



UNIVERSITÀ  
DEGLI STUDI  
DI PADOVA

**Università degli Studi di Padova**

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

**Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in  
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione Culturale (LTLLM)  
Classe LT-12**

Tesi di Laurea

*"Am I good enough? Yes, I am": Michelle  
Obama's Autobiographies and the Making  
of a Political and Cultural Symbol*

Relatrice  
Prof. Renata Morresi

Laureanda  
Margherita Filipuzzi  
n° matr. 2006491 / LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2022 / 2023

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Afro-American Autobiography</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1.1 The Afro-American Experience in the New World .....	5
1.2 Slave Narratives: - A New Literary Genre.....	9
1.3 Black Women Activists and Writers.....	10
1.3.1 Harriet Jacobs - Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself.....	12
1.3.3 The Beginning of a New Generation up to Michelle Obama.....	16
<b>2. “Becoming” Michelle Obama</b> .....	<b>19</b>
2.1 Early Life and Racial Identity .....	19
2.1.1 South Shore Chicago.....	20
2.1.2 Racism at Princeton.....	21
2.2 Becoming a Mother – Infertility difficulties .....	23
2.3 First election – Michelle Obama as a Lawyer, Political Figure, First Lady, Mother and Wife .....	24
2.3.1 Blackness in the New Millennium .....	30
<b>3. Analysis of The Light We Carry: Michelle Obama and Her Public Persona</b> .....	<b>33</b>
3.1 The beginning of the 2019 Global Pandemic and the Murder of George Floyd...34	
3.1.2 Trump Administration and the Assault on the U.S. Capitol - Political violence and criminal justice.....	37
3.2 Michelle Obama as a Public Figure .....	39
3.2.1 The Fashion Icon.....	40
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>43</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>45</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>53</b>
<b>Italian Summary</b> .....	<b>55</b>

## **Introduction**

Michelle Obama and her autobiographies will be the center of my thesis. She is one of the most inspiring Afro-American women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Together with her husband, Barack Obama, she represents a new beginning for American society, which witnessed the election of a black president for the first time in 2008.

At the turn of the century people have begun to consider the notion of a national unit without any racial hierarchies and imbalances. However, despite the watershed event of a black presidency, recent incidents of police violence show that there is still a long way to go.

In order to understand the history of Afro-American people in US society over the centuries I will describe in the first chapter some of the most crucial historical events to comprehend the African American experience, especially through the lens of major biographies. Black people in the US have suffered centuries of enslavement, and even after emancipation black Americans have had to live in a society where racism has affected the lives of, individuals, families, communities. Also, at stake is the future of a nation that has always been embedded in a fluid ethnocultural system and has turned racial discrimination into a system.

I will focus on slavery as a key point that marked the start of a new era, in which thousands of enslaved Africans contributed to the founding and survival of colonies in the Americas, or better the so-called "New World". "New World" refers to a world that was colonized by the Europeans, although it was not new at all to the populations that already existed there and developed their own customs and cultures.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries people were abducted from Africa, sold into slavery in America and exploited to work in the cultivation of crops, like cotton and tobacco, which were essential to the industrial revolution and to the creation of European wealth.

Both African and indigenous people have witnessed their homelands, their dignity, and, their ancestry destroyed. From this sense of incompleteness, black writers begin to use biographies as a tool to assert oneself, a way to raise consciousness, a genre useful to disseminate knowledge. Their purpose was to speak out about their existence, in a country that has always hushed them and left them in the shadows of society.

During the years black women have empowered themselves and offered a series of visions of citizenship, civil rights and democracy. This thesis, in fact, aims to examine how black women leaders have overturned the white and male centered narratives. I will devote my attention to the works and the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth, trying to understand how these autobiographers and their texts are significant both on historical and literary grounds.

After describing the historical context, I will consider the role of Michelle Obama in American society. I will use her figure to explain her ability to create an ideal of unit and inclusion in a country where togetherness and integration were not on the agenda. Her impact on US society and around the world was and still is immense. Throughout reading her words I will focus on the society that she and her husband have tried to make more inclusive. Michelle Obama in her books does not want to criticize politics or people; instead, she merely wants to share her life experience from the perspective of a woman who in a short period of time became the first black First Lady of the United States. *Becoming* is an autobiography written by Michelle Obama, in which she describes the early stages of her life, her studies at Princeton University and Harvard Law School, the elections of her husband, and the years of presidency.

The key point of this autobiography is trying to describe her normal life based on her feelings as a woman; in a rich web of relationships. She grew up with the family in a bungalow on Chicago's South Side, in a community in which more than half of the population was black. She lived with her family, her mother, her brother, and her father. She was a little girl in a black community with her father suffering from sclerosis. She explains how difficult and frustrating was being a mother, due to different problems of infertility, and build a career as a lawyer in a male-dominated world.

In the third chapter I will analyse *The Light We Carry*, Obama's second autobiography, written in 2020. Fourteen years after the first election of Barack Obama: How did the First Lady create a strong identity, an inspiring image and a powerful public figure? Starting from these questions I will analyze her transformation over the years, contextualizing the social and political reality. This autobiography explores her life in the latest years but also examines different aspects and events that changed US history.

In order to give a clear understanding of what marked her life and the life of black people in the States, I will then analyse how the election of Donald Trump was and still is a

turning point for the US. With the famous slogan “Make America Great Again”, Trump pushed for the return of white suprematism and the oppression of racial and, ethnic minorities, and tried to dismantle the realization of the post-ethnic society pursued by the Obama’s administration. According to what Michelle Obama writes in *The Light We Carry*, the consequences of this violent politics have caused two crucial episodes: the death of George Floyd and the assault on the U.S. Capital. In addition, all of that was surrounded by a global pandemic which changed priorities and ways of life all over the planet. This work aims to understand how black women autobiographies help us to understand the experience of black people in the US, along with the values connected to blackness. In particular, I want to focus on the crucial role of Michelle Obama and on her vision of US society.

## **1. Afro-American Autobiography**

### **1.1 The Afro-American Experience in the New World**

I will analyze the history of black people and how they became part of American society. Slavery is an integral part of Afro American history, and before exploring all the details about it, it’s important to acknowledge the terrible suffering and injustice experienced by slaves and their descendants.

1492 is a date that traditionally combines the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern age in Europe, the year of the so-called ‘discovery’ of the New World thanks to Cristoforo Colombo, who thought that he had found a different way to reach ‘the Indies’, but instead had arrived in a continent unknown to the Europeans. As a result of this event, social, cultural, and economic transformations occurred, altering the course of global history.

In North America, in 1606, King James I of England granted the Virginia Company an authorization to establish a colony: three ships left London, and after five months, on May 13, 1607, they sailed up the Chesapeake Bay into a river, and named their fort Jamestown. It was the first successful settlement in North America, and it became the capital of Virginia state for the next 100 years. At Jamestown, the English settlers learned important lessons about how to sustain a colony in America (Horning, Kelso, Lucchetti, Cotter

1998, 56-60). After seeing that the colony's economic prospects were improving, new workers were necessary on the expanding number of plantations along the James River. By 1621, 50 ships had brought about 3,750 settlers to Virginia. These settlers included poor people from London and a small number of Puritans who established plantations on the south side of the James River.

On August 1619, the first enslaved people from Africa arrived near Point Comfort, in Virginia, traveling a circuitous route: they were first captured by the Portuguese during their campaigns in Angola in 1618–1619 (Horn, 2011, 27-18) and then seized by two English privateer ships, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*.

The Portuguese and the Spanish were the first to inaugurate the slave trade, followed by the French and the English. This new commerce was the result of several transformations and developments that the western area was experiencing: the emergence of capitalism, the price revolution, agricultural changes, the expansion of global markets and predatory approach developed by the Europeans.

The first slave trade was made by King Ferdinando of Spain, who sent 250 enslaved Africans to Potosí in Bolivia, where more labor force was required than the indigenous. Until the 1860s, according to estimates from the *Slave Voyages*<sup>1</sup>, around 8.5 million slaves have been transported in the New World. The development of the economy was possible due to the triangular trade: textiles, metal wares, spirits, beads, guns, and other items were shipped out from Europe, buying slaves to be sold in America, and paying for gold, ivory, gum, and pepper to be sold in Europe (Rawley, Behrendt 2005, 9-19).

In 1659-60, the first British colony to establish slavery was Massachusetts, and the rules developed there eventually spread to the other colonies; it was the first step to consider enslaved people a thing, a property.

The widespread and extensive slave labor extended from the whole southern region of the United States to the Gulf of Mexico: Tennessee, Georgia, North and South Carolina. Alabama, Virginia, and Mississippi were the states with the highest number of slave's trade. People were sold in the appropriate fairs called "slave marts". During the sale the

---

<sup>1</sup> *Slave Voyages* is databases on the Trans-Atlantic and Intra-American slave trade, it's the result of decades of study by academics who used information from archives and libraries all around the Atlantic region. See the webpage: <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>.

merchants specified 'black slaves' because at the time there were also white slaves. People imprisoned for debt or theft or who did not have enough money to buy the ship tickets from London became servants for approximately 5 or 10 years (Dello Strolago 1973, 248-249).

After the American Revolution, Americans started to think about the status of enslaved people. According to the Declaration of Independence, everyone was "created equal" and had the "rights" to "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Connecticut abolished slavery right away after the Revolution. People began to consider that slavery was morally wrong; nevertheless, most Southern whites became more and more reliant on slavery and firmly believed in its necessity and virtue. At the end of July 1776, the Continental Congress debated how to distribute taxes to fund the new government, just a few weeks after adopting the Declaration of Independence. According to its population, each state was supposed to submit taxes to the federal government, the key topic of discussion was whether to include slaves as well as free individuals. People from the north and south began to disagree and divide about the subject of human slavery. The Southerners won the argument: slaves were never included in the allocation of taxes under the Articles of Confederation, therefore they were considered to be "property."

In 1787 state delegates came to an agreement known as the *Three-Fifths Compromise*, in order to estimate a state's overall population for legislative representation and taxation, it was determined that three out of every five slaves were counted (Harvard College, 2020). The Declaration had a great moral impact, it would contribute to the abolition of slavery in the North. But other slaveowners, as well as the Declaration's principal author Thomas Jefferson, certainly did not intend these claims about equality and liberty to interfere with their right to own slaves.

