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The Meaning of “Angry Black Woman” in Print Media Coverage of First Lady Michelle Obama

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Over the years scholars have studied representations of African American women in a variety of genres, which include music, literature, news and entertainment media. In general, they have arrived at similar conclusions: African American women’s representations, particularly those that linger in the nation’s memory, are stereotypical, negative and often controversial (Moody, 2011; Tyree, 2011; Bogle, 2002; & Hill Collins, 2000).

In 2008, news coverage of Michelle Obama, wife of then U.S. senator and Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, generated new interest in how African American women are portrayed in news media. Of particular interest was the label, angry black woman, which news media used to label her following her infamous statement in early 2008 of being ‘proud of her country’ during a campaign speech for her husband, who was then an Illinois Senator and presidential candidate. Soyini (2009) describes the attacks following First Lady Michelle Obama’s remarks about being proud of her country as *crazy patriotism*, or the unhealthy condition that impairs the ability to both love and critique, to both honor and re-imagine, and to both recognize the noble possibilities of this country while interrogating its wrongs. Still, although efforts would be made to reshape her image and to keep her on script for the rest of the campaign and throughout the first term of the Obama Administration, the angry black woman label would resurface again to describe Mrs. Obama when the book, *The Obamas*, hit the stands in 2012 (Holland, 2012).

But is the angry black woman a new stereotype that has emerged to describe black women, or is it merely a modification of other traditionally stereotypical images of African American women? This

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study seeks to add to the breadth of knowledge and understanding about stereotyping by examining the case of First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama as an angry black woman.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Origin of African American Women Stereotypes

Stereotyping occurs when a negative and/or misleading generalization is made about a category of people and used to predict or explain behavior (Davis & Harris, 1998). Stereotypes usually evolve over a period of time as a result of repetitious portrayals of specific groups of people (Devine, 1989). African American female stereotyping is has been around since African womens first came to the United States. Unlike stereotypes that are associated with white women, which are usually sexist in nature, African American women's stereotypes are rooted in slavery and, therefore, racist in nature (Jewell, 1993).

Initial images of African American women were based on stereotypes developed largely by slave owners attempting to justify the institution of slavery and, equally important, seeking to provide a rationale for their refusal to recognize gender differences in the treatment of slaves. (p. 72) In addition, Kern-Foxworth (1994) writes that there was little or no distinction made between advertisements for female and male African American runaway slaves. In fact, women in advertisements were called wenches, a term used to refer to a young woman, a female servant, or a lewd woman or prostitute. The term, it is assumed, was what the mistresses of African American female slaves inflicted upon them to reinforce stereotyping, which in turn, also allowed them to retaliate against them for bearing the offspring of their husbands, brothers and fathers (p. 20).

The oldest and perhaps most recognized stereotype is the loving, overweight, independent, asexual, cantankerous, yet motherly mammy (Adams & Fuller, 2006). Next is the less loving matriarch, who is known for controlling and emasculating her man (Hill Collins, 2000; Ransby & Matthews, 1995;

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Wallace, 1978). She is often portrayed as loving and caring for the white family for whom she works (Bogle, 2002; Hill Collins, 2000). The welfare queen/recipient is the epitome of a bad black mother.

Opposite the matriarch, she is not too aggressive, and contributes to her children's poor faring in the world by passing her bad traits on to them (Hill Collins, 2000; Sklar, 1995). Deemed by many scholars as being the most negative of old stereotypes is the jezebel, who is depicted as exotic, promiscuous, with excessive and out- of-control sexual desires, all of which she uses to solicit love, attention and material gain (Hill Collins, 2000; Morton, 1991). More recent and contemporary variations of the jezebel, which have the same characteristics, are the "chicken head," the "hood rat" (Stephens & Phillips, 2003), and the "freak" (Cleage, 1993).

In addition, new stereotypes exist for black females. Among these is the "gangsta" female, who is described as being self-sufficient and aggressive and who resides in the urban settings alongside her male counterpart (Mitchell, 1999; Hampton 2000). The "gold digger," also known as the "pigeon" and "hoochie mama," are considered as having little social status, uneducated and known for possessing sex as their main commodity (Stephens & Phillips, 2003).

Finally, the angry Black woman, the focus of this study, is seen as a form of the "mouthy harpy" (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Tyree (2011) found that stars in reality television shows who fit the angry black woman stereotype, exhibited a mixture of stereotypical behaviors. These include use of head shaking, arm folding, harsh facial expression usage, and neck jerking while speaking. Making verbal threats, frequently engaging in arguments, yelling, provoking confrontations with roommates, and threatening to fight others, also were common.

