michelle Obama would have to bridge. As the role of the First Lady has been defined around domesticity, regality, and hostessing, it has silently organized First Lady identity in opposition and in contrast to the designation of Black women in American society.

First Ladies take their cues from those that came before (Kelly 2001, p. 155). In racial terms, this isn’t available to Michelle Obama, though as noted Obama did fashionably perform Jackie Kennedy and as a result generated at least linguistic comparisons between ‘Jackie O’ and ‘Michelle O’. Initially however for Michelle Obama to socially be accepted as the first lady she had to reimagine the space of the first lady that was already “defined and designed around constructions of white femininity” (White 2011, p. 11) and embedded within norms of idealised American womanhood (Kelly 2001, p. 155). To overcome this discursive positioning, Michelle Obama relies on clothes, make-up, hair, and demeanour. By actively coding herself within the troupes of Jackie Kennedy and her wearing of glamour internationally recognised designer gowns (as opposed to Hillary Clinton’s penchant for eclectically texture and coloured pantsuits), Michelle Obama’s performance of an idealised universal femininity simultaneously downplays her race, particularly as a dark-skinned African American with slave genealogy. While she does perform a “recognizable black” femininity (to not do so undermines the ontological truth of her blackness) Michelle Obama is required to perform a “transracial, upper middle class and heterosexual identity” or risk “censure” (Tate 2012, p. 235).

The idea that Michelle Obama might become the first lady inspired curiosity but also inspired anxiety and hostility (Williams 2009, p. 835). Gina Ulysse (2008, p. 174) highlighted the sense of incredulity at the appearance of an African American woman in the White House, “who for
once had no business ‘carrying the washing in and out of the back door’, in Alice Walker’s words”. Anxiety and hostility thus required a “repackaging” of Michelle Obama from her “earlier, spikier image”. To not do so meant as an African American woman she would be excluded from attaining the legitimacy attached to the status of first lady (Williams 2009, p. 835; Lauret 2011, p. 106). Hence Michelle Obama has had to re-perform race in order to perform gender. As a post-identity project it requires making her identity fluid. As Milner puts it (2005, p. 541) the reconceptualization of identity is “performative, mobile, strategically essential, intersectional, incomplete, in-process, provisional, hybrid, partial, fragmentary, fluid, transitional, transnational, cosmopolitan, counter-public, and, above all, cultural.”

What Michelle Obama has had to overcome therefore is stereotypical portrayals of African American women that centre on “fetishized and animalized sexual imagery” meaning African American women in the political sphere have become “effaced or distorted” (James 2009, p. 2). As Hooks (1984, p. 24) notes, “racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black woman are operative myths in the minds of many White women”. This was a challenge for Michelle Obama and one that she sought to neutralise in her performance of post-identity that was enacted via enacting high-end glamour, costume and by actively reimaging a linguistic and stylised version of former first ladies, Jackie Kennedy in particular. Such practices sought to negate her race as a basis for her social or cultural exclusion in her performance of American womanhood as sited in first lady discourses.

**National Identity and Security**

Again, as the Jackie Kennedy example demonstrates, the costumed first lady informs national as well as individual identity. Questions of national identity come to the fore often in periods of economic, political, global uncertainty and crisis, none more so in America in the period immediately after 9/11. National identity is a defining and unifying concept of nations and
nationalism (Anderson 1983). As with gender, national identity is performed. Performance implies that the subjective experience of identity is not internal or authentic but is a product of repetition of practices including language, speech, gesture, customs, and costume that are normative. The success of the performance relies on conforming to accepted practices, corporeal and temporal. As with national identity which is grounded in constructed myths of nationhood, gender performance is similarly grounded in myths. Because of the mythical foundations, both national identity and gender require ongoing and repetitious performance.