The slave trade provision in the article I of the Constitution stated slaves were primarily classified as "people," but they were also described as "property." On this issue, the slave trade provision is internally inconsistent. The phrase refers to both "importation" of persons, which implies that they are property, and "migration," which involves people. The final sentence of the provision permits "a Tax or duty on such Importation"; this was unmistakably the language of "property," but the Constitution also permitted taxes up to and including "ten dollars for each Person" to make it more complicated. The paradoxical

idea of slaves as both persons and property was essentially condensed into this paragraph. In the same way, it included the notion that states, not the federal government, determined who or what qualified as a citizen, therefore, during most of the nineteenth century, all the decisions concerning slaves were made on a "local option". Despite strong opposition, the Constitution was rapidly passed, and many people lamented the sacrifices made regarding slavery. A great number of people criticized the absence of a Bill of Rights; therefore, being ratified in 1791, a set of amendments suggested by Congress in 1789 came to be known as the Bill of Rights. According to the Fifth Amendment, no one may "be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law" nor could "private property be taken for public use without just compensation." (Finkelman 2012, 115-120). In 1808 the American Congress abolished the slave trade, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1808, it was impossible to bring foreigners with the intention of using them as a slaves, people who would participate in the illegal trade would be fined \$10,000 (Bourne 2008, 1-5). The division between the north and south was firmly established due to the different approaches to slavery, but the former was also developing, instead the latter was not evolving as quickly as the north. After the election in 1860 of Abraham Lincoln as president of the United States, the North and South's rivalry grew more intense, and a civil war began in 1861 and lasted until 1865 (Vorenberg 2001, 197-198). During the civil war, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, on January 1, 1863, which stated "that all persons held as slaves" in the rebelling states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Emancipation was the first stage in the process by which enslaved African Americans became legal citizens. Later, three amendments were incorporated into the Constitution: the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup>. Since the Bill of Rights, the Fourteenth Amendment, passed by the Senate in June 1866, has been the most significant constitutional amendment in American history. The first section, in fact, stated that all people born or naturalized in the United States (apart from 'Indians'), are both national and state citizens, and served as the document's core. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment was approved by the Congress in February 1869. It made voting accessible to African American men. This was just the beginning of new era of integration.



## 1.2 Slave Narratives: - A New Literary Genre

The slave narrative first appeared in the context of political and theological movements that helped the formation of new narratives throughout the 1770s and 1780s. People were encouraged to publicize the narrative thanks to newly formed political organizations, such as the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (1775–1784). These political organizations had an impact on how the genre portrayed the physical and spiritual journey of the black protagonist.

It seems that slave narratives were popular genres on both sides of the Atlantic, in fact, the narratives by Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, John Marrant, and Olaudah Equiano produced several editions and were published in London, Dublin, Edinburgh, and occasionally in America (Gould 2007, 2-21). The slave narratives constituted an important part of a developing, capitalist market, due to the increase of abolitionist sentiment, in fact, abolitionist societies sometimes assumed the role of publishers, the AASS (American Anti-Slavery Society) offered funds for the publication of the first of Douglass's autobiographies (Heglar 2001, 7-10).

*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* has served as the starting point for many studies of American literature, and is one of the best examples of African American storytelling in its entirety. Douglass wrote three autobiographies, and he became an American icon. He wants to make readers reject slavery and support the abolitionist cause. He starts his story by mentioning his unknown date of birth and that he ignored his father's identity. He describes the violence and cruelty of his master and other slaveholders' while outlining the inhumanity of slavery.

Ex-slaves' autobiographies were a sort of statement to manifest their freedom, and also a tool to remember the injustice of slavery.

Slave narratives were one of the first forms of written self-expression for African Americans, and they were occasionally produced illegally and in secret, since slaves were also prohibited access to literacy and education, in addition to the speaking of languages of the African motherland (Josipovic, Vujeva 2021). The slave narrative serves as a historical record that traces the development of white supremacy from enslavement in the eighteenth century to segregation and racial exclusion in the early twentieth century. These stories give voice to generations of black people who still managed to leave the

South and the country a literary legacy of immeasurable collective value (Stauffer 2007, 201-203).

The term "slave narrative" refers to a wide range of works that make up an extensive and homogeneous genre. It can be divided into three main historical phases: the British colonial and early national periods, the antebellum years between 1830 and 1861, and the works published after the Civil War.

The most popular narratives in the antebellum period were published during the fervor of the abolitionist debate, when the North and the South stood for diametrically opposed positions. This division is reflected in the structures of many of these works' narratives. Writers such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs emphasized how African Americans managed to survive in slavery by finding creative ways to fight back against oppression, sometimes silently resisting it, and occasionally escaping in search of better opportunities in the North, the Midwest, Canada, or Europe (Andrews 2001).

The situation was different for African American women, due to their dual status as members of two oppressed groups: African Americans and women, two elements that influenced African American female histories (Gwendolyn 1991, 425). Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth are two of the more recognizable female Afro American writers who that have fought for their rights and about which the following paragraphs will speak.

### **1.3 Black Women Activists and Writers**

Black men have always dominated the field of black writing in the United States. Male authors have represented male protagonists and heroes throughout history, and they are known as the fathers of African American literature.

The deep diversity of black female experience has largely passed unnoticed. Despite being involved in the growth of Afro-American writing from the beginning, no works by black women had been recognized as significant contributions to the heritage of black literature until recently (Calvin 2017, 723).

In order for black women to be recognized as writers, they had to face the political and economic aspects of their slavery. They needed to clarify a discourse of black womanhood to address the exclusion of black women from the idea of true femininity itself, trying to protect their bodies from being constantly connected to illegal sexuality.

In male slave narratives, mothers, sisters, and daughters are typically portrayed as the victims of their severe beatings or sexual assaults, the whipping of Douglass's aunt Hester constitutes a well-known example (Barrett 1995, 431). The victim was described as a figure of oppression and was associated with the emasculation of the male slave.

In opposition, black women writers portrayed themselves as women who could make their own decisions regarding their own lives, setting their own ideals into practice, they were usually emphasized for their active roles as historical players rather than passive subjects (Garby 1987, 34-36).

In this case, women described themselves as holders of self-authorization; for instance, in Jacobs' story, the protagonist hides in a garret on the roof of her grandmother's home to avoid her master's punishment (Barriet 1995, 434).

Black women's autobiographical literature in the 19th century focused on a wide range of genres: diaries, memoirs, slave narratives, and memories of missionaries (Braxton 1929, 39).

Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, and Mary Church Terrell are some names of black women, historical figures who during the 19<sup>th</sup> century focused on political participation, campaigned for civil rights, and created awareness about racial identity and sexual orientation (Bow, Brah, Goeman, Harriford, Keating, Yi-Chun, Pérez, 1978).

In 1773 Phyllis Wheatley was the first African American woman to publish a book of poetry, in 1841, Ann Plato published the first book of essays by an African American woman, and Harriet E. Wilson was the first black woman to publish a novel in the United States in 1859 (Gates 1991, XVII).

Harriet Tubman was the first woman to lead a group of U.S. soldiers during the Civil War. In South Carolina she helped the sick, but also soldiers and “contrabands” who were former slaves who eventually escaped their owner or had been forced to fight (Chism 2005, 47).

Black women writers weren't always able to express themselves openly.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, all women were subjected to censorship in America. In conformity with social and theological beliefs, women were expected to be silent at church and other public places where there were other genders present.

Ironically, it was an African American woman who broke down these barriers first. An abolitionist group of men and women was organized by the African American Female Intelligence Society of Boston in October 1832, in which Maria Stewart was the first free African American woman to deliver a public speech (Gwendolyn 1991, 425-426).

According to Barnett, black activists were used to develop plans, strategies and organize resources and money. Specifically, Afro American women had to deal with a region historically marked by difficulty legitimizing violence, sexual and labor abuse.

Black women were essential to the civil rights movements thanks to their personal and political experiences (Barnet 1993, 163-165).

### **1.3.1 Harriet Jacobs - Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself**

*My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each.*

Harriet Jacobs

Harriet Jacobs is one of the most popular black female writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among antebellum women authors, Jacobs is the only one to have produced a book-length secular autobiography.

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs describes her life during slavery, her final escape, and her fight for her identity.

The first publication of the book did not have the same result and effect as Frederic Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).

Her work, as well as the other black women writers', had to face the consequences of the two elements I mentioned before: being black and being a woman. The book was either not understood or received tepidly. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were still hostilities: the book was considered unauthentic and unusual.

A century and a quarter later the autobiography received the first academic treatment by Jean Fagan Yellin. Now, Jacobs' autobiography appears on educational courses in American literature and history, feminist studies and African studies in the United States and elsewhere (Zafar 1996, 4-6).

The antebellum slave narratives written by men featured a protagonist best described as a heroic male fugitive. The typical slave narrator secretly plotted his escape, running away

to the north for freedom. The narrative's iconic style provided representations of the cruelty and immorality that characterized slavery. Jacobs made enormous changes in the slave narrative genre, providing the audience not with a heroic fight and a bold escape but with an unusual tale of survival: the protagonist spends the first few years of her escape hiding in locations given by relatives and friends, since she does not have the heart to leave her loved ones behind. She aspires to build a new life for herself and her kids.

Jacobs assumed the name of Linda Brent in order to protect her identity from the public, though, usually, the author's name was known (Braxton, 1989, 27).

Antebellum slave memories frequently illustrated the cruel treatment of slaves, but her unique personal experience of peer protection and determination sets hers apart. In fact, she has frequently been charged with exaggerating some aspects of her life in order to achieve a certain artistic effect or to promote her reputation (Smith Foster 1996, 66-67).

In 1813, she was born in North Carolina. After her mother passed away in 1819, Jacobs was taken to the home of Margaret Horniblow, where she was tutored in reading and writing. However, when Miss Horniblow left Harriet to her granddaughter, whose father repeatedly tried to use violence with her, he refused to allow her to marry Samuel Sawyer, with whom she had two children. After years of suffering, she managed to escape, but her children could not join her. He spent seven years hiding at his grandmother's house, in a space under the roof. She could see her children through a little hole in the roof.

In 1842, Harriet Jacobs arrived in New York City, where she worked as a nurse for the family of abolitionist Nathaniel Parker Willis. In the following years, he traveled between New York and Boston, reuniting with his children. During this time, she became active in a circle of anti-slavery feminists, where she was encouraged to write the story of her life (Jacobs 1681).

Unlike other antislavery authors, she did not minimize the occurrence of rape and seduction. In fact, she used to describe the sexual episodes, therefore, she is the first example of a dangerous slave woman because for the first time she told her story (Smith Foster 1996, 61).

Jacobs develops a first-person narrative through Linda Brent, that is important in its presentation of the subject of sexual abuse and the oppression of slave women.

The autobiography has five chapters that specifically address the sexual oppression that slave women experienced: “The Trials of Girlhood”, “The Jealous Mistress”, “The Lover”, “A Perilous Passage in a Slave Girl’s Life”, and “A New Tie to Life”.

Jacobs understands the fugitive's desire for freedom and education, but she manages to balance her heroic ideals with her sexual vulnerability (Braxton 1989, 29).

The autobiography's narrative connects the psychological and emotional strength of Jacobs and the two children's welfare: being a mother opens the door to self-awareness.

### 1.3.2 Sojourner Truth

*I am a woman's rights.*

Sojourner Truth

Feminist, abolitionist, a social and public speaker: Isabella Baumfree was born into a slave family in 1797 and later adopted the name Sojourner Truth in 1843.