Famous Women Cast as Angry Black Women

As reported in the *Boston Globe*, author Gail Wyatt offers the following comment to explain the angry black woman stereotype:

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The black woman who's achievement-oriented, kind of no-nonsense, overworked, exhausted, not particularly kind or compassionate, but very driven... tart-tongued, neck-rolling, loudmouthed sister... The angry black woman is so ingrained in society that the tag gets slapped on any African American woman in a position of power. Consider National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, who was shown on TV and in newspapers looking monumentally peeved last month (March 2003) after her former counterterrorism adviser Richard Clarke began chastising his former boss for failing to adequately fight terrorism.

As previously described, one characteristic of the angry black woman typically is that of an opinionated woman, most often seen in a position of earned power, all of which were traits characteristic of Mrs. Obama prior to her arrival on the national scene. For example, as the holder of bachelor's and master's degrees from Princeton University, and a law degree from Harvard University, she is well educated. Her independence and success as a leader also were evident by the fact that she, as vice-president for community and external affairs at the University of Chicago hospitals, had been employed in a position that paid in excess of \$300,000 a year (Harper, 2008). As such, it came as no surprise during the 2008 presidential campaign that Mrs. Obama was ripe for being framed as an angry black woman. In the early months of the 2008 campaign, her off-the-cuff remarks during a political rally that America was "downright mean" and that she felt proud of her country "for the first time" did little to help her or her husband's image (Doyle, 2008). Critics labeled her as unpatriotic (Nelson, 2008), and as an arrogant, cold, angry black woman (Leonard, 2008). An opinion column in *The Irish Times* (Aug. 22, 2008) went as far as to suggest that critics were guilty of sexism as well as racism in their attitudes toward Mrs. Obama. Following is an excerpt:

Media coverage of Obama has packed a nasty racism-sexism combo that is quickly becoming a national disgrace. First a Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox News Segment captioned a picture of Michelle as "Obama's Baby Mama", a disparaging term for unmarried mothers. Right-wing

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commentators have called her an “angry black woman” and “Obama’s bitter half”, while the National Review ran a cover story dubbing her “Mrs. Grievance”. Then came the notorious, if satirical, New Yorker cover, where she was featured as having a large Afro and toting a machine gun. (p. 14)

Powell and Kantor (2008) reported in the *New York Times* that a *Slate* columnist had claimed, with little evidence, that the college thesis she wrote in 1985 while a graduate student at Princeton was proof that she was once influenced by black separatism. The manuscript was about racial exclusion and focused on what she’d experienced 23 years earlier while studying at an elite white university. In it, she predicted the path she’d chosen would likely steer her to “further integration and/or assimilation into a white cultural and social structure that will only allow me to remain on the periphery of society; never becoming a full participant” (Wente, 2008).

It has been suggested that those very traits and extremely high polling negatives forced the Obama camp into overdrive in an attempt to overhaul Michelle Obama’s misunderstood media image. For example, Allison Samuels (2009) reported the following observations in *Newsweek* magazine:

Early on in the primaries, after she was labeled too forward and too loud, Michelle demonstrated self-restraint and discipline by dialing back... Her remark about being ‘proud of my country’ for the first time was another rare misstep. But she quickly learned to play the adoring and uncontroversial wife ... She toned it down and took to wearing pearls and reassuring J. Crew cardigans. (p. 29)

In the months that followed, Michelle Obama was criticized widely for voicing her opinions and was even depicted, along with her husband, on the cover of *The New Yorker* (July 21, 2008) as radical terrorists wanting to gain control over the White House. Still, given that African American media portrayals, particularly on television, have been based on negative stereotypes that do not objectively or accurately portray reality (see Dates, 1990; Entman 1990,

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1992; Rada 2000), the emergence of Barack and Michelle Obama onto the political and media scene even prompted Mrs. Obama, herself, to speak out and help to inform the conversation surrounding this image. Puente (2008) reported in *USA Today* that Mrs. Obama explained, during a “Good Morning America” interview, the mystique surrounding her family:

“As we’ve all said in the black community, we don’t see all of who we are in the media. We see snippets of our community and distortions of our community. So the world has this perspective that somehow Barack and Michelle Obama are different, that we’re unique. And we’re not. You just haven’t seen us before.” (p. 1A)