Attesting to the performative nature of national identity, Lavi (2013, p. 699) argues “nationality is not something that people have, but rather something people do”. In the post 9/11 period it is suggested there emerged a “post 9/11 culture” which saw American culture and society fundamentally altered by the securitization rhetoric specifically articulated by the George W. Bush Administration. The idea of national threat discursively merged into narratives about who was a threat and safety correlated with combating and eliminating threat (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo 2011, p. 200). As a result a “concerted effort unfolded to protect America by containing Un-American bodies” (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo 2010, p. 1). ‘Un-American bodies” initially were those opposed to the war in Iraq or the loss of civil liberties that occurred after 9/11. However the frame was expanded to include other racial and sexual bodies, including Michelle Obama’s raced body and Hillary Clinton’s feminist body (Bloodsworth-Lugo & Lugo-Lugo 2010, p. 2).

While Michelle Obama’ race positioned her within the ‘Un-American bodies’ discourse for Hillary Clinton, frames of her as sexuality Otherness emerged in discussions, mostly in right-wing Republican. While such commentary didn’t directly claim she was a lesbian, commentary did infer that she was not only a feminist but was a radical and angry feminist, evidenced in her ongoing wearing of pants suits and as one that didn’t conform fashionable as Jackie
Kennedy or her predecessors did. The inference was that while Clinton was a lesbian she dressed like one. A 2016 article in *Slate* offers

Hillary Clinton’s sense of style has been criticized for as long as she has been on the national political scene. One of the uglier forms this mockery has taken, most often in barbed private jokes and comments but occasionally openly by anti-gay activists, has been the “rumours” of secret lesbianism, supposedly evidenced by her pantsuits and her (actually not always full-throated) support of gay rights.

For Michelle Obama, racialized Othering emerged in both right-wing publications and in satirical publications. One of note was the cover of *The New Yorker* in July 2008. On this cartooned cover, set in the Oval Office, Michelle Obama is represented with a 1960s afro, holding an AK-47, in a ‘fist-bump’ with Barrack Obama. Barrack Obama is dressed as a Muslim. Michelle Obama is dressed in camouflage pants and army boots and wearing a 1980s power suit jacket with accentuated shoulder pads. There is a print of Osama Bin Laden on the wall and the American flag is burning in the fireplace (Blitt 2008, online). The conservative *Fox News* consistently refers to the Obama ‘fist-bump’ as a “the terrorist fist jab” (Madison 2009, p. 323). The visual references imagine both Michelle and Barrack Obama as racialized UnAmerican bodies and hence a threat to both national identity and national security (Selzer 2010, pp.16-20). What is also evident in this and other representations is that framing casts Michelle Obama as the “darker, contentious and hidden side of her husband…a symbol of her husband’s Otherness” (Madison 2009, p. 321). Here the costuming of both Barack and Michelle’s bodies posit how clothing, hairstyle and accessories are sites of meaning and that reinforces and sustains views about identities (Douglas 1979). What this meant for Michelle Obama was that her race had to be reclassified. To attempt to ignore her race would be ontologically problematic. The result was that her blackness was “beautified, intellectualised and domesticated” into a “new configuration of patriotism and what it means to be an American” (Madison 2009, p. 324). This was largely done via the objectification of her costumed body. The result was she “embodied a new symbol of (post)black womanhood”
(Madison 2009, p. 324). Her Michelle Obama’s post-black and post-feminism contrasted to Hillary Clinton’s white feminism.

**Feminism**

In contemporary America, physical appearance is so stressed that women find it difficult to resist the beauty culture (Tate 2012, p. 234; Wolf 1991). According to Janell Hobson (2005, p. 7) African American women have been “widely excluded from dominant culture’s celebration of beauty and femininity. As a result, beauty becomes a significant site of political resistance and aesthetic transformation in which black women, whose beauty has been contested in dominant culture, strive to redefine their bodies by means of reasserting their womanhood and, possibly, their humanity”. A similar argument could be made in relation to older women, as Hillary Clinton now finds herself to be. But both then and now Hillary Clinton is rarely if ever narrated in terms of beauty.

