

Fashion Politics of Mrs. Obama during Presidential Campaign

Yang-Jin Jeon

Professor, Division of Design, Myongji University

ABSTRACT

Dress and appearance are said to be related to power which results in influencing others. Fashion and appearance style of the first African American First Lady, Michelle Obama during the presidential campaign and the inaugural period were examined. It was analyzed how Mrs. Obama has used her appearance styling to give influence on the American people. Content analysis was applied to understand the meaning of her style. Cultural meaning of her appearance styling during presidential campaign was explained in terms of class ambivalence, racial tension, and gender ambivalence. Strategic negotiation among different classes, gender, and racial groups was shown in her styling and proven to be powerful.

Key Words : *appearance styling, class ambiguity, racial tension, and gender ambivalence*

I . Introduction

Our appearance is most apparent individual characteristic. The term appearance has the advantage of referring to the total, composite impression created not only by clothes but also by the human body and any modifications to it(Kaiser, 1997). Physical traits such as hair color, height, skin color are already programmed in our genes although exercise, diet, cosmetics and plastic surgery can change some of appearance style. Appearance is not freely chosen, thus we are socialized not to judge others by their appearances. Yet, we have to admit frankly that appearance plays an important role in everyday life. Because people tend to use visual appearance to guide their interpersonal relationship, it is useful

to study appearance style within social context.

The term of style places an emphasis on the objects that people consume, including how they put them together while fashion has a connotation of larger social patterns of group(Gronow, 1997). Social pattern is more than what people do or earn for a living. It includes their tastes, attitudes, their ways of eating and grooming, how they are taught to act, and the way they relate future. People use dress to make inferences or to convey information such as sex, taste, social belonging, and power (Gronow, 1997; Johnson and Lennon, 1999).

Fashion is celebrated by some cultural commentators while denigrated by others. Political theory might provide some explanation about fashion by studying its intersection with power and action. Appearance and well dressing seems to be related

with power which shows influence, control, or material gain(Miller, 2002).

In this paper, fashion and appearance style of the first African American First Lady, Michelle Obama during the presidential campaign and the inaugural period were examined. How Mrs. Obama has used her appearance styling to appeal and to influence the American people was analyzed. In this paper, terms of fashion, appearance, dress were used interchangeably even though they have their own meaning, since cultural meaning of one's appearance rather than appearance itself was main concern here.

II. Literature Review on Appearance, power and ambivalence

The appearance is a mode of communication that brings to the surfaces embodies meanings not easily expressed in words(Kaiser et al, 1995). Styling the body is a fundamental part of shaping and sustaining identities in everyday life. Kaiser et al(1995) mentioned postmodern characteristic of appearance. Clothes could not resolve ambivalence because identity constructions are continually changing as people move from one social context to another. Further, clothes tend to be negotiated in group context through everyday social processes. Sociologist Fred Davis(1992) has asserted that clothing registers the culturally anchored ambivalences that resonate within and among identities. From an interactionist perspective fashion and/or style tend to bear identity ambivalence between status claims, on the one hand, and status demurrals on the other hand(Davis, 1992).

Men and women nowadays tend to gain influence through the use of appearance and dress, or at least that story is a recurrent motif in thinking about women's power. Appearance is carriers of

ideological meaning or social agenda(Crane, 2000). That is, clothing and appearance style can be used to trace changes on the social identity.

Power of good appearance has been ignored by political scientists. In contrast to cultural studies, many scholars and theorists generally have not treated the subject of fashion, presumably because it is assumed to be "non-political"(Miller, 2002). In a broad sense, fashion is likely to include the body, clothes, appearance, and the public presentation of sexuality. The design, manufacture, and sale of clothes make a significant industry in every country. Fashion has become a cultural obsession, where models and designers are international celebrities.

Appearing attractive and using appearance to gain power are political skills like others described by Machiavelli such as speaking effectively or making allies(Miller, 2002). Fashion theorist Arnold(2001) claimed that stylish clothing confers power through making women visible. Fashion can be used as a means to assert a type of visual and stylistic power by those who think alienated from the main flow of political life because of gender, class, or ethnicity. Clothing, accessories and cosmetics were held out as the route to social advancement.