Her famous speech *Ar'n't I a Woman?* was delivered at the Ohio Woman Rights Convention after being published in 1851 in the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, an abolitionist newspaper published from 1845 to 1861 (Gates 1991, XXXIV).

Currently, it is a remarkable achievement and probably the text that is most frequently assigned in American social history.

During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, for black women historians and scholars, Truth’s speech was crucial for the acceptance and legitimation of Afro-American women (Hine 2007, 13-14). Truth was a religious woman, she felt inspired by God: “The Lord had made me a sign unto this nation an’I go round a testifyin’, an’ showin’ on ‘em their sins agin my people. The spirit calls me there and I must go,” she declared.

There are two principal written versions of the speech; the most popular is not the original version of Truth. In fact, it was written by a white abolitionist, Frances Dana Barker Gage, 12 years later and published in 1863 in *The New York Independent*. The speech has been rewritten with Truth’s permission, but actually Gage changed the register and the words to that of a stereotypical southern slave (Podel 2007).

As I mentioned before Baumfree called herself Sojourner Truth in order to send a message: her purpose in life was to travel and testify, exposing the "truth" to the people.

She belongs to the category of people who couldn't write their histories personally, in fact, her oral life story was written by Oliver Gilbert, which generates questions about the book's authenticity. This genre is called “dictated autobiography”: the narrator utilizes the information of the storyteller by describing events in a third-person narrative and adding editorial ideas and opinions to the story (Sanders 1994, 114). Her autobiography was published in April 1850, she was just over fifty years old when she started the project of her autobiography with Gilbert; and she was not a recent ex-slave, she had been a free woman for almost 25 years, during which she had the opportunity to become a public figure. She had already gained notoriety.

She decided to establish herself in Northampton, Massachusetts, where there was a large community of well-educated abolitionists. Probably William Lloyd Garrison, journalist and abolitionist, known for being the director of the radical abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* and one of the founders of the American Antislavery Society, suggested a Connecticut woman friend, Oliver Gilbert, one of the residents at the Northampton Association, as the writer of her book.

A large number of scholars have criticized Olive Gilbert for her editing contributions in Truth's speech, because they believe she was incapable of respecting her moral and spiritual sensibilities, due to different perspectives on slavery, motherhood and religion habits.

In some parts of the text, the reader can be “closer” to hearing Truth's own voice, for example, thanks to first-person dialogue and some direct quotations.

Sometimes white abolitionists wanted slaves to expose their cruelties more repugnantly in order to outrage people, but Truth refused to do so.

In the first half of the speech, which describes the experience of slavery as a young girl and woman, Truth is not represented as a victimized heroine who had survived slavery and established herself into respectable womanhood, but as a free mother who chose to be guided by a religious truth over economic egoism (Humez 1996, 30-43).

Each generation of black female writers had possibilities to exceed the ones that preceded them, Truth created a new kind of fiction since she never had access to literacy's resources and could never tell her full story by herself. Yet, Truth started a tradition of black women writers.

### **1.3.3 The Beginning of a New Generation up to Michelle Obama**

In the last century, the history of the United States has been marked by political movements that began to fight for the rights of black citizens and by facts that deeply changed the consciousness of the Black community.

A watershed moment was in April 1963, when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy in April 1963, asked the Congress the emanation of the Civil Rights Act with laws guaranteeing black citizens equal access to public and private services and facilities (Stern 1989, 802).

On August 28, 1963, in Washington, D.C., the March on Washington took place, during which Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous speech "I Have a Dream" (Alvarez 1988, 337). King was a minister, a speaker, and a famous civil rights leader. In the speech, he used powerful metaphors to remind the audience of the cruelty of slavery. Dr. King claimed that black people were still not free and focused on the isolation and exclusion of black communities. He specified that immediate action was required; injustices were no longer tolerable. He cites the Emancipation Proclamation, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to emphasize the constant exclusion from legal justice, political and civil rights (Washington 1993, 176-17).

Following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and President Kennedy, the black community feared the possibility that the path to equality would get more difficult, that there would be increasing retaliations in white institutions, and the entire fight against discrimination would be blocked.

The late 1960s' socio-political climate and social movements gave birth to an uncommon expansion of Black feminist consciousness. Black feminists created organizations to raise their voices. Organizations such as the National Black Feminist Organization (1973-75), the Combahee River Collective (1975-80) and the National Alliance of Black Feminists (1976-80) were formed.

By 1980, all the organizations were in decline due to increasing conservative opposition, a lack of resources, and ideological disagreements.





*Figure 1 - At a 1979 memorial for murdered women of color, members of the Combahee River Collective marched down Massachusetts Avenue in Boston (from The New Yorker).*

Black feminists were different from other activists, they did the impossible in order to serve as full-time unpaid staff members in their organizations, which were really rooted in human rights movements organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). These organizations played a crucial role to demonstrate the leadership of Black women (Springer 2001, 156-158).

The creation of spaces for discussion and building for the fight against black discrimination was necessary to increase the possibility of black women in politics. The lack of female struggle was marked by the invisibility of race issues in feminist movements, this fact has motivated black women to consider new conceptual frameworks produced by their social environment. In more recent years, Kimberle Crenshaw, an American lawyer and activist, introduced the concept of intersectionality. According to Crenshaw, race, gender, and other categories are frequently discussed in mainstream liberal discourse, which increases the marginalization of those who did not belong to the hegemony, and also raises tensions among groups. Crenshaw claims that intersectionality is not a theory of identity, but an approach to consider discrimination: it's necessary to take into consideration several factors, race and gender, but also sexual orientation, religion, and disability, for example, and consider the ways these axes of dominion intersect and impact a subject more seriously than if it were just one (Crenshaw 1991, 1242-1244); all forms of inequality need to be analyzed, there are not inequalities that are 'more important' than others.

In the 21st century, the election of Barack Obama in 2009 as the first Afro-American president in history has changed the vision of politics by giving hope to the black community. Obama is the symbol of two worlds coming together; in fact, he is the son of a white mother and a Kenyan father (Carter, Dowe 2015, 105). The presence of Obama's wife, Michelle, has been crucial to attesting Barack Obama's authenticity. Michelle Obama was the first black First Lady of the U.S. From the first campaign of her husband's, she supported him while acknowledging the risk of the election, for example, having to face the problem of personal security and having to manage life at the White House. For the first time, black American women could identify with a public voice and woman in power.

## **2. “Becoming” Michelle Obama**

### **2.1 Early Life and Racial Identity**

“Becoming” is an autobiography written by Michelle Obama in 2018.

The book is divided into three main chapters: *Becoming Me*, in which M. Obama explains the first part of her life; *Becoming Us*, which describes the initial stages of her relationship with Barack, her approach to becoming a wife and a mother, and her life with her husband running for president; and *Becoming More*, which describes the first period as the First Lady of the United States.

She lived with her family in the South Shore neighbourhood of Chicago. She stayed in an apartment on the second floor with her parents and his brother Craig, two years older than her. Michelle Obama lived a happy childhood in a little community, she claimed “Everything that mattered was within a five-block radius- my grandparents and cousins, the church on the corner, [...] the gas station [...] and the liquor store...” (Obama 2018, 5).

She had always had a good relationship with her parents, her mother used to stay at home, helping her and her brother with school and doing housework.

She was an introverted child who preferred to play at home with her dolls and talked with her mom about school activities (Obama 2018, 5-6).

Her father worked for the Chicago Water Department as a pump operator. She was very close to him, and she suffered a lot for him; in fact, he had multiple sclerosis, and he refused treatment many times.

Since childhood, Obama has always achieved good results at school and education was very important for her parents.

She was usually discriminated against by her friends due to her “white speaking”. She spoke in a different way compared with her peers, her parents used to teach to her to use proper words and not use abbreviations for example “going” instead of “goin”.

The other friends had seen it as a betrayal or a rejection of their culture (Obama 2018, 40).

### **2.1.1 South Shore Chicago**

Michelle Obama grew up with her family on the South Shore of Chicago; in the book, she refers to the district different times.

She remembers a particular event, when, in *The Chicago Defender*, a newspaper liked by Afro American readers, there were opinions about the schools. The newspaper claimed that the Bryn Mawr school was no longer the best school in the neighborhood, but rather that those who govern it had a “ghetto mentality”. Obama defended the school principal, Dr. Lavizzo, who worked hard in order to make students improve. The P.T.A. (Parent-Teacher Association), of which Michelle's mother was a member, helped coordinate a number of projects, including dinners for teachers and fund-raising for new classroom supplies (Obama 2018, 43-44).

The South Shore has always been an area with a large percentage of people of different ethnicities.

The 1950s represent a significant transitional period as the civil rights movement began to gain force and working-class, naturalized immigrants and their children struggled to fit in the society.

According to Alter, from the 1880s to the 1980s, southeastern Chicago (including the community areas of South Chicago, South Deering, East Side, And Hegewisch) was a major steel-producer, there were the region's largest enterprises. After the works were abandoned, several immigrant groups started to establish themselves there.

African Americans began to establish in this region during the 1930s and were able to find work in the mills (Alter 1998, 403).

In 1970, there were 81,000 people living there, 69% of them were black and 28% were white. By the late 1990s, the area of the South Shore had transformed into a middle-class African American neighborhood.

In the autobiography, Obama mentions the Bud Billiken Day Parade, to which one day by chance she went with a friend named Santita, whose father, reverend Jesse Jackson, tried to win the nomination of the Democratic Party candidate in the 1984 and 1988 US presidential elections. The Bud Billiken Day Parade has taken place each year in August since 1929; in 2023, it will be the 94th edition. The parade represents more than a procession; instead, it is a celebration of pride and self-respect for Afro Americans. It is no coincidence that it was chosen on the South Shore of Chicago; the black community

has an important impact on the neighborhood's society (Obama 63-64). It is the second largest parade of the United States after the Rose Bowl. The parade's origins date back to the figure of Robert Sengstacke Abbott, who founded The Chicago Defender mentioned before.

He is the one who expanded his vision and created the tradition of the parade (Chicago Defender Parade 2019).

Obama graduated from Princeton University with a bachelor's degree, and she mentioned that when anyone asked where she was from, she answered Chicago. She knew that by saying "South Shore" people could stereotype the images of the black ghetto. People used to watch the news, and according to them, the south shore was connected to gang battles and crimes. Nevertheless, she was proud of where she came from; her nationhood has been crucial for her childhood, and she belongs to it (Obama 2018, 85).

### **2.1.2 Racism at Princeton**

"I'm not sure that you're Princeton material." These are the words that came out of the college counsellor at Princeton University during the first interview with her. Obama was proud to be part of the same college as his brother and also have the opportunity to study; her parents could not have had the same possibility.

She had excellent grades and scores in high school at the Whitney Young School, in fact, she graduated in the top 10 percent of her class, and she had been elected "Treasurer of the Senior Class". (Obama 2018, 65-66).

Princeton, as a northern town and a prestigious university, was as segregated as anywhere below the Mason-Dixon Line due to its history.