This was a problem for Hillary Clinton because first ladies, and in general female politicians and female political candidates, are often positioned within a ‘Beauty Queen’ frame. The Beauty Queen standard, argues Vasby Anderson (2008 online), is “used tacitly in media narratives to prove political women’s supposed authenticity as women”. Rather than beauty, for Hillary Clinton, her feminism was used to position her as not an “authentic women”. Instead she was positioned as an “unruly women”, an “intimidating feminist” and a “nagging wife” (Vasby Anderson 2008, online). Her agency as a well-educated career-orientated and independent woman was used against her labelling her a “radical feminist, greedy attorney”…and “co-president” (Oles-Acevedo 2012, p. 34). Reminding us of the early images of Hillary Clinton without makeup, wearing coke-bottle glasses and wearing unpredictable fashion and changing hairstyles, Vasby Anderson (2008 online) argues
When political women resist traditional beauty standards, it's easier to stereotype them as radical feminists, making them seem threatening to some voters. Because the Beauty Queen knows how to adhere to society’s rules for appearance, it follows that she will not use public power improperly. However, a woman who challenges conventions of appearance is signalling her intention to undo other traditional standards.

Geraldine Brooks speculates that Michelle Obama’s strong opinions, such as only being proud of America on the election of her husband or her Princeton thesis on race and education (withdrawn from circulation by Princeton “fuelling speculation as to its rabidly anti-white content”) (Brown 2012, p. 244) and her frankness in their expression (such as her 2015 address to Tuskegee University where Michelle Obama talked candidly about race and overcoming racial prejudice) make her a target for those who “still believe that outspoken woman and first lady should never be synonymous’ (Brooks 2008, online). For Patricia Williams “Michelle Obama is often described in terms depressingly similar to those of Hillary Clinton: she’s too outspoken, not domestic enough, going to tank her husband’s candidacy by not knowing her place” (2008, p. 9). The comparison to Hillary Clinton seems apt (Brown 2012, p. 244).

As the former first lady of Arkansas and the American first lady, as well as a mother and a lawyer, Hillary Clinton didn’t “live in a world of either-or, however, but of a both-and” (Jamieson 1995, p. 22). She became a surrogate for that which was incompatible, an educated women and a mother. She also embodied that of a powerful unelected women: the first first lady to have an office in the White House and the first first lady to have a defined role in public policy. In the binds of women-mother-wife-lawyer and policy-maker Hillary Clinton was probably the “most maligned” of all first ladies (Beasley 2005, p. xi). The press contributed to this, likely because they struggled to frame what they saw as Hillary Clinton’s non-traditional role within what they historically, socially and culturally understood as the traditional role of the first lady. One example is insightful. President Clinton didn’t hold a formal state dinner until almost 18 months after his inauguration: the first being for the Japanese Emperor and Empress in June 1994. Traditionally, the first ladies office would release the menu and guest
list to the press. Instead Hillary Clinton deferred this to the State Department (Winfield 1997b, pp. 245-246).