But that would change in 2012 with the release of author Jody Kantor’s book, *The Obamas*. The book’s depictions of the First Lady and her early days in the White House would spark another round of controversy about her (Holland, 2012). According to Kantor, she had clashes with the president's staff. Notable were fights with former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and tension with former White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs, whom Kantor writes is one of her sources. Another source was White House Special Advisor Valerie Jarrett. In an interview with CBS shortly after the release of the book, Michelle Obama denied all of the claims in the book, saying specifically, that she had never had a cross word with Emanuel and she considered Gibbs a trusted advisor (Cornwell, 2012, p. 12). In an interview with the *Toronto Star* (Jan. 12, 2012), Kantor shared how surprised she was about Mrs. Obama’s reactions to the book, particularly her objections to being portrayed as an angry black woman. Kantor explained that she mainly discussed how frustrating life in the White House can be, especially in this case for newcomers such as President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama (p. A9). And although Kantor didn’t regret the attention her book was garnering in the media, she still lamented all the negative feedback from those she said “just haven't read the book” (Boesveld, 2012).

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RESEARCH QUESTION

Qualitative research, unlike quantitative research, involves a different approach that allows researchers to ask and answer different types of questions (Salkind, 2006). Qualitative studies such as this one have one purpose, which is to demonstrate the fact that describing and reporting about high profile, and accomplished black women, such as Michelle Obama, is a complicated process that often results in misunderstandings that result in stereotyping. As such, this study sought to answer the following research question:

RQ1: What words or descriptors do news media use to describe Michelle Obama as an angry black woman in news content?

METHODOLOGY

Method and Procedure

A qualitative content analysis of newspaper content was completed. Newspaper articles were downloaded from the Lexis-Nexis database *LexisNexis® Academic*. This database offers students and faculty at universities quick, easy access to more than 10,000 of the most credible business, legal, and news sources available in a single location. Full text of articles from more than 2,500 newspapers, including top-tier news publications such as *The New York Times®* and *The Washington Post®*, and local, national, and international sources comprise this database (<http://www.lexisnexis.com>).

The sample period included the dates of January 1980 through January 31, 2012. The year 1980 was used for two reasons. First, it is the beginning year for articles captured in the database. Second, it allows the researcher an opportunity to gauge when Michelle Obama initially became associated with the angry black woman stereotype. The stop date of January 31, 2012, was used because it captured the peak period for articles about the Kantor book release and subsequent controversy surrounding the book's release. The search terms "angry black woman" and "Michelle Obama" were used. Because the study sought to determine what descriptors journalists used to describe the angry black woman

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stereotype, all article types -- news and feature stories, opinion columns, and book reviews -- were included in the sample.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Sample Under Study

Only articles that contained the terms “angry black woman” and “Michelle Obama” were chosen. The sample resulted in 142 articles. Further examination revealed that some articles were duplicates, which reduced the sample to 118 usable articles published in domestic and international newspapers from June 11, 2008 through January 31, 2012. Table 1 illustrates the total number of articles analyzed for each of the years yielding articles that met the search criteria.

Although the year 2012 yielded the most articles ($n = 62$), it is worth noting also that January was the only month in 2012 that was included in the sample. Again, the sample stop date of January 31, 2012, was used because it captured the peak period for articles that were published about the Kantor book and the subsequent controversy surrounding the book’s release. The year 2008 yielded the second highest total with 29 articles. Here again, the articles meeting the criteria included slightly less than six months of the year with the first article being published on June 11, 2008. The year 2009 saw a reduction from 29 to 17 in total number of articles published that met the search criteria. In 2010, the number dropped to four articles published meeting the search criteria. The next year, 2011, yielded a slight increase from four to six articles published.

Table 1. Articles Containing “Angry Black Woman” and “Michelle Obama” by Year

Year # Usable Articles

2008 N = 29 - Beginning with June 11, 2008

2009 N = 17

2010 N = 04

2011 N = 06

2012 N = 62 - Ending with January 31, 2012

Total = 118 usable articles (Original total was 142. Duplicates were eliminated.)

Clearly these figures indicate that some incident had to have happened to affect the frequency in reporting activity shown from 2008 to 2012. The following sections discuss what trends occurred in reporting for each of the five years mentioned.