Attractive clothes are often used as a legitimate and empowering strategy to impress others. Clothing advisers are certain that wearing the right clothing is one of the most important steps a woman can take to attain power. At present physical appearance, money, and power are closely connected. Also, social analyses of consumer behavior have shown how social class works in terms of appearance.

Fashion and appearance do communicate some information about person's social identity which is framed by cultural values in terms of gender, social status, age, race and so on. They are more important for the culturally minor groups such as female, low class, black people than their counterparts

(male, elite, white people). Tulloch studied Malcolm X's life transformation through the written and visual presentation in the autobiography of Malcolm X (Bruzzi & Gibson, 2000). She found that clothes and appearance were deeply associated with change of Malcolm X as a political and cultural icon. In the US, African female Americans have historically had much reason to feel ambivalent about creating ways to ascend in dominant white, male culture.

As the first African First Lady in the US, Mrs. Obama's fashion style has caught media and people all around the world. She may strive to negotiate her appearance style to appeal several racial groups and different social classes effectively while keeping her own individuality.

III. Research Method

Images of Michelle Obama's appearance style were obtained from internet site from the US Yahoo portal. Content analysis on media images, one of the interpretive approaches, was applied to understand the meaning of appearance style of Mrs. Obama.

The interpretive method assumes that the particular case represents an macrolevel cultural processes and structures (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Accordingly, the analysis of the particular case can provide insights into the operation of larger societal context. Interpretive study tends to reveal the structure of knowledge and power in historical, cultural and social context. Interpretive paradigm would be useful to explain how to clear out ambiguity and ambivalence visually with appearance and to ease cultural tension.

IV. Results and discussion

1. Personal Background of Mrs. Obama

Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama (born January

17, 1964) is the wife of the forty-fourth President of the United States, Barack Obama, and the first African-American First Lady of the United States. She was born and grew up on the South Side of Chicago and graduated from Princeton University and Harvard Law School. After completing her formal education, she returned to Chicago and accepted a position with the law firm Sidley Austin, before meeting her husband Barack Obama. Subsequently, Mrs. Obama has worked as part of the staff of Chicago mayor, and for the University of Chicago Medical Center. Throughout 2007 and 2008, she helped campaign for her husband's presidential bid. Mrs. Obama is the mother of two daughters.

With the ascent of her husband as a prominent national politician, she has become a part of pop culture. In May 2006, *Essence* magazine listed her among 25 of the World's Most Inspiring Women. In July 2007, *Vanity Fair* magazine listed her among 10 of the World's Best Dressed People. She was an honorary guest at Oprah Winfrey's Legends Ball which helped pave the way for African American Women. In September 2007, *O2138* magazine listed her 58th of "The Harvard 100," a list of the prior year's most influential Harvard alumni. Her husband was ranked fourth. As a high-profile African American woman in a stable marriage, she is anticipated to be a positive role model of African Americans.

2. Mrs. Obama's style during the 2008 presidential campaign

In July 2008, she made a repeat appearance on the *Vanity Fair* international best dressed list. She also appeared on the 2008 *People* list of best-dressed women and was praised by the magazine

for her "classic and confident" look. When Michelle Obama moved to Washington, D.C., she brought with her a sense of high fashion and easy elegance. Michelle Obama has the ability to move between modern trends and more vintage-inspired styles with grace. The First Lady has delighted the fashion press, as well as stylish women nationwide. Besides the content of Barak Obama's Inaugural address, one of the most eagerly anticipated questions of that day was what Michelle would be wearing.

For the Inaugural Parade on January 20, 2009, the First Lady wore a stunning sheath dress with a matching coat by young Cuban-American designer Isabel Toledo. Michelle Obama has said that she chose the bright lemon grass colored ensemble because she wanted to wear something optimistic and charming on that historic day. Clearly, this is a woman who understands the power of fashion to communicate and send a message. First Lady topped off her sheath and coat with a beautiful brooch and a pair of Jimmy Choo pumps.

The asymmetrical one shoulder style worn by the First Lady on January 20th turned out to foreshadow one of the hottest trends at the Academy Awards one month later. Not only did many of the celebrities wear one shouldered gowns to the Oscars, cream was one of the most popular colors that night. It looks like even Hollywood is turning to Michelle Obama for fashion inspiration.