Hillary Clinton’s independence was not unprecedented. Her decision to keep her maiden name during Bill Clinton’s 1980 Governor race was blamed for her husband’s defeat and when she adopted ‘Clinton’ she was criticised for self-defeat (Jamieson 1995, p. 23). When responding to questions about the relationship between her law firm and Bill Clinton’s Arkansas Governor’s office in 1992 she responded: “I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life”. The comment was considered to demean women and their apparent homemaking priorities (Oles-Acevedo 2012, p. 37). Two months earlier, appearing on 60 Minutes with her husband responding to allegations of his infidelities, Hillary Clinton replied: “I’m not sitting here [like] some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette…I’m sitting here because I love him and I respect him and I honour what he’s been through and what we’ve been through together. And you know, if that’s not enough for people, then heck, don’t vote for him” (CBS 1992). What was noted in this statement was the Hillary Clinton was not behaving in a feminine manner, as is expected of first ladies (Anderson & Baxendale 1992; Oles-Acevedo 2012). The notion of “being feminine” means “adopting a personal or self-disclosing tone” yet Hillary Clinton’s tone was viewed as that with which she was trained; as a lawyer, advocate, and expert (Kohrs Campbell 1998, p. 6). For Jamieson this is the double-bind that public women have to negotiate. “The negotiation is figuring out how to walk a fine line between being regarded as too feminine…or too tough (Jamieson 1995, p. 121). As early as 1994, Hillary Clinton appeared to have understood the need to perform gender. Amid claims of the failed Clinton Whitewater land deal in Arkansas 16 years earlier, she held a press conference, alone on a raised platform, under a portrait of Lincoln, wearing a soft pink sweater and without notes exhaustively answered all the questions put to her by the press. As Winfield
notes (1997b, p. 249), “much like a teacher, she calmly explained the difference between a
discretionary and nondiscretionary investment account”. Rather, than “projecting an image of
arrogance, she appeared contrite and dutiful…responsible, yet soft and a bit repentant”. What
is also of note in the Whitewater press conference is Welter’s recollection of the notion of “true
womanhood” as being submissive, pure and pious, characteristics that Hillary Clinton appeared
to be performing (Brown 1997, p. 267).

Unlike other first ladies, Hillary Clinton (particularly in the first 18 months of Clinton’s
presidency), didn’t give lifestyle interviews or comment on her social activities. Only when it
became apparent that she has an “image problem” did she revert to the “safety net” or
“protective shield” afforded by appearing in women’s magazines and talking about women’s
issues and framing herself as a traditional wife, mother and national hostess (Winfield 1997b,
p. 251). Hillary Clinton, and her ‘image problem’ had been inadvertently assisted by Bill
Clinton who quipped during the 1992 presidential election that with a Clinton presidency, the
nation could “buy one, get one free”, which was fulfilled when Hillary Clinton was appointed
by her husband to lead health care reform (PBS 2016). Early in the first Clinton administration
the media couldn’t easily define Hillary Clinton “except for noting violations of standard
behaviour for a first lady” (Winfield 1997b, p. 250). What resonated in the national mood was
that American’s were to “fear women with power” and to “admire women with the status of
victims” (Parry-Giles 2000, p. 221).

More broadly the problem was that as a professional, strong-willed and outspoken feminist,
Hillary Clinton appeared not to be performing the idealised version of a first lady. Instead
Hillary Clinton was acting as an independent woman and was vilified for it as a “power-mad
consort, accused of overarching ambition that negated feminine nature (Beasley 2005, p. 224)
and as such she represented the “tensions between the social imaginary family and
contemporary women’s lives” (Gardetto 1997, p. 226). Hence there was a need for Hillary
 Clinton to transform herself further or risk alienation and exclusion. While costuming was an effective tool for Michelle Obama to visually code her performances, this proved difficult for Hillary Clinton. Even though Clinton embraced the European designers used by former first ladies, Dominican-born Oscar de la Renta who designed for former First Ladies Nancy Reagan and Laura Bush, and often wore her hair in a Jackie Kennedy bob (Fury 2015), her costuming was continually criticised. While Clinton was the first first lady to appear on the cover of Vogue she refused a second cover saying she didn’t want to look too “feminine” (Viralmozo 2016, online). The wearing of pantsuits continually generated considerable analysis about Hillary Clinton, her feminism, agenda and gender. Stylist Tim Gunn reportedly said: “Why must she dress that way? I think she’s confused about her gender” (Gunn cited in Jezebel 2011, online).