In February 2007, then-Illinois Senator Barack Obama announced in Springfield, Ill., that he would seek the 2008 Democratic nomination for president. By February 2008, Michelle Obama had taken a leave from her job as a hospital administrator in Chicago and begun her journey campaigning for him. However, at first her husband’s campaign failed drastically in grooming her for the task (Romano, 2009). As a result, on February 18, 2002, she would utter those infamous 15 words in Milwaukee, Wis., that would haunt her for months to come: “... for the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country because it feels like hope is finally making a comeback” (Doyle, 2008). Later that day she delivered an amended version of her comments in Madison, Wis.: "For the first time in my adult lifetime, I’m really proud of my country, and not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change" (Knight, 2008).

Altogether, these missteps would put a dark spot on her image, and, in turn, be used by opponents to hinder her husband’s campaign, particularly the negative actions inflicted by commentators from the

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right wing who, then and still, tend to be associated more with 'conservative' values, the status quo and tradition, and tend to be tougher on law and order than those on the left (Difference Between). In fact, both these incidents prompted some right-wingers in February 2008 to comb through her 23-year-old senior thesis, which at the time was still housed at Princeton, for evidence that she was an angry racist. After all, the manuscript is titled, "Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Black Community" (Timpone, 2012).

The following month, in March 2008, the future First Lady had some even harsher things to say. In a *New Yorker* profile she is quoted in a stump speech made throughout South Carolina as characterizing America as "just downright mean." She continued, by claiming that the country is divided, life is not good, and the people are "guided by fear" and cynicism. "We have become a nation of struggling folks who are barely making it every day," she told churchgoers in that primary state. "Folks are just jammed up, and it's gotten worse over my lifetime" (<http://www.wnd.com/2008/03/58072/>).

Adding fuel to the fire was a cover of the *New Yorker* (July 21, 2008) magazine, which did little to downplay Michelle's image as an angry black woman. It depicted the Democratic presidential candidate and his wife as fist-bumping terrorists. Her caricature also is shown wearing an Angela Davis style afro and toting an AK47 rifle while his is shown dressed in Muslim garb.

In all, the Obama campaign went into overdrive to remake her image. One memorable public relations tactic was her appearance on "The View" in June 2008, where one journalist writes that she was portrayed as an "articulate, intelligent lady with a down-to-earth human side... shows she's far from the one-dimensional angry black woman some critics have tried to portray her," (*The Guardian*, June 19, 2008). Finally, by the time her husband took office in January 2009, she was well on the road to re-building her image. Her role as First Lady, replete with campaigns to support military families, to help youth eat healthier school lunches and exercise more, to raise organic vegetables in a garden on the White House grounds, her fashion, and other public gestures, would send her approval ratings

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soaring among both Whites and Blacks. As a result, reporters' attention changed, causing an apparent drastic drop in interest by most reporters from 2009 to 2011 to discuss the angry black woman stereotype when reporting about the First Lady's activities.

Analysis of Newspaper Articles Published in 2008

By the end of 2008, some 29 articles had been published that recanted the Milwaukee and Madison incidents. As well, journalists used a variety of terms to help interpret and explain the meaning of the angry black woman stereotype exemplified by Mrs. Obama. These included "unpatriotic", (Nelson, 2008) "ungrateful", (Doyle, 2008) "strong, outspoken", (Wente, 2008) "Obama's bitter half," (Doyle, 2008) "angry", (Nelson, 2008) "chip on her shoulder," (Munro, 2008) "too strong and too scary to win votes," (Antonowicz, 2008) "domineering," (Samuels, 2008) "tough," (Baldwin, 2008) and "radical and opinionated" (Baxter, 2008).

Newspaper Articles Published in 2009

By 2009, efforts to remake Michelle Obama into the ideal First Lady had succeeded. The number of articles meeting the search criteria had dwindled to 17 for the entire year. When the terms angry black woman and Michelle Obama appeared in these articles, most of the time it was done to discuss how she had transformed her image. Allen-Mills (2009) reported in *The Australian*, that the angry black woman who once suggested she had not been proud of her country was now one of the most glamorous first ladies since Jackie Kennedy. Baldwin (2009) reported in *The (London) Times* that she had smoothed her harder edges as a Harvard-educated lawyer and an angry black woman who had been seen as a liability during the presidential campaign.