It is clear that Michelle has a love of fabulous jewelry and accessories like many women. On the evening of the Inauguration, the First Lady wore a spectacular pair of diamond chandelier earrings and armful of thin diamond bangles. When Mrs. Obama wore a turtleneck dress in tonal charcoal and black for a performance at the Kennedy Center on February 6, 2009, she added a large eye-catching pearl brooch.

Mrs. Obama enjoys classic jewelry such as pearl

and crystal but dramatic pieces for a special occasion. Pearls are clearly one of Michelle's favorite adornments. Not only has she been seen in the pearl brooch, but the First Lady has been photographed wearing a variety of pearl necklaces, as well. Michelle Obama looked resplendent in the bold multi-strand pearl and crystal necklace at the Governors' Dinner on February 22nd. It showed that Mrs. Obama has the confidence to take some fashion risks.

She really has a great sense of how to complete an outfit with just the right piece. When the First Lady wore a bright cobalt blue sheath to the National Prayer Breakfast on February 5, 2009, it was a classic strand of pearls that added the perfect balance to the strong color of the V-neck Proenza Schouler dress. Over another brightly colored dress, this time with a jewel neck, Mrs. Obama layered in a longer strand of pearls for a visit to Howard University.

In the official portrait of Michelle Obama released by the White House, the first lady wore a sleeveless black shift dress by the designer Michael Kors. The sleeveless dress as her signature style was a fantastic and flattering look for her, as is evident by the dresses she wore on recent covers of Vogue.

3. Cultural meaning of Mrs. Obama's fashion style

1) Class ambiguity

When it comes to fashion, Michelle Obama seems to have a strategist's instincts. She uses both high end style and low end one with mixing strategically. She wears dresses from expensive designers like Isabel Toledo, Thakoon and Narciso Rodriguez to moderate retail labels such as J. Crew

Maria Pinto, and has become a fashion trendsetter. She's equally skilled at pulling together outfits from the other end of the spectrum. The soon-to-be First Lady pulled out one of her favorite labels, J Crew. For an October rally in Miami, she wore this striped dress from H&M with a \$34.95 price tag.

Perhaps the most appealing thing about Michelle Obama's fashion choices is that they are current without being too trendy, and that they feel entirely accessible to the ordinary woman. The First Lady is well known for mixing pieces from national stores like J Crew with her more exclusive or upscale clothing. When she is photographed wearing a stylish pair of skinny jeans tucked into boots, or a chic all black outfit, women everywhere see themselves. A young lady wanting to emulate Mrs. Obama's graceful style can head right to her local mall to find pieces like signature belts, classic dresses, and bright pops of color in her shoes and gloves. Michelle Obama would surely influence and inspire American women in every class beyond fashion.

Michelle Obama on the March 2009 cover of *Vogue* has been compared to Jacqueline Kennedy due to her sleek but not overdone style, and also to Barbara Bush for her discipline and decorum. The cover shot features a Jason Wu silk magenta sheath dress.

Many people hoped that the media would focus more on Obama's serious contributions than her fashion sense. However, some journalists has pointed out that Obama's own publicists seem to be feeding the emphasis on style over substance.

The First Lady made waves at President Obama's first Congressional Address on February 24, 2009, in a sleeveless plum silk dress by Narciso Rodriguez. The lack of arm-coverage raised some eyebrows in the fashion world, starting a debate on

whether it's appropriate to wear a sleeveless dress to a formal speech. However, her look proved to be both stunning and occasion appropriate.

2) Ease with racial tension

Michelle seems to negotiate her style in terms of racial tension. As a member of minority group, woman in terms of gender and black in terms of race, she is very considerate to choose fashion style as well as fashion designers. First, she tries not to emphasize her African American traits in her appearance styling. She always showed with straightened hair style rather than with curled African hair style. Like other successful elite African American women such as Condoleezza Rice, Michelle is likely not to emphasize her ethnicity even though she never hide her racial traits in white dominant society. She must have learned right appearance style to belong to and to negotiate with white dominant culture.

