

MICHELLE OBAMA DRAMA, OUR GUIDE TO GREEN ENTERTAINING, GYPSY-CHIC FASHIONS

PIPIST


FOR WOMEN WITH SOMETHING TO GET OFF THEIR CHESTS

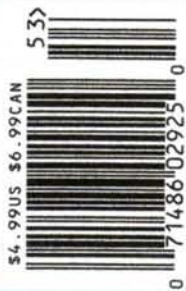
funny girls

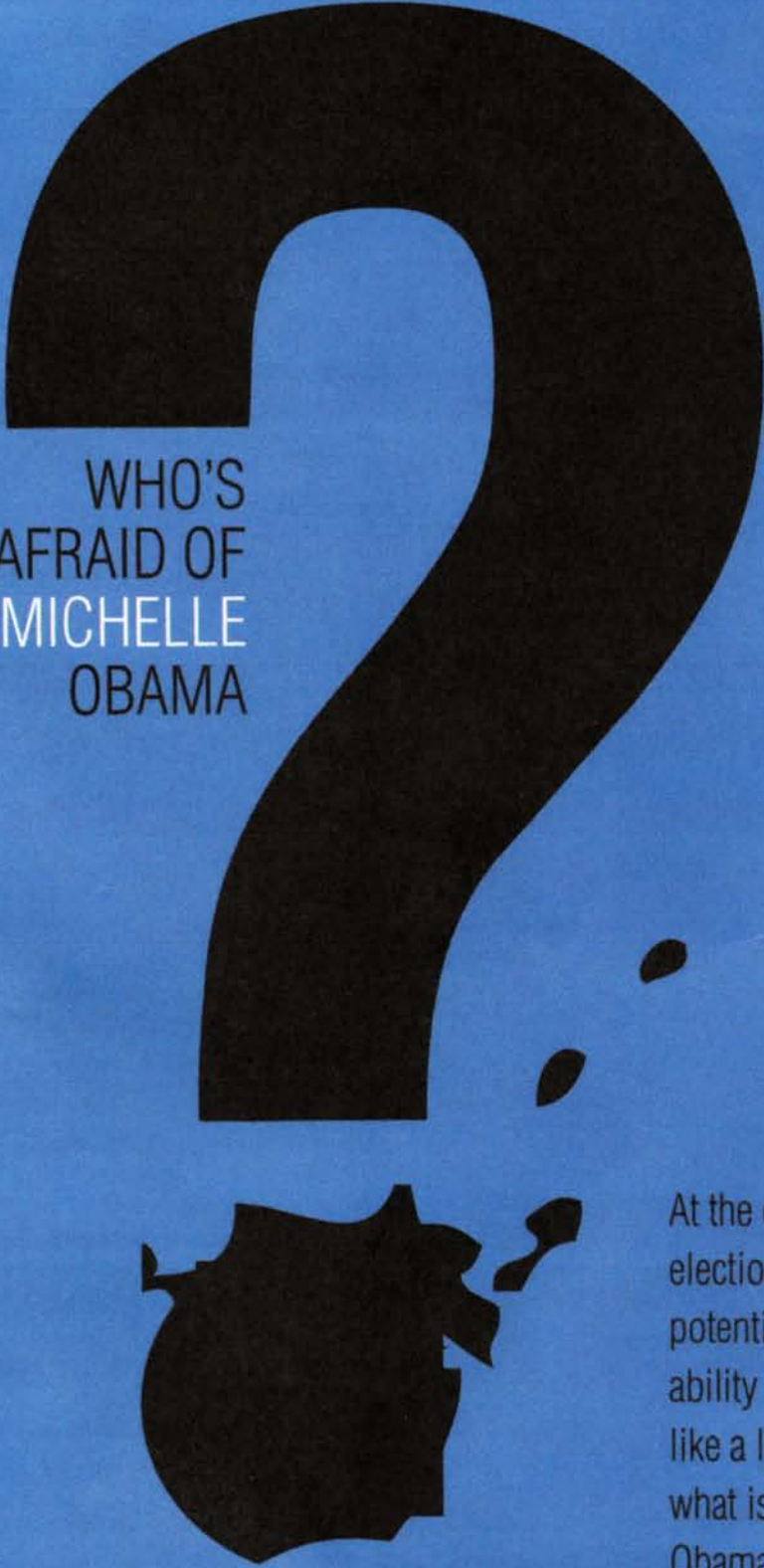
Sarah Silverman
troublemaker

Margaret Cho
reality-show rebel

Kristen Schaal
conchords' superfan

 LEARN HOW TO CAN YOUR OWN JAM AND MAKE YOUR OWN CHEESE; GIRLY BIKE RIDES; UGLY BETTY'S FREDDY RODRIGUEZ; GUITAR GODDESS MARNIE STERN; SRI LANKAN TRAVEL TIPS; JULIANA HATFIELD; AND MUCH MORE





WHO'S
AFRAID OF
MICHELLE
OBAMA

At the center of this election lives a polarizing potential first lady with the ability to draw criticism like a lightning rod. But what is it about Michelle Obama that gets people so riled up? BY K. EMILY BOND
ILLUSTRATION BY LOUISA BERTMAN



ARTIST'S SIGNATURE



IT WAS THE joke that thudded around the world. The now-infamous July 21st cover of *The New Yorker* depicted an illustration of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama dressed as a Muslim extremist in the Oval Office, “terrorist-fist-jabbing” his wife, Michelle. While most of his campaign’s ire over the cover focused on the cartoonist’s depiction of Barack, arguably the more interesting aspect of the drawing was the depiction of Michelle: Afro-ed, dressed in military fatigues, and carrying an AK-47. The artist Barry Blitt had originally drawn Michelle in a burqa, but the powers-that-be at *The New Yorker* suggested, according to Blitt, “a more suitably paranoid vision of her, as an Angela Davis-type figure.” It wasn’t the first time that the fear surrounding Michelle Obama had been satirized in the press—two months prior, the liberal *Daily Kos* Web site ran an illustration of her strung from a tree, surrounded by white-robed Ku Klux Klan members holding a branding iron that read “Uppity Liberal.” And those were the depictions from supposedly