The Mason-Dixon Line is the border separating the states of Maryland and Pennsylvania in the US. The name is still used to denote the historical ideal border between the slave states of the south and the free states of the north. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023).

Princeton University did not admit black students until the middle of the twentieth century. Social movements impacted students and progressive school and gradually black students were accepted and the schools stated to oppose to the apartheid South Africa. Princeton University, along with the other Ivy League Schools such as Harvard University, Brown University, the University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, and so on, needed to represent historical transformation and a new period of black emancipation

and social justice. Princeton University has a great deal of history with black people; in fact, the university once owned slaves, and before the Civil War, approximately half of the students were from the South. John MacLean, one of the presidents, was a member of the American Colonization Society, which promoted the enslavement of African Americans. Slaves were present on the campus of Princeton University since slavery was permitted in the town of Princeton.

After slavery was abolished, there were still issues at Princeton with black students being present on campus. The reality changed thanks to the U.S. Navy, which instituted the V-12 program at the university that allowed young cadets to participate in the courses. In 1945, four young blacks were admitted, and a couple of years later, one of them, John Leroy Howard, was the first black student to earn a Princeton bachelor's degree.

Black students at Princeton fought from the 1940s through the early 1960s to even matriculate; by the late 1960s, however, they had developed a distinct identity for themselves (Bradley 2010, 110-113).

I thought it was necessary to explain some of the history of Princeton University before trying to define how Obama could actually feel because of her race and of the history of racism in the US.

In the book, she claims, "Princeton was extremely white and very male." She clarifies that the number of men on campus exceeded the number of women, and less than 9 percent of the students in the class were black. For the first time, Obama found herself in a community of so many white people, and she felt strange and uncomfortable.

The reality she was used to was completely different, "white" students simply left their bikes outside buildings, abandoned their rooms unlocked, and left their gold earrings in the dormitory restrooms. Instead, since she was a child, even on the bus, she used to keep an eye on her belongings, and on her way to school, she used her house keys to defend herself if needed. Obama had a completely different lifestyle and background than them. She was Craig Robinson's sister, and as a result, she started to meet his teammates and their friends, which helped her feel included at Princeton (Obama 2018, 71-73).

After this first period of integration, she felt she became part of a group composed of black and latino students thanks to the TWC - the Third World Center, which became a place where black people could have parties and meals together without being discriminated against.

The history of the TWC begins in October 1978, when racial tensions were a constant at the university. An episode to remember is the Rockefeller Suite incident, when a black student was urinated on after asking to turn down the volume of the music in a white party. From that event, a member of the Association of Black Collegians proposed that black students had a “Black house” (Mccray 2022).



Figure 2 Students protested outside of the Third World Center (from Princeton web site).

## 2.2 Becoming a Mother – Infertility difficulties

In my opinion this chapter truly emphasizes the impact that Michelle Obama has in the society, she shares her life experiences and common problems of many American women. Her simplicity is seeing as truly in the U.S. population.

In the book, she described her life after realizing she had problems getting pregnant. When she discovered it, her husband, Barack Obama, was elected to the Illinois Senate in November 1996. He was very busy, and they were apart for most of the week. Michelle Obama was also going through a transitional period at the time; she had accepted a new position and decided to leave Public Allies to pursue a career in another field. The University of Chicago was looking for an employee who could focus on community relations. Like a woman with a project of life, she thought about her stability, in fact the new employment could give her better pay and better working hours (Obama 2018, 184-186).

She unfortunately had a miscarriage, “[...] which left me physically uncomfortable and cratered any optimism we’d felt.” She claims this in the second chapter (Obama 2018, 184-187). During the campaign for the book *Becoming*, in an interview with ABC News, she anticipated the topic of infertility with the interviewer, Robin Roberts. She told how she felt: “Lost and alone, I felt like I failed”. She explains how it is necessary that women

start talking about their bodies and about the possibilities of having miscarriages, which are common (You Tube 2018). Many women find themselves in her words, she is very good to respond to this cultural need of normalize this kind of issues that are often situations of social humiliation.

The video of the ABC News interview is four years old, but the comments below make explicit how many people still love her after many years since the first election of Barack Obama:

“Michelle is a gem. So relatable, so real. She’s what America needs.” by @Sam\_bubs.

“Such style, grace and class. I love her authenticity.” by @iamtheeduchess.

In the book, she explains the different treatments she put herself through.

She first tried to take Clomid, a substance that stimulates egg production, after, she tried the vitro fertilization. During this new therapy, her husband was occupied with the state legislature, which returned to its fall session. She explains how hard was being alone “carrying the responsibility” and she started to feel a little of resentment about politics and Barack's constant commitment to his job (Obama 2018, 188).

Following Malia’s birth, the lives of the couple changed. Michelle Obama started to work part-time hours at the University of Chicago, and her husband, with 89 percent of the vote won re-election to a four-year position in the state senate. He began to be appreciated and successful. He began to consider other options, such as running for office. Michelle Obama didn’t agree much, but she knew that her husband was a politician now, and he needed the support of his wife (Obama 2018, 193).

### **2.3 First election – Michelle Obama as a Lawyer, Political Figure, First Lady, Mother and Wife.**

Barack Obama’s famous speech at the Democratic National Convention in Boston the 27<sup>th</sup> of July 2004 was one of his first significant performances on the national stage.

Obama was a modest state senator from Chicago’s Hyde Park; running for president in 2008 would have been almost impossible. But the speech inaugurated a new beginning for his career in national politics.



The speech was written by David Axelrod, media specialist, and Robert Gibbs, chief press assistant. I chose to report below an excerpt from the final part to underline its powerful impact (Bernstein 2007):

*I believe we can give our middle-class relief and provide working families with a road to opportunity. I believe we can provide jobs to the jobless, homes to the homeless, and reclaim young people in cities across America from violence and despair. I believe that as we stand on the crossroads of history, we can make the right choices, and meet the challenges that face us. America!* (PBSO NewsHour, n.d.).

The day of the speech Michelle Obama left the kids at home with her mother in order to be with her husband. In the book, she explains her feelings about that night, both of them were nervous, but he was determined. The more pressure he had, the calmer he was. She was proud of her husband (Obama 2018, 215).

The reaction of the media to Barack's speech was uncontrolled: for example, Chris Matthews on NBC stated, "I've just seen the first black president".

As a wife, she could not believe what was happening.

In November, with a national vote share of 70%, Obama was elected to the U.S. Senate. He obtained a huge majority of votes from whites, Latinos, and blacks. "Even white people were recognizing him now." She claims in the book (Obama 2018, 216-217).

Their lives were different, Obama used to flight to D.C. frequently, he had a senate office and an apartment there, he started a new life there. Michelle Obama was in Chicago with the girl and sometimes they went to see the father. Even though the future First Lady started to be included in a world very different from the one she was used to, she describes her life doing common things as a normal person, such as washing dishes, going to the gym and so on. One day she received a call from a wife of a fellow senator, this woman wanted to invite her to be part of a club in Washington in which senators' wives meet together. Obama explained her decision to live in Chicago and for the first time she felt judged, in fact, the woman told her that it will be hard live apart from her husband. (Obama 2018, 219).

On February 10, 2007, there was the Announcement Day: Barack Obama candidacy for the presidency of the United States was official.

Already, the family started to feel the pressures of a national campaign, in fact, the campaign didn't start in the best way. The Announcement has been scheduled for the same day as the State of the Black Union, an annual occurrence in the States to reflect on the African American Community. This could have put Barack Obama in a bad light, especially in relation to the Black community. The Rolling Stone published an article with a reporter visiting the Trinity Church in Chicago, of which the Obama family was a member since the girls Malia and Sasha were born. The article referred to a piece from a sermon by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright about the treatment of blacks in the country, suggesting that Americans cared more about sustaining white supremacy.

That Day, all the family was there to support her husband and father, after the speech, the four of them greeted the audience. Michelle Obama suddenly realized how deeply involved the entire family was in the campaign (Obama 2018, 229-232).

There were different risks to take, for example, safety. Barack Obama was a black man, and this even more put him at risk. In fact, in the memories of everyone are the deaths of President Kennedy, his brother Robert and Martin Luther King Jr.

Obama had been assigned Secret Service protection, he was the first to have it so early before effectively becoming president. Michelle Obama didn't feel unsafe, she started to speak in public. The girls often followed their mother and travelled a lot (Obama 2018, 242-243).

The Obama family started to live with the idea of having many people around them. During the campaign, the days were completely organized.

Obama team stated that it was good for the campaign giving a TV interview with the whole family, for the first time including the girls. Michelle Obama claims in her book how hard it was having the girls all over the internet (Obama 2018, 156-257).

In the article "Obama rethinks TV interview with his daughters" on the New York Times, it was referred to how Barack Obama "questioned his decision after seeing how much attention the interview had received" (The New York Times 2008).

Michelle Obama was making an enormous contribution to the campaign. She used to give speeches all over the country. She states in the book how she was natural by speaking from her heart. She expressed her anxiety and perplexity about the political approach. One day, after a speech in Wisconsin in February 2008, someone took the video of it and modified it by adding a different type of content. She was worried, but her husband

comforted her, he knew that she was becoming very popular, and this was the price to pay. In the book, the love that the two feel is always evident: Michelle Obama reports the words the two used to exchange, for example, “I love you, honey.” (Obama 2018, 259-261).

People used to attack from different sides. Someone quoted parts of her thesis from Princeton. It was a survey conducted to find out how African American students at Princeton felt about racism. The thesis was portrayed by the conservative media as a secret black-power manifesto.

The First Woman started to ask why people were so angry at her. She was not the candidate; she was just his wife, she just worked harder than the other wives.

The volume of requests from the media and the effort required to travel overwhelmed her. Her team began to help her, trying to focus on her body language, facial expression, and her gestures (Obama 2018, 263-267).

On November 4, 2008, the Election Day.

Michele and Barack Obama went to deposit their vote at the polling place in Chicago. It was not a normal day, but however the girls were ready to go to school. Following twenty-one months of campaign and fatigue, that day was a symbol of all the hard work done it. The first results came up around 6:00 pm, Vermont voted for Barack and Kentucky for McCain, the republican opponent.

At the beginning it seemed John McCain would be the winner but later, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine and D.C. went for Obama. Late at night there were the first announcement about Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States.

Michelle Obama writes in the book: “He had done it, We’d all done it. It hardly seemed possible, but the victory was sound.” (Obama 2018, 278).

The entire Obama family were in Chicago that day in order to show up at more than 200.000 people who were waiting the new president and his family (Obama 2018, 273-279).



Figure 3 Barack Obama, the incoming president, makes an appearance on stage with his family for his victory speech at his election party on November 4, 2008, in Chicago (NBC News).

Michelle became the first Black First Lady of the United States.