While Hillary Clinton did transform and engage in gendered performance, her costuming – mostly pantsuits – arguably posited her desire for some independency and agency, befitting her feminist ideals. Conversely Michelle Obama appeared to embrace the gendered performance of the first lady, eschewing the “transgressive behaviour” of Hillary Clinton and even refusing the title of “feminist” when asked by a reporter, saying: “You know, I’m not that into labels…I wouldn’t identify as feminist” (Michelle Obama cited in White 2011, pp. 13-14). In her media representations, Michelle Obama’s image signifies elements of “post-feminism as she is portrayed as a strong woman who can be interested in ostensible frivolities (as a penchant for fashion is understood to be un-, anti-, or post-feminist) and yet not be dismissed as frivolous” (Joseph 2011, p. 60). Her fashion choices, both ready-to-wear off the rack and high end fashion, dictate that audiences should not pay attention to any feminist values she may have instead here mediated image posits audiences “embrace her outside (as in post-feminism) (Joseph 2011, p. 61).

In a profile of Michelle Obama in 2008, it is theorised that, “the very qualities that make her an icon of twenty-first-century womanhood — her strong opinions, her frankness in expressing
them, and confidence born of bootstrap triumphs — make her a rich target for those who still believe that outspoken woman and first lady should never be synonymous’ (Brooks 2008, online). Along these lines, Patricia Williams suggests that, “Michelle Obama is often described in terms depressingly similar to those of Hillary Clinton: she’s too outspoken, not domestic enough, going to tank her husband’s candidacy by not knowing her place’ (Williams 2008, p. 9). Feminism, it seems, is still problematic in the performance of first lady gender. In terms of bodies, however a more complex terrain faced Michelle Obama and her gendered performances of American womanhood within the prism of the first lady.

*Class*

The title ‘first lady’ has class connotations even though American political culture attempts to deny class is an American concern. Until 1870 American first ladies were referred to as ‘Mrs President’. However the suffix ‘Mrs’ didn’t denote the preferred class of a first lady, hence the term ‘lady’ was adopted to differentiate between industrial wage earning working wives (‘Mrs’) and middle class domestic women reliant on her affluent husband (‘Lady’) (Welter 1973). This class ideology served to socially elevate middle-upper class women to the “cult of true womanhood” (Gardetto 1997, p. 227). While second wave feminism challenged the notion of the middle class, stay at home wife and mother as the personification of authentic womanhood, framing still posits middle class, stay at home mothers as an idealisation of American womanhood. For first ladies that come to the role as careerists, as both Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama did, there is a need for them to constantly emphasise their nurturing capabilities, something not required of men (Jamieson 1995; Gardetto 1997).

Class is related to social mobility. When Hillary Clinton recalls her working class family background in the industrial belt of Scranton, Pennsylvania and later the clay plains of Park Ridge, Illinois it iterates an American rag-to-rigs story and signifies her “real” American
identity (Bernstein 2007, pp. 12-13). When Michelle Obama recounts her childhood in the working class South Side of Chicago her comments resound differently. As Lauret (2011, p. 102) puts it, “in a country where class is rarely spoken of as a meaningful social, let alone political, category” Michelle Obama “emphasised time and again that she came from a working-class family [and] that had been key to her success and well-being, and that she was acutely aware how high the barriers to class mobility continued to be for African Americans”. Perhaps best exemplifying Michelle Obama’s own understanding of class (and likely race) she said at a campaign stump speech: “…I am not supposed to be here…” (Michelle Obama cited in Mundy 2009, p. 13). When Michelle Obama says: “I am a product of a working-class background. I am one of those folks who grew up in that struggle. That is the lens through which I see the world” (Michelle Obama quoted in Thomas 2008) it is considered within the context of America’s post-identity culture which demands both class and race be addressed in a mainstream, and recognizable (read white-friendly) manner.