Newspaper Articles Published in 2010

As Table 1 shows, journalists' interest in writing about the angry black woman stereotype as it related to Michelle Obama had fallen off drastically and was almost non-existent in 2010, with only four articles appearing in the database search. One of the four articles is a book review written by McLarin

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(2010) of Sheri Parks' book, *Fierce Angels*, which examines the myth of the strong black woman. Dowd (2010) reported in *The International Herald Tribune* about Mrs. Obama's decision to leave the president behind on his birthday while she and the children went away for the weekend. Givhan (2010) discussed in the *Washington Post* the First Lady's role as mother and how she had changed how some Americans saw her as well as how inner city youth in the District of Columbia saw themselves.

Newspaper Articles Published in 2011

Journalists' interest in writing about the angry black woman stereotype in 2011 increased very little from four the previous year to six. The six articles were published from February through October. Although the stereotype was mentioned, it was used mostly to discuss her transformation. For example, Marlowe (2011) mentioned in a story she had written for the *Irish Times* that Mrs. Obama had gone from wearing pin striped or tweed power suits to bright colours and unconventional shapes. Marlowe also mentioned a review of Kate Bett's new book, *Everyday Icon: Michelle Obama and the Power of Style*, which focuses on Mrs. Obama's makeover. Wickham (2011) opined in *USA Today* about how author Sophia Nelson's book, *Black Women Redefined*, had given Michelle Obama kudos for helping black women's images.

Newspaper Articles Published in 2012

As mentioned already, use of the angry black woman stereotype to describe Mrs. Obama would resurface full force in January 2012, when an article reported by Judith Timson (2012) was published in the January 6, 2012, edition of *The Globe and Mail*. Prior to that, it appears that the last time a story had been published reinforcing her as being an angry black woman was when a story written by Krissah Thompson (2012) was published in the October 30, 2012, issue of the *Washington Post*.

Then, *The Times* ran an article in its January 11, 2012 issue featuring a headline that read, "I'm not some Angry Black Woman," which were the exact words Michelle Obama had used in a CBS interview to contest what she had been told about what was written in Kantor's book. Specifically, the

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book describes apparent tensions between the First Lady and White House staff. The White House dismissed the book as Kantor's writings about her imaginations (Allen-Mills, 2012). However, Kantor countered by pointing out that she had conducted more than 200 interviews with staff to gather details for the book. Kantor was shocked to learn of the First Lady's reactions, particularly since Michelle Obama had admitted to having not read the book (Henneberger, 2012). It also is worth noting that in the aforementioned discussion of traditional stereotypes for black women, the matriarch was described as being less loving and for controlling and emasculating her man. And while it can be argued that Mrs. Obama is portrayed as being controlling and less loving in the Kantor book, it does not appear that Kantor is arguing that she uses her alleged controlling behavior to emasculate the president.

In all, some 62 articles published in 2012 were found usable for the sample. Journalists who worked for both domestic and international news organizations—*Korea Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Sunday Times of London*, etc.--reported about the book's contents and the First Lady's CBS interview remarks. For example, Kathleen Parker (2012) reported in *The Washington Post* that the book revealed that she was known for clashing with her husband's staff, for firing off angry emails to the director of scheduling when she couldn't get in to see her husband, and for clashing with former White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel. Swain (2010) also reported in *The Daily Telegraph* that the book portrayed her as being pushy during the healthcare reform campaign. In all, the book's contents were just what many commentators needed to ignite the angry black woman stereotype midway through the 2012 presidential campaign season. Some journalists such as Bill Maxwell (2012) claimed they had read the book for themselves. Ten of the 62 articles featured headlines that focused on accusations that the book had portrayed Mrs. Obama as an angry black woman. "Michelle Obama has denied .. and is tired of the Angry Black Woman Stereotype," read the headline that ran on a story in the January 11, 2012, issue of *The Telegraph*. The headline on a story reported by Bonnie Greer (2012) that ran in an issue of *The Telegraph* mentioned that Mrs. Obama was "fighting against charges that she is

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meddlesome,” while the headline on a story reported by Virginia Blackburn (2012) in the *Sunday Express* featured those three infamous words as a question: “Angry First Lady?”