friendly media; elsewhere, without a trace of jokiness, she’s been called Obama’s “baby mama” (Fox News), his “bitter half” (conservative columnist Michelle Malkin), an “angry black woman” (commentator Cal Thomas), and countless other racist and sexist names. All of which raise the question: why is everyone so afraid of Michelle Obama?

Of course, we’re long accustomed to seeing potential first ladies skewered in the press. The critics who lambasted Michelle Obama for being a strong black woman held Hillary Clinton in similar contempt in 1992, calling her “a dowdy feminazi” at the GOP Convention and the “Lady Macbeth of Little Rock” in *The American Spectator*. Teresa Heinz Kerry was ripped apart in 2004 for being too foreign and saying things like “I don’t give a shit” in *Elle* magazine, which led to her monikers “the ungaggable Teresa Heinz” in *The Washington Post* and “Salty Tongue” in the *New York Post*. Like her predecessors, Michelle is no shrinking violet, which has earned her descriptors ranging from “outspoken” and “strong-willed” to “sarcastic” and “angry.” The added racial dimension, however, has upped the ante in a way that we have not quite seen before. Perhaps by

virtue of his exotic ethnicity as a mixed-race, fair-skinned, Kenyan-American man, Barack Obama has largely been able to transcend the race question. But his wife, an African-American woman from the South Side of Chicago, has not. And the attacks on her speak volumes about this country’s stunted ability to deal with race beyond calling upon stereotypes, particularly when it comes to black women. Blogger Gina McCauley of *WhatAboutOurDaughters.com*, a site dedicated to combating negative depictions of African-American women in media and pop culture, points out, “This isn’t just about Michelle. Instead, it is a unique opportunity to have a conversation we wouldn’t otherwise be able to have.”