What allows Michelle Obama to mostly escape criticisms of her working class background is that she has a “visual code” which she wears as a “stylistic mask” that allows her deflect such resistant content (Joseph 2011, p. 70). Obama’s “visual code” can be examined three ways via her costuming. Firstly, Michelle Obama’s costuming by internationally-recognised designers like Naeem Khan (India State Dinner gown, 2009), Isabel Toledo (2009 Inauguration), Peter Soronen (Mexico State Dinner gown 2010), Tom Ford (Buckingham Palace Dinner 2011), Alexander McQueen (China State Dinner 2011), Missoni (Italian State Visit 2015) as well as regular appearances in Vera Wang, Ralph Lauren and Carolina Herrera (French White House Dinner 2014) codes Michelle Obama to white upper class women as normatively performing American first lady womanhood. The use of Herrara, the Venezuela-American fashioner designer, also codes Michelle Obama within the stylistic narratives of Jackie Kennedy because Herrara also styled Jackie Kennedy.
Second, as noted, by repeating the costuming of former first ladies, Michelle Obama is repeating previous gendered performance suggesting her citation within the acceptable norm of authentic American, and first lady, womanhood. When that repetition of costume is that of Jackie Kennedy’s it displaces Michelle Obama’s working class background and attaches her to the status of Jackie Kennedy. In 1962, Oleg Cassini designed a fitted silk apricot dress with a triple strand of pearls for First Lady Jackie Kennedy to wear on an official trip to India (Castaldo 2013). Michelle Obama’s wearing of a similar dress in style and colour and with similar accessories posits that Michelle Obama is located within the “rightful place” of the physical and corporeal boundary of the white, glamourous, upper class American women (Tate 2012, p. 231). Similarly Michelle Obama’s repetition of Caroline Herrera’s button-up jackets with knee-length skirts (worn by Jackie Kennedy on an official visit to Paris in 1961) similarly acts to code Michelle Obama. This has not gone unnoticed. *Vogue* editor-at-large Andre Leon Talley describes Michelle Obama’s wearing of oversized pearls and the styling of her hair in a flip reminiscent of Jacqueline Kennedy, as a “playful nod” to “a black Camelot moment” (Trebay 2008, online).

Thirdly, in wearing Target, Macy’s, Neiman Marcus, J Crew or Tracey Reese, Michelle Obama codes her working class background as normatively performing every-day American womanhood (Joseph 2011, pp. 71-72). Even if not of the working class backgrounds of Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama, all first ladies must enact a performance that speaks to American womanhood. With American womanhood fractured by class, race, generations, religion, geography, and other values different forms of gendered performance emerge: one is glamour. But what remains problematically, as even Michelle Obama’s cosmopolitan wardrobe attests to, is that glamour is codified in terms of upper and middle class respectable femininity idealised as universal, recognised across race, class and national boundaries (Tate 2012, p. 231). Style and taste are linked to social location, sidestepping racial identity but, as with
Michelle Obama’s wearing of off-the-rack fashion, still foregrounds class norms (McAllister 2009, p. 313). This tendency to leave racial difference unspoken while class difference is explicit, allude to the problem of race and American womanhood. Yet, social class and her performed glamour has acted to make Michelle Obama’s blackness mostly (but not entirely) acceptable (Madison 2009, p. 324).

**Conclusion**

In this discussion of Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama’s reactive and/or conscious gendered performances via costuming the complex texts of class, race, national identity-security, feminism and the body have been interrogated. Using performance studies, that which is nondramatic, nontheatrical, ceremonial, and everyday performances and performances that “appear to depart from the authority of texts” (Worthen 1998, p. 1093) Judith Butler’s theories of performance provide a grounding framework to understand why gendered performance occurs.