In the late 20th and 21st centuries, the American public strongly rejected the different attempts by First Ladies like Hillary Clinton to turn their positions into political functions. Barbara Bush and Laura Bush, the wives of the presidents, were more well-liked because they supported traditional agendas that prioritized education and families. Michelle Obama was and is different; she represented the possibly radical challenges to America's conservative race and gender politics. Her early involvement in the Obama campaign was therefore an experiment in trial and error. Similar to her husband, she has been the focus of adverse public discourse, and her speeches and interviews have become an essential tool of resistance. Following her initial mistakes, she adopted a drastically different approach to her public appearances, embracing and appreciating her duties as a mother and wife and reinventing herself as the "Mom-in-Chief." She spoke about her goals and dreams for her girls, her mothering experiences, and how she planned to help her daughters transition to life in the White House (Cooper 2010, 48-50). In the book, she describes the initial stage of life in the White House for her and mostly for the girls; for example, she had meetings to decide on one possible school. The family needed to manage the Secret Service, they had secret names, Barack was *Renegade*, Michelle was *Renaissance*. The girls could choose their own, Malia was *Radiance* and Sasha decided for *Rosebud*. The White House is vast with around 130 rooms (Obama 2018, 285-289).

The United States was facing the financial crisis of 2008. After the Great Depression, it was the worst economic crisis that devastated the US and world economies. On September 15, 2008, there was the first symptom of a crisis: the company Lehman Brothers went bankrupt. After President Obama was elected, he stabilized an economy in crisis, establishing the foundation for long-term growth, trying to stabilize the housing

sector, improve academic standards in schools, and make investments from preschool through 12th grade (Obama White House archives, n.d.).

After his first month as president, Obama passed the first law adopted under his administration, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act which provided protection for workers from discrimination on the basis of gender, race, and age. His work was different now, he worked more hours, despite working all day, he still had time for his family for dinner. (Obama 2018, 306-307).

Michelle Obama's mother had an important role in the life of the family; she helped the girls every day and she assisted them when the parents were away.

In April 2009, President Obama and the First Lady made their first international trip to England. In London, they had the possibility of seeing Her Majesty the Queen and attending the G20 meeting. The first journey was essential for Obama's debut as president. In the book, the First Lady explains that she had not met royalty before, but she remembers having a good time with Queen Elizabeth.

At the time, a lot of newspapers wrote about how the president's wife unintentionally touched the monarch with her arm. In the book, Obama explains that the two were conversing about the uncomfortable shoes that they had (Obama 2018, 135-316).

In 2009, the First Lady started to work with her team in order to create a campaign to spread sensibility about healthy food. While her husband was president, nearly a third of American children were overweight or obese. Type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure were being diagnosed in children at levels that were previously uncommon. The issue was related to the expensive cost of fruits, the lack of programs to encourage children to play sports and the increase of slogans used in advertisements for sugary cereal and microwave convenience foods. The major beverage industries as well as the farmers who grow the corn used in many sweets would be against her initiative (Obama 2018, 329-330).

Her program *Let's Move* was launched in 2010 and over the years many improvements have been made. According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity rates for children between the ages of 2 and 5 dropped between 2003 and 2012, and certain states have lately reported substantial progress against obesity in underprivileged children (Carman and Thompson 2015).

### 2.3.1 Blackness in the New Millennium



*Figure 4 On November 5, 2008, in London, a salesman sells copies of The Times with Barack Obama on the cover. The news of Barack Obama's historic victory in the US presidential elections gripped news outlets around the World (NBC News).*

At the base of the American Dream is the notion that all Americans, regardless of race, have equal possibilities to succeed, but there are people in society who think that there are still obstacles to achieving economic success. Anyway, a significant number of white people attribute racial and socioeconomic inequality to black people's lack of motivation. Having a black president elected is a symbol that these obstacles for the Black community might have been removed and as a result, economic, social and political possibilities in the US have increased. Black people could think to have the opportunity to have a real voice in government.

In addition, the minorities believed they could get through feelings of exclusion (Le and Stout 2012, 1339-1341).

This scene made people think about an American Dream for black people.

Obama's complicated personal past placed the 44th president of the United States in a unique position to serve as an iconic example of Black Cosmopolitanism<sup>2</sup>. "Complicated past" refers to the first years of his life. In fact, Barack Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in Hawaii, where his mother met Obama's father, who was born and raised in Kenya. After his parents divorced, Barack's mother got married an Indonesian guy, and so Barack spent his early years there. Before entering fifth grade, she moved back to Honolulu to live with her maternal grandparents and take advantage of a scholarship (White House government, n.d.). The connection between nationalism, ethnicity, and a

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Brock of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the term cosmopolitanism refers to a political theory that claims that all people have the right to be respected and considerate, whatever their citizenship status or backgrounds (Brock n.d.).

person's cultural hybridity is of great importance to cosmopolitanism theorists (Selzer 2010, 15-16).

The difficulty of fitting Obama into a preexisting conception of Americanness because of the diversity and variance in his life made it easier for opponents to represent the candidate as a hybrid: he wasn't black or wasn't black enough to be elected. After his election, people called his presidency the "Obama Revolution", not just in American history but in the history of humanity. (Selzer 2010, 22-23).

"I am married to a Black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slave owners." (Barack Obama, Philadelphia, 2008)

As the previous quote shows, the First Lady was essential during the campaign of his husband.

In the past, First Ladies embodied domestic and conventional womanhood. For instance, they had to take care of the visiting heads of state, take care of the house, or manage festivities during the holidays. The First Lady must be eligible to be a "true woman". Michelle Obama, however, had to deal with the historical struggle of being a black woman: for her the social code of 'appropriate' womanhood, typically based on whiteness, were not available and she had to reinscribe, challenge or reinvent them (Verna 2009, 835).

Racist social structures are still supported by patriarchal standards. Black mothers are criticized for social issues like poverty and juvenile delinquency because they are perceived as being oversexed and extremely fertile.

When we consider the First Lady within this background, it is evident that this role is profoundly gendered and racially framed. Also, according to the idea of intersectionality of Kimberlé Crenshaw, racism and sexism are forms of oppression. The challenge for the Obama campaign was to increase American public comfort with a Black commander-in-chief while also doing the same for his spouse (Verna 2009, 839-840).

Michelle Obama was able to convey her authenticity as a "lady" and demonstrate that she was up to the task as a First Lady. Obama's victory over Senator John McCain, however, is not only a representation of having exceeded the traditional gender order but also that

the United States presidential election of 2008 will be remembered for giving a new model of a couple to embrace (Verna 2009, 844).



### 3. Analysis of *The Light We Carry*: Michelle Obama and Her Public Persona

*The Light We Carry* is an autobiography written by Michelle Obama in 2022. This book is different from the other mentioned before; if *Becoming* was a chronological autobiography of the life of the First Lady, this one is a retrospective narrative of what the US and the entire world were passing through based on the point of view of Obama, who keeps being a beacon for millions of people.

I consider this book a guide with the main purpose of demonstrating that we all have a light to show to the world; we just need to know how to manifest it.

In an article appeared on the Guardian, J. Newman really described the book in a proper way: “Each chapter is a tool.” In fact, she wants to give some advice to her people. Different scenarios are at the basis of the book: the election of the new president (Donald Trump, at the time the book was being written), the Corona virus epidemic, and the murder of George Floyd. I will focus and examine them under the light of Obama's viewpoints and ideas since these events are significant to US history. The book was published in November, the same week that Donald Trump declared his intention to run for re-election in 2024. The contrast between these two political characters has always been very intense and in the book, it is very clear (Silva 2022). Michelle Obama launched a podcast called “The Light Podcast” in March 2023 based on the book *The Light We Carry*. The podcast is made through different interviews made by some celebrities, journalists, and activists, for examples Ellen DeGeneres, Tyler Perry, Conan O'Brien, Oprah Winfrey, Hoda Kotb, David Letterman, with the First Lady. In my opinion, what makes it interesting is the fact that the interviews become a kind of friendly talk connected with the main topics of the book (Czachor 2023). In April 2023, the famous streaming service Netflix launched the TV show “The Light We Carry: Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey”. The show is very good because a lot of the themes of the book are presented, but also because a constructive conversation is established between the two successful black women talking about their feelings and prejudices that they had to deal with before they could have the notoriety they now have.

### 3.1 The beginning of the 2019 Global Pandemic and the Murder of George Floyd

In the chapter “The Power of Small”, the First Lady is isolated in Washington, D.C., with her family, living with a new struggle: the Coronavirus Pandemic.

She describes how hard it was to get over it every day, being worried about her mother alone in Chicago and about her nation: losses of jobs, massive numbers of deaths, and screaming ambulances.

During that period, she had a hobby: knitting. The activity distracted her from anxiety and fear: “I’d given myself over to something that was smaller than my fear, smaller than my worries and my anger, smaller than the crushing sense of helplessness I felt.” (Obama 2022, 34).

During an interview for *People*, the former First Lady explains how her mental health was challenged; she talks about having “low-grade depression”. She wanted to encourage Americans to open up about their mental health (Westfall, 2021).

According to data from the Census Bureau, compared to a survey conducted in the first half of 2019, after the global pandemic of 2019, the number of Americans suffering from depression or anxiety has tripled (Gordon 2020).

Obama had already worked with a nonprofit program called the Girls Opportunity Alliance, which helps adolescent girls, and immediately after the pandemic, she spent quality time with a group of them. These young girls described their lives after the pandemic and their feelings of stress and pressure from society (Obama 2022, 39). The testimonies were different: one girl lost her brother to gun violence; another was working a part-time job and making an effort to avoid the criminals on her block. Obama explains how she felt that when it’s time to share the pain, and comments that it’s even harder for young black women to face historical racial barriers without confusing their feelings and openness with self-pity (Obama 2020, 41).

After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, the U.S. seemed divided into two factions: pro and against the American Law Enforcement. Some of the teenagers of the Girls Opportunity Alliance told her that they wanted to make a difference, to make the world hear their voice, and like them, millions of angry Americans. In that moment, she expressed serenity, explaining the importance of balance and mental health. Our minds can be imperfect; it’s necessary to pay attention to our feelings and to focus on improving our knowledge of ourselves (Obama 2020, 44).

In the chapter “Am I seen?” Obama tells a story about her brother, Craig. When he turned twelve, their parents bought him a new bike. Later, while he was outside with the bike, a city police officer assumed he had stolen it. Just because he was black. Obama wants to tell the reader how being black can make things harder and how the feeling of not being seen simply as a person but just as a black person (Obama 2022, 113-114). She also narrates the story of Stacey Abrams, an American politician who was a high school class's valedictorian. She accepted an invitation to meet other valedictorians from Georgia. When she arrived with her family, the security guard told her, “This is a private event. You don't belong here.” Her parents took the matter into their own hands, arguing with the guard, but the moral damage was already done. The message of those words hurt; she was just a young girl. Being in the early stages of life, the memory of those comments could affect the emotional trajectory of your life. A similar episode happened to Obama, too. As I described in the previous chapter, when she applied to Princeton, they told her that “She was not a Princeton material”. Thanks to other supportive adults in Obama's life, she was able to transform her anger into motivation and encouragement (Obama 2022, 114-116).