By now Michelle’s biography is familiar to many. She grew up in a working-class Chicago family. In 1981, she left for Princeton, where she was one of only 94 black freshmen in a class of more than 1,100 students. Her white roommate freaked out because she was black. She went on to write her senior thesis about black alienation in elitist white institutions before moving on to Harvard Law. After graduating in 1988, she practiced at a corporate law firm where she met Barack, who was her underling. He flirted anyway. They began dating, eventually got married, and had two daughters, Malia and Sasha. All told, Michelle is five feet and eleven inches of modernity—an Ivy-league-educated working mother and accomplished career woman in her own right.

And yet, from her reception in the media you would think she was a pariah. In April, the *National Review* put her on the cover and dubbed her “Mrs. Grievance” for speaking openly about some of the more negative realities of the American experience. A month later they went after her again, this time naming her “America’s Unhappiest Millionaire” for touting what they called her “gospel of misery.” Then in mid-May, pro-Clinton blogger Larry Johnson started circulating the rumor that there was a tape of Michelle bemoaning “whitey” from the pulpit of Jeremiah Wright’s church. Rush Limbaugh was the first to take the bait and mention it on record at the end of the month, and by mid-summer, everyone was either talking about it or Googling it. While Michelle herself never denied the rumors, the Obama campaign responded with a statement on the “Stop the

Smears” section of its Web site, stating, “No such tape exists. Michelle Obama has not spoken from the pulpit at Trinity and has not used that word.” Limbaugh defended his role in spreading the lie, saying, “I mean, I’m just reporting what’s out there. I’m reporting on a rumor that is out there,” forgetting that it’s his job to report and comment on facts, generally speaking.

“A lot of what’s been reported on as news in this campaign, like this alleged speech about whitey, originated as smears,” says Isabel Macdonald, communications director of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a media watch organization. “I think that has been picked up because it’s in line with the stereotypes that are circulating already through the media.” What started as rumor, then, was readily accepted as truth, indicative of our collective willingness to lean on stereotypes as a means of shaping popular opinion.

While this all seems to be happening to an exceptional woman in a unique position at an extraordinary time, the rumors, slurs, and general paranoia Michelle Obama has weathered are actually a reflection of what black women routinely face in the workplace and in society at large. According to the Department of Education, black women account for 67 percent of all bachelor’s degrees, 71 percent of all master’s degrees, and 65 percent of all doctoral degrees awarded to black students. The concept of success among black women like Michelle and her peers, however, is still perceived as somehow extraordinary or even abnormal. “She is like so many of us,” says McCauley. “What’s happening to her publicly, black women face privately in their own lives each and every day.”

Princeton University political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell, currently at work on her second book, *For Colored Girls Who’ve Considered Politics When Being Strong Wasn’t Enough*, says that Michelle Obama, like many women of color, has been felled by a deeply entrenched and pervasive triumvirate, wherein black women are recognizable in American culture only if they are cast as the hypersexualized Jezebel, the Mammy figure (the “black best friend” role popularized in cinema and TV sitcoms), or the ABW (angry black woman). By her argument, Michelle has spent much of the election cycle circumnavigating all three. When Fox ran the “Baby

Mama" banner, which carries the connotation of a mother and father who've never been married, she became the Jezebel. Her softer and gentler appearance on *The View* described as her "reintroduction" to the American public in *The New York Times*, sought to transform her into everybody's best friend, thus casting her as Mammy for a day. And her early pronouncements on issues as varied as race relations and work-life balance made her the ABW, a stereotype that has trailed her incessantly and is all too familiar among her peers.

Like many adult African-American women, Obama is part of the so-called Claire Huxtable Generation, made up of successful women of color who came of age in the era of *The Cosby Show*. "Part of why that show worked so well is that it tried very hard not to deal with race," says Harris-Lacewell, who recalls an episode when Rudy came home from school crying that a classmate called her a name. For a moment, Cliff and Claire brace themselves but soon learn it was a silly chiding that was not racially motivated. "Most middle-class blacks don't spend every minute thinking about blackness but are aware that at any moment, it might get called back into their consciousness. For us, watching it happen to Michelle is instructive, familiar, and painful."