Performance, in this analysis is used to understand how people, specifically first ladies, behave and the power associated with performing certain social roles. It is of concern that first ladies are required to perform gender, and when they do, they are rewarded. Both Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama arguably engaged in gender performance as evidenced in their personal and public narratives of feminism and work (Clinton) and class, race and national identity (Obama): enforced and affirmed in costume. While it has been suggested that Hillary Clinton reactively accepted the need to perform gender and Michelle Obama more actively embraced a post-identity gender, neither meaningfully sought to reject the historical, political, social or cultural structures that regulate gender. Neither engaged in subversive gender performativity because to have done so would have risked their social viability and legitimacy resulting in their marginalisation and alienation.
While the public positions of Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama may posit that they had/have a visibility that well positions them to enact agency and change, it is argued that they operate within duality of the construction of gender performance and the construction of first lady performance. In cases, gender and first lady performance was a predetermined, constructed historical and political idealisation of what women/first ladies are. With a raced first lady not available to Michelle Obama, it posits two things: either she is in a liminal space of neither ‘this’ or ‘that’, a ‘between’ space or that she reverted to normative white frames of beauty and glamour to narrate her first lady performance. That said, there is some evidence that each of the first ladies examined did attempt to perform individualised and reimagined versions of American womanhood specific to their times. Jackie Kennedy sought to reimage American modernity, Hillary Clinton sought to reimage the normative role of the career mother and Michelle Obama sought to reimage black post-feminism and post-identity. These performances however were balanced against the need to perform gender to ensure their acceptance as viable and legitimate subjects compounded by the temporal performance of national identity and patriotism.

One specific example discussed here provides a conclusion to this analysis, particularly as it relates to the issue that separates Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama, that of race. As Butler (1997, p. 410) points out, “just as a script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered [and raced] body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives”. What this means is that race already dictates failure when whiteness is normative (Butler 1997, p. 410). The earlier example of Jackie Kennedy’s 1962 Oleg Cassini designed apricot dress is lastly reinterrogated.

Tate’s (2012) informative analysis in *Comparative American Studies* posits correctly that Michelle Obama is judged, and legitimised, for how she performs Jackie Kennedy’s style
inferring that she effectively enacts upper, middle-class femininity and glamour. As Tate (2012, pp. 232-233) says of Jackie Kennedy’s designer style

…I mean dignified designer chic that draws attention from the body at the same time as drawing attention to it in an understated sexualising way. To be a First Lady in the style of Jackie [Kennedy] is to be fixed, to make the body conform to the cultural sign of ‘First Lady’, to bring the First Lady bodily into being within the permissible boundaries of possibility, and through a sustained and repeated corporeal strategy in which stylization is the key. This is so given that race already dictates that the body occupying this space must be white.

Through stylisation of costume Michelle Obama, rather than performing an activist post-feminist, post-black identity she is confirming that the first lady is “not a white-raced fact but a regulatory fiction” (Tate 2012, p. 232). Without repeated performance neither American womanhood, nor normative understandings of first ladies as the site of these idealisations, is possible. Returning to Butler who argues that how “one acts one’s body is subjected to the tacit conventions that determine what will be recognised (Butler 1997, p. 407) means that for Michelle Obama her raced, gendered, classed, and heterosexual body reminds audiences that she is a “cultural script” that always “assumes the first lady to be white”. Michelle Obama’s repetition of Jackie Kennedy’s Oleg Cassini designed 1962 apricot dress confirms this. As Tate (2010, p. 233) well argues: “Judgements that liken Michelle [Obama] to Jackie [Kennedy] seek to “interpret her [Michelle Obama] as a ‘mimic woman’, incapable of putting a stamp not only on her own style but also on the First Lady cultural script because she is black. This is, of course, the colonial condition: one can only mimic, one can never become”.

While Jackie Kennedy’s costumed style may have provide the socio-cultural legitimacy that first ladies have repeated since 1961, especially for Michelle Obama and other women of colour that come after her, it will continually and discursively point to the fact that authentic American womanhood, as situated in the first ladies representations of this idealisation, remains “white, slender, and part of an old, establishment family” and “it consolidates her [first lady] entitlement to be there at least in terms of fashion” (Tate 2012, p. 234). While this frame was
available to Hillary Clinton there is evidence that she at least at times chose not to engage with it, however in not fully embracing her gendered performances as first lady, it arguably feed into American attitudes about her that were costly at the 2016 presidential election.
References


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