Journalists also used several descriptors for the First Lady that were found in the book. One article (Harvey, 2012) suggested that she was portrayed as “pushy, bossy, ungrateful, and resentful, and that her life had been constrained by her husband’s success, and bitter that she had given up so much to help him campaign for a dream job with a dream house that had turned out to be a cage.” They also suggested that the book had portrayed her as being “unhappy” (Addley, 2012), “controlling” (King, 2012), and “assertive” (Timpane, 2012). Mundy (2012) reported in the *Toronto Star* that she had come across as an “irritated help meet,” who was “forceful in her displeasure” and a brooding “unrecognized force.” Despite these negative terms, a *Washington Post* – Kaiser Family Survey (Thompson & Williams, 2012) of black women revealed during this time that they had perceived the First Lady as “intelligent,” “strong,” and “classy.” To them, she was a role model, someone familiar – like a sister or aunt.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The following research question was posed for this study: What words or descriptors do news media use to describe Michelle Obama as an angry black woman in news content? It appears that some of the most common terms used during the period examined in this study have been “controlling,” “assertive,” “tough,” “outspoken,” “bitter,” “ungrateful,” and of course, “angry.” Given that all 118 articles included at least one mention of the angry black woman stereotype as well as the decline and spike in articles using the stereotype over the five-year period, this study’s results show that journalists continue to reinforce this negative stereotype when reporting on powerful, famous, intelligent, albeit outspoken, black women.

In an interview with Politico (Henderson, 2009), Professor Beverly Guy-Sheftall suggested that this type of stereotyping inflicted upon women such as First Lady Michelle Obama happens because “the dominant culture doesn’t know what to do with women such as Michelle Obama, so they put her

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under a label with which they are familiar. In doing so, news media use a variety of negative terms to explain what is meant by the angry black woman stereotype." Allport (1954) argued that "stereotypes are socially supported, continually reviewed, and hammered in, by our media of mass communication—by novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage radio, and televisions" (p. 200). What is problematic about the continuation of the practice of casting prominent black women as angry black women is that it sends a clear message to all similarly situated black women: It's OK to be accomplished, educated, smart, and even physically attractive, so long as you don't speak your mind!

News reports play a significant role in shaping how the world perceives women's images. For this reason, it is problematic that newspaper articles contain stereotypical language about African American women. Black women, in particular, should take it upon themselves to become familiar with the roots of these stereotypes if they desire to guard against being negatively impacted by the stereotypes.

But why stop here? We offer the following two suggestions to help address the problem of assigning unfair or unnecessary stereotypes in news reports for African American women, particularly high profile women such as First Lady Michelle Obama:

1. The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) should strongly encourage its member schools to require that students majoring in journalism complete at least one diversity course as part of the curriculum needed to complete degree programs with emphasis in news.

2. The National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) should take the lead in helping to dissuade all journalists from using terms such as "angry black woman" to describe African American women in news content.

First, the ACEJMC (<http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/>) should urge its member schools to

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require that students pursuing degrees in journalism with an emphasis on news be required to complete at least one diversity course. Although two of the council's nine standards address curriculum and diversity issues, neither of the two specify that programs require that students take a course dedicated to diversity. So, again, it is suggested that the council encourage its members schools to require a course in some aspect of diversity. As such, programs should be granted the liberty to define what is meant by a diversity course. For example, a course could be one that focuses on race or gender, or both, perhaps.

Second, the NABJ should be urged to contribute to countering the practice of using stereotypical language in reporting. Founded on December 12, 1975, the National Association of Black Journalists is the largest organization of journalists of color in the nation. With more than 2,000 members, it is committed to providing a number of services, which include informational training for its members and the public (<http://www.nabj.org/>). For example, the *NABJ Style Guide* is posted on the organization's web site. However, it appears that the guide does not offer suggestions on how to avoid using stereotypical language, nor does it provide a list of alternative terms journalists can use when reporting about educated, independent African American women such as First Lady Michelle Obama. As such, it is recommended that an exploratory committee be charged with addressing these two deficiencies. For example, Fears (2004) examined perceptual stereotyping of African American women, and suggested four labels that can be used when describing their portrayals in news media. These include *the leader*, *the upstanding woman*, *the charmer*, and the *careerist*. Each of these images has its own set of unique adjectives that are used to describe the label. Leader, for example, is described as *powerful*, *aggressive*, *dominant*, and *determined*. Upstanding, consists of four descriptors — *dignified*, *honest*, *modest*, and *peaceful*. A third image, Charmer, consists of four descriptors — *happy*, *skinny*, *sexy*, and *attractive*. A fourth image, Careerist, consists of four adjectives -- *independent*, *career-oriented*, *successful*, and *not loving her man*.

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In all, an African American woman in a powerful leadership position should not be interpreted as being an angry person. Instead, terms used to describe her should be more diverse. By choosing other descriptors such as those developed by Fears, then and only then can we begin to expect to see more alternative and positive images and ways of describing black women in the media, particularly in news media content.

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