“I can't breathe” were the last words of George Floyd. On May 25, 2020, a police officer killed Floyd in Minneapolis. He was arrested after a grocery store employee called 911 to report that Mr. Floyd had bought cigarettes with a fake \$20 money. Officers took a series of actions that violated the policies of the Minneapolis police department, which became fatal to Mr. Floyd. A policeman continued placing his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck, leaving the man without the possibility of breath (Hill, Jordan, Tiefenthäler, Triebert, Stein, Willis 2020). I felt this event deeply because, when it happened, I was in the United States for a cultural experience. The episode shocked everyone in my neighborhood and myself included, even if I am not American I was impressed to discover how human cruelty doesn't have limits. During that spring and summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) protested in the country, spreading all over the urban, suburban, and rural areas (Heaney 2020, 196).



*Figure 5. The road heading up to the White House, Washington, DC, has painted a massive "Black Lives Matter" sign (The New Yorker).*

According to studies conducted by many think tanks, the BLM has significantly changed the political and social climate. Since the movement's official start in 2013, it has changed the nation's approach to racial issues. In comparison with 2016, when only four in ten Americans supported the movement, in 2020, within every ethnic group, two-thirds of adults said they supported it. The movement has motivated more white Americans to take part in local protests for black liberation; precisely 95% of the participants were white. Democrats, who, according to their ideas of thought, are more inclined to support the movement's mission, placed over one million ballots in the 2020 Democratic primary season, breaking the previous record established in 2008 with Barack Obama's win over the Clinton campaign (Strickland 2022, 78-80).

The murder of G. Floyd demonstrates the seamless continuity of racial development, the racial state, and the related aspects of internal colonialism (Bazian 2020, 124). Blackness and the neighbourhoods where black people lived began to be associated with deterioration, poverty, and criminality. This racial and ethnic shame continues today and contributes to maintaining segregation along racial and economic borders (Gaynor 2021, 51). In fact, Obama, in her book, tells us how hard it is to feel a sense of belonging in American white society, for example, during her time at Princeton. She felt different and disconnected from others. There were no black faces in the paintings; the buildings were given the names of white men, and the teachers did not look like her. All the black students she knew had an anecdote to tell about being black (Obama 2022, 103-104). She talks about the fact, that according to a recent study by the Mellon Foundation, in the United States, the majority of the monuments are in honor of white men, only 10% are monuments that commemorate black and indigenous people. Her words: "It's hard to dream about what's not visible." She is referring to the American society that, in a way,

doesn't let people be accepted, saying "We are a young country dominated by old narratives" (Obama 2022, 112).

### **3.1.2 Trump Administration and the Assault on the U.S. Capitol - Political violence and criminal justice**

The First Lady made it clear in the different chapters of the book what her opinion about the Trump administration was. It comes as no surprise given all the work that she and her husband, the former President Obama, have done, including their presence in the White House, a breath of fresh air, since they were the first black family to live there. The 2016 election was an apparent rejection of all that. "It shook me profoundly to hear the man who's replaced my husband as president openly and unapologetically using ethnic slurs, making selfishness and hate somehow acceptable, refusing to condemn white supremacists or to support people demonstrating for racial justice." (Obama, 2022, 32). These some of the words of the First Lady from the book.

It happened more than once that Donald Trump made sexist and racist comments. In 2016, after a conversation of Trump making abusive comments on a woman came out, Obama intervened immediately. She made a speech during the 2016 campaign for Hillary Clinton, and she talked about how painful it is to be looked at and treated like an object by men.

In her speech she consolidated the sentiments of many women following Trump's recording, and her contribution will go remembered as one of the most significant in the 2016 election (Cilizza 2016). In the book, Obama refers to the Capitol Building attack on January 6, 2020, making explicit her resentment for the former President Trump. She realized that her country was reaching a high level of political division. That day in January, Donald Trump encouraged and fomented the group of protesters that rushed into the building (Obama 2022,228). The FBI defines the attack *domestic terrorism* since it has been committed with the intent to terrorize civilians. People using violence clearly attacked the Democrats who were elected, in fact, Trump has consistently made-up false election-related accusations (Hoffman 2021).



*Figure 6 Trump supporters outside the US Capitol building following a Trump rally on January 6.*

Obama writes that historically; Americans have placed their trust in democracy. After the incident, there was unthinkable damage. Trump is known for his slogan “Make America Great Again” which was a figurative expression referring to a return to white Christian supremacy.

White nationalists were shocked by Barack Obama's election as president. A black man in a position of authority represented to them the end of "their" America. White supremacists continued to make racist remarks against the first black American president during Obama's presidency. Racists considered it intolerable that a black man served as president of the United States of America, which pushed them to create excuses for insulting and dehumanizing him as an imposter. Trump promoted the ridiculous unborn conspiracy theory in late 2011, questioning Obama’s birthplace using 116 tweets against him. Trump has always used Twitter in order to criticize Obama. Before announcing his candidature, 10% of Trump's tweets mentioned or addressed Obama; still during his presidency, 2,7% of his tweets were of the anti-Obama variety (Nacos, Shapiro, Bloch-Elkon 2020, 4-7). Michelle Obama, in the book, described how it feels to be black in a white society. He refers to her grandfathers, men who had worked to make their families live in a secure and happy environment. Nevertheless, her grandmother had trouble trusting non-family members, especially white people. Obama is aware of all the humiliations that her family has suffered in the past. Her parents lived with the same fear as her grandparents. They were very wary of taking opportunities and conscious of the risks associated with being people of colour. (Obama 2022, 64-65). Obama now has the possibility to meet people of value and be invited to important events, but despite that, she remains close to her community, bringing authentic examples in which people can reflect on their lives.

### 3.2 Michelle Obama as a Public Figure

In this paragraph I will focus on the creation of Michelle Obama's identity as a public figure, in order to shed light on the strengths that characterize her.

At the beginning it was difficult to imagine a black First Lady. The former president Obama wasn't raised up in a black community and is not related from slaves, but Michelle Obama was, she lived in a black community and her ancestor were enslaved people (Griffin 2011, 134). It was January 2009 when Beyoncé sang "At Last" at the inaugural Neighborhood Ball. The song connected the first African American First Lady and one of the most adored African American female pop star. It was a beautiful moment between President Obama and the First Lady, but also a powerful one that celebrated that, finally, prejudices on race had been broken down. The song is related to the spiritual words of the speech "I Have a Dream" by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in which he said, "Free I last! Free at last!" (Kooijman 2013, 147).

The First Lady is a unique character; she has never hidden her personality from her people or the country. In the book, *The Light We Carry* she describes herself. She is intense when she wants to feel connected with her friends; she is a dedicated planner and a person who likes to be dragged into new experiences and have something to look forward to (Obama 2022, 121-122).

One of the characteristics that makes her figure so close to people is her sense of authenticity. In the book, she goes into the depths of her life, explaining herself in a truly profound way. She writes, "My home is my family. My home is Barack". She focuses on her marriage, which is very important because, thanks to it she and her husband have an idiomatic place where energy and emotion meet together (Obama 2022, 157). The recipe for her success is her openness and transparency; in fact, she fights for issues in which she genuinely believes, and she always wants her audience to hear what she shares. In the last twenty years, social networks have increased in importance and the former First Lady has always managed to renew herself. On her platform, her personality is visible, although there will be many people, working for her. Especially for young people all the social media sites as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and so on are necessary to know what people think and try to keep a connection with them. She is very active.

Obama, as First Lady, spoke as National Mom, speaking for her American children but also as Mom on duty for her two girls, Sasha and Malia. Unlike Hillary Clinton, who as

a First Lady was involved in politics, Obama, like several prior first ladies, talked from her private sector to reach out to a wide audience while differentiating herself from her husband's office. She has faced challenges that the others do not. The American culture expects black women to be strong and selfless just like the enslaved women I talked about in the first chapter. Harriet Jacobs is the representation of the strength of a mother who, for seven years, could see her children through a small hole in the roof. The space was so small that he could not stand (Terre 2016, 76-80). The First Lady has always been very proud to be an African American woman who had enslaved ancestors. In the 2016 Democratic National Convention's speech, she remarked on the story of the U.S., created by a generation of individuals who experienced the shame of enslavement and segregation. She claimed, "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves." And she also mentioned how glad she was to see her daughters playing at the White House. The speech was powerful; she was and is the symbol that a woman can make a difference (Obama 2016).

During the first presidential campaign, the First Lady found out about her great-great-great grandfather, who was white and may have been the master of a black slave known as Melvinia, living in South Carolina, who was her great-great-great grandmother. Smolenyak, the expert who tracked the history of the Obama family, claimed, "This is a very universal story. It's a story of the spread of slavery through the South and the Great Migration of African Americans to the North. The fact that there is mixed heritage involved will not be a great surprise to many as it was so common between masters and slaves." The only relation found between Obama and slavery before Smolenyak's research was through her paternal line. There was information that Jim Robinson, her paternal great-great grandfather, had been a slave on a rice farm in South Carolina till the end of the Civil War (Pilkington 2009).

Obama transmits confidence and a sense of trust. Her public character is marked by proud courage and a strong sense of community, both within and outside of the U.S.

### **3.2.1 The Fashion Icon**

Although presidential wives' clothes have frequently drawn attention, Michelle Obama's influence on modern fashion is unmatched since Jacqueline Kennedy's. She gained a significant following by wearing clothing from mid-market brands like Gap, Talbots, and



Target, where millions of customers shop every day in malls all over the country. Once in an interview, Obama was wearing J. Crew clothes, and she claimed to the audience, “You can get some good stuff online!”

After that, J. Crew saw a positive economic consequence, and the stock price was exciting: it increased by 8% the following day and by 25% by the end of the week (Yermack 2010, 5-7).

Obama appeared on the Today Show in February 2011 in a H&M dress of \$34,95. The clothing choice affected American public opinion: How is it possible that the First Lady does not spend half a million for a dress? Obama wanted to evoke a sense of normality and sympathy for American women. (Schäfer 2015, 245).

Michelle Obama threw away the common outfit, and by wearing a purple dress to the 2008 Democratic National Convention, in she showed her unique sense of style (Schäfer 2015, 238). The purple color is a symbol because it is a mix of blue and red, as well as Democratic and Republican party colors, a symbol of moving further along the political divide. It is the color that represents unity. Purple has also been adopted as the official colors of the suffragist movement, the National Woman’s Party. It is not a coincidence that during Joe Biden’s inauguration, Michelle Obama, Kamala Harris, the Vice President of the United States, and Hillary Clinton, the former First Lady and U.S. senator, used different shades of purple for their clothes (Harding 2021). The role of the First Lady has always been very traditional, and it is normal that people are more interested in her habits, what she wears and what accessories she uses. The Obama’s style made her persona correspond more closely to a traditional female gender role. Obama uses fashion and its cultural meaning to compose a fashionable independent First Lady (Schäfer 2015, 237-238).