Mrs. Obama's style has been compared with that of Jackie Kennedy during the presidential campaign. Actually she appropriated Jackie's trademark flip, the simple '60s sheaths with strand of pearls. Media like to compare the two young First Ladies who are prominent in terms of fashion style and influence.

Second, Mrs. Obama has always supported lesser-known designers like Thakoon, Narciso Rodriguez and Isabel Toledo. They are Asian or Latin American rather than white or black. Michelle might prefer them because of their ethnicity as well as their designs. She has to get support from white and black voters together by not to making one part upset. She wisely escaped from white or black designers and found creative Asian or Latin American designers. By that decision she has also put good impression on Asian and Latin American

voters.

Cuban fashion designer, Isabel Toledo has not well known designer in spite of her career for more than 30 years. At a New York fund-raiser in 2008 spring, Mrs. Obama looked so comfortable in one of Toldeo's edgy designs. Isabel's design shows that Mrs. Obama truly wants to create a balance of the new and innovative with things that are classic and traditional. And she knew that it would be very cold out. So she designed something that was very sophisticated and very warm. The upper part of the coat and the back of the sleeve are all lined with a pashmina lining for extra warmth around the torso.

The young Thai-born designer Thakoon Panichgul, who's known simply as Thakoon, is Michelle's another favorite designer. Thakoon designed Michelle's silk floral dress for the first Presidential debate. Mrs. Obama likes to add a trinket here or there, she altered the silk floral dress with a small bow at the side of the neck.

On the night of the election Michelle Obama made fashion waves in red and black Narciso Rodriguez dress, which came straight from Rodriguez's Spring '09 runway. The designer proved to be a campaign trail favorite and will show up again and again during Obama's time in the White House.

Jason Wu is also Michelle's favorite designer. She is 26 years old and was born in Taiwan and studied at Parsons in New York. For her Inaugural Ball gown, Mrs. Obama chose to feature the work of Jason Wu. Jason Wu also created the dress Michelle wore on the cover of American Vogue's March issue.

Some of Michelle Obama's other favorite young designers, such as Tracy Feith and Narciso Rodriguez are bound to experience the same rise in

their stature as Cassini did as a result of Mrs. Kennedy's patronage. When Jackie Kennedy became First Lady, she realized that it was important for her to wear American designers, like Oleg Cassini, rather than the French designers that she had previously favored.

3) Gender ambivalence

Michelle has a law school degree, a high-powered job, which could influence male dominant organization. Mrs. Obama has stated that she would like to focus attention as First Lady on issues of concern to military families and working families. She actually has shown her ability from the previous jobs such as lawyer, staff of mayor, and for the University of Chicago Medical Center besides campaign for her husband's presidential bid.

In addition to her career, Mrs. Obama seems to be very good at empowering herself both on masculine and on feminine societies together with her styling. She seemed to show very thoughtful style behavior for others. For example, the first joint appearance of the Obama-Biden (vice president candidate) families in 2008 summer, the 5-foot-11 tall Mrs. Obama slipped on silver ballet flats not to tower over just about everyone. rally. Her considerate attitude has impressed many men and women voters.

Michelle is likely to choose her outfit depending on whether the context is for herself or for her husband. Certainly rather than just a fashion plate or a pretty face, she has a fresh and modern style that will inspire the average woman. Mrs. Obama is very adventurous, especially for color. Usually she favors bold shades, blues, oranges, purples while she chose a soft-colored dress for her husband's acceptance of the Harold Washington Award in 2008. It seems that Michelle enjoys striking colors for

making strong, dominant image and soft ones for supportive, subordinate image.

In short, Mrs. Obama is likely to use her appearance style strategically, which results in influencing both men and women groups favorably.

Conclusion

In this paper, it was analyzed how Mrs. Obama has made her appearance styling for influencing American people as a First Lady. Subtle and strategic negotiation among different cultural groups with a view to class, gender, and ethnicity was shown in her styling and proven to success. Now women everywhere will still be paying close attention to her fashion choices, both at home and abroad. A woman of substance like Michelle Obama would select their outfits with care to make looking proper politically. As Miller (2002) said, using appearance to gain power are political skills. Mrs. Obama's style seemed to provide her power through making her visible.

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