



Reading Michelle Obama's *Becoming* as a Black Feminist Epistemology

Lire *Devenir* de Michelle Obama comme une épistémologie féministe noire

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Abstract : *This study analyzes Michelle Obama's autobiography *Becoming* (2018) through the lens of black feminist epistemology, exploring its role as a platform for knowledge production among black women. Drawing upon Patricia Hill Collins' theoretical framework, the research examines how Obama's narrative reveals the different forms of oppression and how they operate within the hegemonic knowledge and how it offers a counter-narrative of black womanhood. The study concludes that Obama's memoir emerges as a black feminist epistemology that challenges systemic injustices, centers black women's experiences, and empowers them to assert their voices and agency.*

Keywords: *Becoming, racism, sexism, classism, black feminist epistemology*

Résumé : *Cette étude analyse l'autobiographie de Michelle Obama, *Becoming* (2018), à travers le prisme de l'épistémologie féministe noire, en explorant son rôle en tant que plateforme de production de connaissances parmi les femmes noires. En utilisant l'approche de Patricia Hill Collins, la recherche examine comment le récit d'Obama révèle les différentes formes d'oppression qui opèrent au sein de la connaissance hégémonique, et comment il propose un contre-récit de la féminité noire. L'étude conclut que les mémoires d'Obama émergent comme une épistémologie féministe noire qui remet en question les injustices systémiques, centre les expériences des femmes noires et les habilite à affirmer leurs voix et leur agentivité.*

Mots-clés : *Becoming, racisme, sexisme, classisme, épistémologie féministe noire*



Autobiography, as a literary genre, holds a unique position in the realm of literature. It offers readers an intimate glimpse into the lives, experiences, and perspectives of individuals, allowing for a deeper understanding of the human condition. Through the autobiographical lens, authors have the opportunity to narrate their personal journeys, confront societal norms, and grapple with complex questions of identity, agency, and power. In this sense, autobiographies serve not only as repositories of personal history but also as vehicles for storytelling, self-reflection, and cultural critique.

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One such autobiography that has captivated readers worldwide is Michelle Obama's *Becoming* (2018), which traces her remarkable journey from her upbringing on the South Side of Chicago to her tenure as the First Lady of the United States, offering readers a candid and compelling account of her life, experiences, and aspirations. However, *Becoming* transcends the boundaries of a traditional autobiography, as it not only chronicles Obama's personal narrative but also serves as a cultural artifact and a platform for social commentary. Michelle Obama's status as a black woman and a former First Lady imbues her autobiography with a unique resonance and relevance. Beyond simply recounting her life story, Obama's narrative serves as a means for transmitting messages about the struggles and empowerment of black women in contemporary society. Drawing upon Patricia Hill Collins' theoretical framework of black feminist epistemology, this research aims to show how Michelle Obama's *Becoming* serves as a vehicle for knowledge production among black women by focusing on the narrative's challenge of systemic injustices, its emphasis on black women's experiences, and the empowerment it offers them to assert their voices and agency within society.

Patricia Hill Collins' black feminist epistemology helps understand knowledge production process and the ways in which race, gender, and other social identities intersect to shape individuals' lived experiences and perspectives. Black feminist epistemology challenges traditional notions of knowledge and truth by centering the experiences and perspectives of black women, who have historically been marginalized and excluded from dominant systems of knowledge production. Collins argues that knowledge is not objective or neutral but rather influenced by power dynamics and social hierarchies. She emphasizes the importance of lived experience, storytelling, and community-based knowledge in understanding and interpreting the world. Black women's perspectives are valued as sources of insight and wisdom, offering alternative ways of knowing that challenge dominant narratives and expand the possibilities for understanding reality.

This study initially examines Michelle Obama's reflections on the various forms of oppression she encounters. It then delves into how she challenges and offers counter-narratives to traditional notions of black womanhood, diverging from hegemonic ideologies. Finally, it explores how her lived experiences and storytelling serve to validate her knowledge claims. This study is significant as it illuminates the multifaceted nature of Michelle Obama's *Becoming*, transcending mere life narrative to delve into complex explorations of identity intersections and power dynamics, which contributes to broader discussions on the role of autobiography in shaping collective understanding and fostering positive social change.

1. Tracing Michelle Obama's Journey with Racism, Sexism, and Classism

Michelle Obama's memoir offers a poignant narrative of her encounters with racism, sexism, and classism, painting a vivid picture of the challenges she faced throughout her life, spanning from her childhood on the South Side of Chicago to the White House. These reflections resonate with Patricia Hill Collins' framework of black feminist epistemology, which underscores the importance of understanding how hegemonic ideologies shape knowledge and consciousness via manipulating ideas, symbols, and ideologies that perpetuate the systems of oppression (2000: 285). She argues that the first step towards constructing counter-hegemonic knowledge is to understand epistemology, which "investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true.

Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (2000: 252). Michelle Obama's memoir delves into the intersectionality of oppression, exploring how racism, sexism, and classism manifest in various aspects of her life, including her experiences in social circles, academia, and media scrutiny. Through her narrative, she sheds light on the different stereotypes and degradations faced by black women, offering insights into the complex interplay of power dynamics and societal expectations that shape their lived experiences.

1.1. Skin-Color Prejudice

Michelle Obama's memoir provides a portrayal of how racial prejudice operates within hegemonic knowledge to oppress black people, particularly black women. From an early age, she noticed the vulnerability inherent in black people's skin color. An illustrative example is her brother's unjust accusation by an African American police officer of bike theft, revealing the systemic bias ingrained even in the minds of fellow African Americans who couldn't fathom a black boy obtaining a new bike honestly. This narrative unveils the insidious nature of racial prejudice, perpetuated both consciously and unconsciously within society. The memoir sheds light on the persistence of racial segregation despite outward appearances of harmony and integration. The vandalism of Michelle's father's Buick following the family's visit to the Stewarts, a light-skinned black family leaving in a predominantly white neighborhood, serves as a tangible manifestation of these tensions. Significantly, Michelle's mother's reflection on the fact that the neighbors didn't perceive the Stewarts' blackness until their visit highlights the nuances of colorism and racial discrimination. This incident prompts Michelle's family to return home in silence, symbolizing the pain that often accompanies the experience of racial prejudice.

Transitioning from her childhood experiences to her time at Princeton University, Obama's memoir continues to illuminate the complexities of racial prejudice in predominantly white academic environments. Her journey at Princeton reveals the stark reality faced by minority students striving to navigate an educational system that often fails to fully embrace diversity. Despite the university's purported commitment to inclusivity, the burden of assimilation disproportionately falls on the shoulders of minority students. As Michelle asserts, this dynamic demands a considerable amount of energy, effort, and confidence from minority students to assert their presence and voice within these academic spaces (2018: 66).

Michelle recounts the reaction of a white schoolteacher from New Orleans upon learning that she would be her daughter's roommate. The mother's insistence on separating them, coupled with her candid interview confirming her discomfort with a black girl near her daughter, exposes the deep-seated legacy of racial bigotry and intolerance that persists in society. She further narrates the experiences of her peers, highlighting Derrick's incident of being denied sidewalk space based on his race and the unfair scrutiny endured by a girl hosting friends of color. These incidents not only show the systemic barriers that students of color must navigate but also how racial otherness is perceived as a threat within predominantly white spaces, leading to increased scrutiny and marginalization. It is important to note that although Michelle Obama provides glimpses into her encounters with racism, the narrative often veils the more sordid details of racial discrimination, perhaps to maintain a balance between authenticity and broader audience appeal. This tactic is not uncommon in autobiographies written by African Americans for a predominantly white readership, as noted by Toni Morrison (1995: 90).

Still, Obama's memoir underscores the undeniable influence of the various forms of oppression that shape her experiences, as well as those of other black women and minorities in a predominantly white supremacist society. Her statement to Oprah Winfrey after leaving the White House: "Color. Wealth. These things that don't matter still play too much of a role in how we see one another" (qtd in. Snider, 2019: 10), succinctly encapsulates the pervasive nature of these societal biases.

1.2. The Interconnectedness of Blackness and Failure

Michelle Obama sheds light on the way hegemonic knowledge links the concept of failure to the experiences of black individuals, particularly within the context of education and socio-economic disparities. She reflects on her time at Bryn Mawr, a school situated in the racially and economically segregated South Shore neighborhood of Chicago. Despite efforts to maintain the school's integrity, racial and economic sorting persisted, resulting in a predominantly black and economically disadvantaged student population. The Chicago Defender published an article criticizing Bryn Mawr, from being one of the city's best public schools to a "run-down slum" governed by a "ghetto mentality". This statement was rejected by the school principal, who immediately hit back with a letter to the editor, defending his community of parents and students and deeming the newspaper piece "an outrageous lie, which seems designed to incite only feelings of failure and flight" (2018: 46). Obama insists that this perception reinforces the notion that failure is inevitable and already half arrived, and the use of the term "ghetto" further contributes to a sense of hopelessness and resignation within the black community.