## Conclusion

One of this work's objectives is to highlight the two autobiographies of Michelle Obama, *Becoming* and *The Light We Carry*, analyzing her story as a teenager from the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago who succeeded in becoming one of the most loved women in America. In fact, according to a poll conducted by Gallup in December 2018, Michelle Obama was “The Most Admired Woman”, following her, Oprah Winfrey, Hillary Clinton, Melania Trump, Queen Elizabeth, and so on (Jones 2018).

The two books are very different; in *Becoming*, Obama wants to describe her life by explaining the different challenges that she had to overcome during her childhood, the college years, and later when she was an adult. Thanks to this autobiography, many African American women could reflect on her, her words brought back her simplicity. She is the First Lady, who, with her perseverance, made all America and the entire world understand that being black is not a barrier but an added value. In my thesis, I demonstrate the importance of the First Lady over the years, focusing on the hard work that she has done to go beyond being black and a woman. She represents a complex image of today's United States, where the fear of discrimination is concrete. In *The Light We Carry* the reader feels her closeness to the American people. She's like a friend: giving advice, encouraging people, talking about herself and, about her family.

Her origins belong to a past that makes many blacks, women and men, feel connected to her. Her story is linked to slavery: her ancestor were slaves.

Black people were used as animals, beaten almost to death by a slave owner who counted them as money, and whole families were separated and sold to whites. They were a thing. The specificity of this genre, as I mentioned in the first chapter, is the link it manages to create between the expression of an African American personality, the need to celebrate the black experience, and the desire to tell a personal story without shadows.

Can black women also benefit from the myth of the 'self-made man'? Yes, Michelle Obama is an example of a self-made woman. She is a mother, a lawyer, a wife, and the former first black First Lady. In the 1800s and 1900s, being a 'self-made man' meant much more than getting rich or being successful; it meant shaping one's personality to excel in the world.

Her figure gives me the possibility to imagine my future as something bigger compared to what I thought a few years ago. Women always had to fight to reach what they wanted, as Sojourner Truth stood up to speak out and defend her right to justice as a black American woman.

Obama allowed me to consider that making a change for what I believe is possible and necessary, it is just the beginning of being ready for a society that restricts how people ought to behave and perceive things. The former First Lady has never had pants that fit her because she was very tall compared to the other girls, and this was a situation that mortified her during childhood, just because it was different from others. Feeling invisible to society can hurt, but we have the power to make a difference.

I understand that I matter to the world and my story matters to others.

Am I good enough? Yes, I am.

## References

### Primary sources

Obama, M. 2018. *Becoming*. New York: Crown Publishing.

Obama, M. 2022. *The Light We Carry*. New York: Crown Publishing.

### Secondary sources

Alter, P. T. 2001. *Mexicans and Serbs in Southeast Chicago: Racial Group Formation during the Twentieth Century*. *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1998-), Vol. 94, no. 4, 403–419. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40193585>.

Alvarez, A. 1988, “*Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’: The Speech Event as Metaphor.*” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 337–357. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784511>.

Andrew, W. L. 1986. *To tell a free Story. The first Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

Andrew, W. L. 2001 <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html#literary> accessed 29 July 2023.

Barnett, B. 1993 “*Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement: The Triple Constraints of Gender, Race, and Class.*” *Gender and Society* 7, no. 2. Sage Publications. 162–82. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189576>.

Barrett, L. 1995. *African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority*. *American Literary History*, vol. 7, no. 3, 415–42. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/489846>.

Bazian, H. 2020 ‘*I Can’t Breathe.*’ *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, vol. 5, no. 2, 124–33. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/islastudj.5.2.0124>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2023.

Bernstein, D. 2007. *The speech*. *Chicago Magazine*. <https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/june-2007/the-speech/>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

Bourne, J. 2008. *Slavery in the United States*. edited by Robert Whaples. <http://eh.net/encyclopedia/slavery-in-the-united-states/>.

Bow, L. Brah, A. Goeman, M. Harriford, D. Keating, A. Yi-Chun, L. Pérez, L. 1978. *Combahee River Collective Statement*. Zillah Eisenstein.

Bradley, S. M. 2010. *The Southern-Most Ivy: Princeton University from Jim Crow Admissions to Anti-Apartheid Protests, 1794-1969*. American Studies, vol. 51, no.3-4, 109–30. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41472298>.

Braxton, J. M. 1989. *Black women writing Autobiography. A tradition Within a Tradition*. Yale University press.

Brock, G. n.d. History & Society . Cosmopolitanism. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cosmopolitanism-philosophy>. Accessed 21 July 2023.

Calvin, H. 2017. “*The Sexual Mountain And Black Women Writers.*” vol. 50, no. 4. 723–729. The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of African American Review *jstor*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26446120>.

Cambridge Dictionary. 2023 “The Mason-Dixon Line”. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/mason-dixon-line>.

Carby, H. V. 1987. *Reconstructing womanhood. The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman novelist*. Oxford University press.

Carman, T., Thompson, K. 2015. A healthful legacy: Michelle Obama looks to the future of ‘Let’s Move’. The Washington Post. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/a-healthful-legacy-michelle-obama-looks-to-the-future-of-lets-move/2015/05/03/19feb42c-b3cc-11e4-886b-c22184f27c35\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/a-healthful-legacy-michelle-obama-looks-to-the-future-of-lets-move/2015/05/03/19feb42c-b3cc-11e4-886b-c22184f27c35_story.html). Accessed 21 July 2023.

Carter, N. M., & Dowe, P. F. 2015. *The Racial Exceptionalism of Barack Obama*. Journal of African American Studies, Vol.19, no 2, 105–119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43525584>.

Cooper, B. 2010. *A'n't I a Lady?: Race Women, Michelle Obama, and the Ever-Expanding Democratic Imagination*. Vol. 35, No. 4. Oxford University press, 39-57 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25759557>.

Chicago Defender Parade. 2019. <https://www.budbillikenparade.org>.

Chism, K. 2005. *Harriet Tubman: Spy, Veteran, and Widow*. OAH Magazine of History, 19(2), 47–51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163763>.

Cilizza, C. 2016. *Michelle Obama’s speech on Donald Trump was remarkable*. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/13/michelle-obama-just-put-a-huge-and-emotional-exclamation-point-on-trumps-hot-mic-tape/>. Accessed 25 august 2013.

Crenshaw, K. 1991. *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*. Stanford Law Review. Vol. 43, No. 6. Stanford Law Review, 1241-1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

Czachor, W. M. *Michelle Obama announces new podcast based on “The Light We Carry” book tour*. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/michelle-obama-new-podcast-the-light-we-carry-book-announcement/>. Accessed 24 August 2023.

Davies, C. B. “‘SHE WANTS THE BLACK MAN POST’: *Constructions of Race, Sexuality and Political Leadership in Popular Culture*.” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, vol. 25, no. 4 (90), 2011, 121–33. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23287211>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2023.

Dello Strolago, S. 1973 “*Storia della schiavitù. Dagli antichi egizi ad oggi*” Giovanni De Vecchi Editore S.p.a. Milano.

Dorians, B. M. 1991. *Black Womanhood in Nineteenth-Century America: Subversion and Self-Construction in Two Women's Autobiographies*. Vol. 43, No. 2. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 199-222.

Eakin, P. J. 1991. *American Autobiography. Retrospect and Prospect*. The University of Wisconsin Press.

Finkelman, P. “6 *Slavery in the United States: Persons or Property?*” in Jean Allain (ed.), *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary* (Oxford, 2012; online edn, Oxford Academic), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199660469.003.0007>.

Fisch, A. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave narrative*. Cambridge University Press.

Garfield, D. M. Zafar, R. 1996. *Harriet Jacobs and incidents in the life of a slave girl: new critical essays*. Cambridge University Press.

Gates, H. L. 1991, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth; A Bondswoman of Olden Time, with a History of Her Labors and Correspondence Drawn from Her ‘Book of Life’*. Oxford University Press.

Gaynor, T. S. Kang, S. C. Williams B. N. 2021. *Segregated Spaces and Separated Races: The Relationship Between State-Sanctioned Violence, Place, and Black Identity*. The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, vol. 7, no. 1 50–66. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2021.7.1.04>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2023.

Gilbert, O. Truth S. 1999. *The narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Project Gutenberg.

Gordon A. 2020. *Michelle Obama says she’s suffering from ‘low-grade depression’*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/06/us/michelle-obama-coronavirus-depression-trnd/index.html>. Accessed 24 August 2023.

Gould, P. 2007. *The rise, development, and circulation of the slave narrative in in Fish, A. The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave narrative*. Cambridge University Press.

Griffin, F. J. 2011. "At Last...?: Michelle Obama, Beyoncé, Race & History." *Daedalus*, vol. 140, no. 1., 131–41. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25790448>.

Gwendolyn, E. L. 1991 "Standing up and Speaking out: African American Women's Narrative Legacy." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 425-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42888747>.

Harding N, 2021. *Michelle Obama's inauguration outfit has a symbol meaning*. *Compopolitan*.  
<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/fashion/celebrity/a35269897/michelle-obama-inauguration-outfit-meaning/>. Accessed 29 August 2023.

Harvard College 2020,  
<https://perspectivesofchange.hms.harvard.edu/node/87#:~:text=The%20Three%2DFifths%20Compromise%20was,for%20legislative%20representation%20and%20taxation>.

Heaney, M.T. 2020 "PROTEST AT THE CENTER OF AMERICAN POLITICS." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2, 195–208. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26939975>. Accessed 24 August 2023.

Heglar, C.J. 2001. *Rethinking The Slave Narrative. Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft*. Greenwood Press.

Hill, E. Jordan, D. Tiefenthäler, A. Triebert, C. Stein, R. Willis, H. 2020 *How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/31/us/george-floyd-investigation.html>. Accessed 24 August 2023.

Hine, D. C. (2007). "Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South": Twenty Years After" *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 92, No. 1 , 13–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20064151>.

Hoffman, B. 2021. *Domestic Terrorism Strikes U.S. Capitol, and Democracy*. Council on Foreign Relations. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31152>.

Holte, J. C. 1982 *The Representative Voice: Autobiography and the Ethnic Experience*. *Ethnic Biography and Autobiography*, Vol. 9, No. 2, *Melus*, 25-46.

Hooks, B. 2015. *Yearning. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. 711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017.

Horn, J. 2011. *The Founding of English America: Jamestown*. Vol. 25, No. 1, Oxford University press, 25-19 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23210257>.



Horning, A. J. Kelso, W. M. Lucchetti, N. M. Cotter J. L. 1998. *Journey to Jamestown*. Vol. 51, No. 2. Archaeological Institute of America, 56-63 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41771365>.