Case in point: Sophia A. Nelson, a corporate attorney and president of iask, Inc., an organization for African-American professional women, wrote a *Washington Post* op-ed in the

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wake of Michelle's negative coverage. In the piece, she mentions that when she asked a group of professional African-American women how they're viewed in the public sphere, they responded with words like, "loud," "angry," "intimidating," "mean," "opinionated," "aggressive," and "hard"—the same set of words and perceptions that have plagued Obama. In their private lives, all these women said they were quite the opposite. "The perception is we shouldn't speak at all, and if we do it's in anger," says McCauley, "like these are the only two [reactions] African-American women are allowed to have." This stereotype is reflected in policy and across popular culture, and causes society as a whole to miss a valid and important point. "We forget that there might be significant social and political reasons why black women might be angry," says Harris-Lacewell. "In fact, we might not be as angry as we ought to be."

Michelle hinted at that reality in a pre-Super Tuesday interview with MSNBC's Mika Brzezinski. When told that her husband was still trailing Hillary 46 percent to 37 percent among African-American voters, she responded, "What we're dealing with in the black community is the natural fear of possibility. The stuff that we see in these polls has played out my whole life, and I've always been told by someone that I'm not ready, that I can't do something, that my scores weren't high enough." It was that sort of honesty that put people on notice, particularly after she declared at a rally in Wisconsin, "For the first time in my adult life, I'm really proud of my country." Most Americans understood the crux of that comment, including Laura Bush, who swiftly came to her defense, telling ABC News, "I think she probably meant 'I'm more proud.'" Nevertheless, says Isabel Macdonald of FAIR, "the attention paid to that comment is disproportionate and reveals an implicit racial anxiety."

Race, of course, is not the only factor in the negative coverage of Michelle. Sexism plays an obvious role as well; any bright, assertive woman would be doing badly in the media right now. Compare the coverage of Michelle with that of her rival, Cindy McCain. *The Washington Post* said McCain "looks perfect for the part" of a candidate's wife in a July profile, going to great lengths to interview sources that could attest to her "strong" character. One friend invokes that word to describe how McCain hid her prescription-drug addiction from

her husband, and Cindy herself seems absorbed in maintaining that facade, even when she's in the throes of a medical emergency. Recounting a stroke that she'd suffered in 2004 while lunching with friends, she told Larry King that her first instinct was to drive away: "I was mainly more concerned about being caught in public without my full faculties," she said. If going to such lengths to hide one's problems is considered strong, is it any wonder that Michelle Obama comes off as a bit stronger?

Of course, Obama is not the only assertive woman to have wound her way through this election cycle: Hillary Clinton has been just as maligned. Drawing a comparison between the two women has obvious limitations—namely, because one was running for office while the other is not. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the strange position Obama was caught in during the battle royale that was waged during the primaries, a divisive one wherein it was black men and white women vs. the patriarchy, with both vying for mutually exclusive titles. It was like a true-to-life reenactment of the fallout between blacks and feminists during the suffrage movement. When black men were granted the right to vote before women, it drew a deep line of resentment between the two groups, and in its wake the subsequent feminist movement left black women by the wayside clinging—in political, economic, and social terms—to the third rung of the equal-rights ladder. As a result, many black feminists have long felt out of touch with the women's movement.

So here we are, in 2008, when it looks like we may have a black male president before a female one. And while that's understandably disappointing to many women, we're also faced with an unprecedented opportunity to redress the past and rally behind a feminist cause in Michelle. Her personal politics (along with those of most black women) are clearly aligned with those of her white feminist counterparts. She often speaks about the challenge of maintaining work-life balance, and when she has spoken openly about policy, she has done so to champion the rights of working mothers and the need to implement better legislation to protect their interests. So the next time she has people running scared, the onus is on all women to stand up and say, We're not afraid of Michelle Obama, and why would we be? She's one of us. ■