The hegemonic conception of black failure perpetuates a cycle of doubt and self-questioning for students like Michelle Obama, who constantly grapple with the pervasive question, "Am I good enough?" (2018: 53). This feeling was further accentuated when a counselor at Whitney Young High School questioned her suitability for Princeton. Despite her parents' encouragement and belief in her abilities, the counselor's remark, delivered with a perfunctory smile, deeply shakes Michelle's confidence and reinforces her inner doubts of inadequacy. Although Michelle entered Princeton, the stark contrast between her background and that of her new classmates heightened these doubts, leading her to question whether she and her black peers were as intelligent as their predominantly white counterparts. Reflecting on her previous academic achievements, Michelle recognized that she and her peers were considered the best students in their predominantly black school and neighborhood. However, she was troubled by the unsettling possibility that their success was relative, fearing they were merely perceived as the "best of the worst" compared to students from more privileged backgrounds (2018: 54). Over time, however, she realized that her white peers were not inherently smarter; rather, they were buoyed by a sense of superiority instilled by history (2018: 69). Still, her determination to excel academically highlights the additional burden placed on minority individuals to prove their worthiness and capabilities in environments dominated by white privilege.

1.3. Media: Zero Tolerance for the Black Race

Michelle Obama's experiences during her husband's presidential campaigns vividly illustrate the intersection of media, racism, and hegemonic knowledge. The racist attacks and conspiracy theories leveled against them, such as the notion of "black folks" being inherently different and divisive (2018: 234), highlight how hegemonic narratives perpetuate racial stereotypes and divisions within society.

Despite not actively watching the news, Michelle remained acutely aware of the ways in which these attacks were being spun, with narratives depicting her as unpatriotic and hostile. The insidious nature of these attacks not only tarnished her image but also planted seeds of fear and distrust among the voting public, showcasing how media narratives can shape perceptions and reinforce systemic racism. Furthermore, Michelle's encounters with reporters and acquaintances during the campaign trail underscored the complexities of navigating race, gender, and educational background in predominantly white spaces. Questions about her identity as a five-foot-eleven, Ivy League-educated black woman addressing predominantly white audiences in Iowa reduced her multifaceted identity to simplistic narratives of difference, disregarding the nuances of her lived experiences. These inquiries, often posed with hesitancy and a superficial attempt to avoid offense, served to further marginalize her and reinforce hegemonic notions of race and gender.

Moreover, the disparaging critique of her senior thesis as if it were a “secret black-power manifesto” (2018: 234) exemplifies the pervasive suspicion surrounding discussions of race, particularly from the perspective of African American intellectuals. This demonstrates the intersectionality of racism and sexism, as critics not only question her intellectual capabilities but also dismiss her academic achievements. In other words, by reducing her scholarly work to incomprehensible gibberish and mocking her intellect, these critiques perpetuate the stereotype of the unintelligent black woman, erasing her agency and undermining her credibility as a scholar. Obama comments that this incident made her feel fully othered:

I was being painted not simply as an outsider but as fully “other,” so foreign that even my language couldn’t be recognized. It was a small-minded and ludicrous insult, sure, but his mocking of my intellect, his marginalizing of my young self, carried with it a larger dismissiveness. (2018: 234)

Michelle Obama faced unprecedented levels of public scrutiny and racially charged criticism that transcended conventional expectations for someone in her position. Upon her arrival at the White House, she found herself subjected to relentless examination not only of her political actions but also of her physical appearance, fashion choices, and even her facial expressions. These aspects of her identity were scrutinized and criticized in ways that starkly differed from the treatment experienced by her white predecessors.

Obama encountered racialized and gendered stereotypes, often being portrayed as an “angry black woman”, “radical militant”, or “Obama’s Baby Mama”. These negative depictions sought to delegitimize her role and diminish her influence, perpetuating harmful stereotypes about black women and reinforcing racist narratives about their character and intentions. Also, Obama’s candid reflection sheds light on the toll that pervasive stereotypes and baseless rumors took on her mental and emotional well-being. Despite her efforts to dispel these falsehoods, she found herself grappling with feelings of demoralization and frustration, trapped in a cycle where her identity as a strong, black woman was weaponized against her. In this context, it is important to note that “most of Obama’s narrative on race, however, comes courtesy not of her own perspective, but that of the many commentators who weaponized her blackness against her” (qtd in. Kovács, 2020: 278).

Michelle Obama also faced media backlash following her spontaneous gesture of hugging the Queen of England at Buckingham Palace, with headlines criticizing her breach of protocol and raising concerns about distracting from her husband's diplomatic efforts. Despite the criticism, Michelle stood by her actions, emphasizing the human connection she sought to make. The incident prompted discussions about her demeanor as First Lady, with questions posed about whether she was perceived as refreshingly honest or too direct, regal, or intimidating. Obama candidly expresses the emotional toll of such scrutiny, acknowledging that “this stuff hurt” (2018: 235). While Obama acknowledges the challenging nature of her role as the first black First Lady, recognizing that her position entails overcoming substantial obstacles to garner respect and acceptance, she also questions whether America has genuinely progressed to the point of electing a black president and transcending racial divisions.