Humez, J. M. 1996. "Reading 'The Narrative of Sojourner Truth' as a Collaborative Text". *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Vol. 16, no.1, 29–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346921>.

Jones, J. M. 2018. *Michelle Obama Ends Hillary Clinton's Run as Most Admired*. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245669/michelle-obama-ends-hillary-clinton-run-admired.aspx>. Accessed 17 September 20123.

Josipovic, I. Vujeva, M. 2021. *Economic Aspects of Slavery in the Triangular Trade in the Early Modern Period*. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of History, University Josip Juraj Strossmayer, Croatia.

Junaidi, M. S. 2022. *A Discourse Historical Analysis of Identity Construction in Becoming (2018) by Michelle Obama*. University of Exeter, UK.

Kooijman, J. 2013. *Yes We Can, This Is It: America and Celebrity Culture*. In *Fabricating the Absolute Fake: America in Contemporary Pop Culture - Revised Edition*. Amsterdam University Press. 147–168. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wp7ck.11>.

Le, D. Stout, C. T. 2012. "Living the Dream: Barack Obama and Blacks' Changing Perceptions of the American Dream." *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 5. 1338–59. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42864130>.

Mccray M. 2022. *A History of the Journey from the Third World Center to the Carl A. Fields Center for Equality + Cultural Understanding*. 50 Years of inclusion. <https://www.50yearsofinclusion.princeton.edu/history-of-the>. Accessed 6 July 2023.

Obama White House archives, n.d. *Economic Rescue, Recovery, and Rebuilding on a New Foundation*. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-record/economy>. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Nacos, B. L., Shapiro, R. Y., & Bloch-Elkon, Y. 2020. *Donald Trump: Aggressive Rhetoric and Political Violence. Perspectives on Terrorism*. Vol. 14, no. 5, 2–25. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26940036>.

Newman J. 2022. *Michelle Obama Has Some Advice*. The New York Times. Accessed <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/15/books/review/the-light-we-carry-michelle-obama.html> 23 August 2023.

NBC News, 2016. *2008: A Look Back at President Barack Obama's Historic Election*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/slideshow/2008-look-back-president-barack-obama-s-historic-election-n678256>. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Obama, M. 2016. *Remarks by the First Lady at the Democratic National Convention*. National Archives. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/07/25/remarks-first-lady-democratic-national-convention>. Accessed 1 September 2023.

PBSO NewsHour, n.d. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/barack-obamas-keynote-address-at-the-2004-democratic-national-convention>. Accessed 13 July 2013.

Pilkington, E. 2009. Michelle Obama may have white slave-owner ancestor. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/09/michelle-obama-white-slave-owner>. Accessed 1 September 2023.

Podell, L. *Compare the Two Speeches*. The California College of the Arts, San Francisco. <https://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches/#> (Accessed 3 July 2023).

Rawley, J. A. Behrendt, S. D. 2005. *The transatlantic Slave Trade*. University of Nebraska Press.

Sanders, M.A. 1994. *Theorizing the Collaborative Self: The Dynamics of Contour and Content in the Dictated Autobiography*. *New Literary History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 445–58. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/469458>.

Schäfer, S. 2015. Phenomenal Woman: Michelle Obama's Embodied Rhetoric and the Cultural Work of Fashion Biographies. Vol.60, No. 2/3, WINTER GmbH, 235-254.

Selzer, L. F. 2010. *Barack Obama, the 2008 Presidential Election, and the New Cosmopolitanism: Figuring the Black Body*. *MELUS*, vol. 35, no. 4. 15–37. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25759556>.

Smith Foster, F. 1996. *Resisting Incidents*. In Garfield, D. M., Zafar, R. 1996 *Harriet Jacobs and incidents in the life of a slave girl: new critical essays*. Cambridge University Press.

Springer, K. 2001. *The Interstitial Politics of Black Feminist Organizations*. *Meridians*, vol.1, no.2, 155–191. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338461>.

Stauffer, J. 2002. Frederick Douglass's self-fashioning and the making of a Representative American man in Fish, A. *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave narrative*. Cambridge University Press.

Stern, M. 1989, "John F. Kennedy and Civil Rights: From Congress to the Presidency." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 4, 797–823. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27550573>.

Silva R. 2022. *The Light We Carry by Michelle Obama review – a guide for life from the former first lady*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/20/the>

[light-we-carry-by-michelle-obama-review-a-guide-for-life-from-the-former-first-lady](#). Accessed 38 August 2023.

Strickland, C. 2022. *The Fight for Equality Continues: A New Social Movement Analysis of The Black Lives Matter Movement and the 1960's Civil Rights Movement*. Phylon (1960-), vol. 59, no. 1, 71–90. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27150915>. Accessed 25 Aug. 2023.

Taylor, K. Y. 2020. *UNTIL BLACK WOMEN ARE FREE, NONE OF US WILL BE FREE. Barbara Smith and the Black feminist visionaries of the Combahee River Collective*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/until-black-women-are-free-none-of-us-will-be-free>. Accessed 4 July 2023.

Terre, R. 2016. 'Changing the Conversation': Contexts for Reading Michelle Obama's *American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America*." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 75–108. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.37.2.0075>.

The New York Time, 2008. Obama rethinks TV interview with his daughters. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/09/world/americas/09iht-girls.4.14367156.html>. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Verna L. W. 2009. *The First (Black) Lady*. *Denver University Law Review* 86, no. 3 833–850. [https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/denlr86&id=850&men\\_tab=srchresults#](https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?collection=journals&handle=hein.journals/denlr86&id=850&men_tab=srchresults#).

Vorenberg, M. 2001. *Final Freedom. The Civil WAR, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment*. Cambridge University Press.

Washington, D. A. 1993 "'I HAVE A DREAM': A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 23, no. 2, 16–19. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41068415>.

Westfall S. S. 2021. *Michelle Obama Talks Her COVID Year: Unexpected Blessings, Quarantine Hobbies & Depression and What's Next*. People. <https://people.com/politics/michelle-obama-gets-real-about-her-covid-year/>. Accessed 24 August 2023.

White House government web site, n.d. Barack Obama. The 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/presidents/barack-obama/>. Accessed 20 July 2023.

Yermack, D. 2010. *The Michelle Markup: The First Lady's impact on stock prices of fashion companies*. NYU Working Paper No. 2451/29629. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1601129](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1601129).

You Tube, 2018. *Michelle Obama opens up about miscarriage, new memoir 'Becoming'* in the ABC News channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LHyc0zvED0>. Accessed 7 July 2023.

## Abstract

The main purpose of this thesis is to explain and interpret the highlights of the life of the First Black First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama.

I will focus on the two autobiographies of Michelle Obama, *Becoming*, published in 2018, and *The Light We Carry*, published in 2022. The books are necessary to understand how this woman and her husband, Barack Obama, changed the historical view of politics and to explore how racial and gender boundaries affected political opinions.

Michelle Obama is an icon for all the Afro-American women who, for the first time, could identify with her.

This dissertation also aims to emphasize the importance of the Afro-American autobiography genre through an analysis of its origins. In fact, slave narratives are a sort of tool and a statement that slaves used in order to express themselves, to finally have a voice, and to declare their freedom. In particular, I chose as a symbol the female black writers, Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth, who opened the way for future generations of women and succeeded in establishing a significant position among African American writers.



## Italian Summary

Il presente elaborato è volto ad analizzare due biografie di Michelle Obama, *Becoming* e *The Light We Carry*. Obama è stata la prima afroamericana a diventare First Lady degli Stati Uniti. Ha avuto e continua ad avere un forte impatto nella società americana e, grazie a lei, per la prima volta, le donne nere si sono sentite rappresentate.

La First Lady è diventata un simbolo non solo per le donne americane ma anche per le donne in tutto il mondo. Una ragazza qualunque, cresciuta in un quartiere del sud di Chicago, abituata ad avere tutto ciò che le serviva intorno a cinque isolati, è diventata il punto di riferimento di intere generazioni.

Il primo capitolo è un excursus storico delle origini afroamericane in America segnata da violenza e, discriminazione disumana. Gli schiavi erano venduti in mercati come oggetti, frustati fino a morte, marchiati a sangue e separati dalle proprie famiglie. Lo schiavismo ha profondamente caratterizzato lo sviluppo della società nera negli Stati Uniti.

La vittoria dei Nordisti nella guerra civile diede il via all'emancipazione dei neri, ma fu solo l'inizio di una vera inclusione sociale.

In tale contesto, la scrittura autobiografica divenne un luogo sicuro, un modo per esprimere apertamente la vita e la sofferenza di donne e uomini.

Nel secondo e terzo capitolo analizzo entrambi i libri.

*Becoming* è un'autobiografia a tutti gli effetti; la First Lady descrive la sua vita, dall'infanzia, al periodo trascorso all'università di Princeton, i suoi studi di giurisprudenza, l'incontro con il suo futuro marito Barack Obama e la candidatura di quest'ultimo come Presidente del Stati Uniti d'America. Obama si racconta a 360 gradi, mostrandosi come una donna uguale a tutte le altre che, pur con le sue paure e debolezze, deve affrontare le difficoltà nel suo ruolo di madre, moglie, donna in carriera, e First Lady degli Stati Uniti, oltretutto prima donna afroamericana a investire questo ruolo. *The Light We Carry* ha obiettivi diversi rispetto alla biografia precedente; qui, infatti, Obama esprime opinioni e fornisce consigli; diventa una specie di guida e supporto morale al lettore. Si focalizza su diversi episodi del XXI secolo come, per esempio, la pandemia Covid - circostanza particolare che ha cambiato radicalmente la vita delle persone – e su come lei stessa l'abbia affrontata.

La First Lady si esprime anche dal punto di vista politico e su diverse problematiche, per esempio nei riguardi della presidenza di Donald Trump, manifestando la sua completa

disapprovazione riguardo ai suoi atteggiamenti, politici e non, tenuti da quest'ultimo e su due eventi che hanno sconvolto l'America: l'omicidio di George Floyd e l'attacco al Campidoglio del 6 gennaio 2021. Il primo ha originato proteste in tutti gli Stati americani. Il primo ha originato proteste in tutti gli Stati americani, che hanno fatto conoscere in tutto il mondo il movimento Black Lives Matter, da sempre in prima fila per la parità dei diritti della comunità afroamericana, ed evidenziato la persistenza del razzismo nella società americana.

Nel secondo, estremisti del partito repubblicano - proprio quelli che si rifanno alle gesta dei patrioti dell'indipendenza dal Regno Unito - assalirono il Congresso americano, dando via a un vero e proprio attacco diretto alla democrazia.

L'analisi di questo libro mi ha portato alla riflessione riguardo alla creazione del personaggio pubblico dell'ex First Lady e il perché il popolo americano, nonostante siano passati molti anni dalle prime elezioni del 2008, mostri ancora profondi rispetto e devozione nei suoi confronti; il popolo sente la sua vicinanza e la sua autenticità, e sono queste le qualità che rendono il suo personaggio così amato.