The caricatured portrayal of herself perpetuated by the media offers scant resemblance to her authentic identity, illuminating the intertwined influences of racism and sexism in molding public perceptions of black women in positions of authority. Notably, Obama contends that these obstacles extend beyond her personal experience, serving as a reflection of pervasive misogyny. She draws parallels to Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, where gendered attacks underscored the broader challenges faced by women in the public sphere.

Michelle Obama's narrative powerfully portrays the systemic barriers and prejudices faced by black women across various aspects of society. Through her experiences, she underscores the imperative to redefine knowledge in order to confront systemic biases and inequalities. As Salami highlights, “demystifying knowledge is a process of redefining knowledge” (2020: 55). Building on this insight, Michelle's story lays the solid groundwork for the creation of counter-hegemonic knowledge that uplifts marginalized voices and challenges prevailing narratives.

2. Michelle Obama as a Counter-Narrative of Black Women's Stereotypes

Michelle Obama's memoir stands as a powerful testament to the resilience and agency of black women, offering a compelling counter-narrative to the stereotypes and expectations often imposed upon them. In *Becoming*, Obama navigates the complexities of identity, race, and gender, challenging prevailing ideologies and empowering black women to reclaim their narratives. Through her candid reflections and personal anecdotes, Obama invites readers to explore the nuances of black women's experiences and to reflect on the diverse paths to self-definition and empowerment. Collins' insights into counter-hegemonic knowledge provide a framework for understanding the significance of Obama's narrative in reshaping societal perceptions. Collins highlights the dynamic nature of counter-narratives, emphasizing the role of individual encounters and responses in challenging hegemonic structures. While black women may confront common struggles, their responses are varied and multifaceted, reflecting the richness and diversity of their lived experiences (2000: 27). Each woman's journey towards self-definition contributes to the collective effort to dismantle stereotypes and assert autonomy.

2.1. Michelle Obama: A Paradigm of Resilience for Black Women

Michelle Obama's historic tenure as the first black First Lady of the United States has captured global attention, marking a significant milestone in American history. Her journey to this esteemed position represents a pivotal moment in breaking down racial barriers at the highest levels of government. With her embodiment of intelligence, eloquence, and professional achievement, Obama emerges as a powerful symbol challenging enduring stereotypes about women and African Americans. However, while her white predecessors might have been afforded a presumed grace, Obama understood that she would not receive the same treatment because “race, class, and gender aspects interact to produce a vision that challenges previous views of the ex-First Lady, drawing copiously on private settings for performing public action” (Kovács, 2020: 294). In this regard, Obama recognized the need to excel and prove herself in the face of societal expectations.

In contrast to the limited and often negative portrayals of black women in mainstream media and culture, her image offers a refreshing departure. Her multifaceted identity challenges traditional notions of race and gender, offering nuance and complexity to discussions about black womanhood. For centuries, black women have been confined to a narrow range of stereotypes, including the mammy, the sexual siren, the welfare queen, the matriarch, and the angry black woman. Yet, Michelle Obama's presence in the public eye serves as a direct challenge to these reductive archetypes. By occupying spaces of power and influence with dignity and integrity, Michelle Obama redefines notions of success and leadership for women of color, inspiring generations to come to pursue their dreams and defy societal expectations. In doing so, she not only reshapes perceptions of black women but also contributes to a broader cultural shift toward inclusivity, equality, and empowerment.

Her journey reflects a profound shift in her self-esteem and confidence, marked by a rejection of societal pressures to conform and a renewed sense of self-assurance in her abilities. Critiquing the tendency to prioritize the opinions of others, Obama arrives at a pivotal realization: “Am I good enough? Yes, in fact I am” (2018: 77). This affirmation signifies a transformative shift in her mindset as she embraces her worth and capabilities with newfound confidence. Moreover, her approach to fashion reflects her rebellion against traditional expectations placed on First Ladies, showcasing her self-esteem, confidence, and refusal to conform to societal norms. Despite facing criticisms of being perceived as either too ostentatious or too casual in her attire, Obama deliberately chooses to embrace unpredictability in her wardrobe choices. By championing American designers, particularly emerging talents, she sends a message of authenticity and individuality. However, Obama's exploration of fashion not only uncovers a deeper truth about the pressures women in public life face to conform to rigid beauty standards but also exposes the hypocrisy of those who critique her appearance while wearing the clothes of her same designers, reflecting a “societal double standard” (2018: 279). Michelle Obama's reflections on her experiences emphasize the importance of self-definition in the face of public judgment and scrutiny. She learned firsthand that if individuals do not actively define themselves, they risk being inaccurately defined by others (2018: 248). By taking control of her narrative and refusing to wait for direction from others, Michelle embodies the power of self-determination and agency. This insistence on defining herself on her own

terms serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of asserting one's individuality and autonomy in the face of societal expectations and judgments.

2.2. Challenging the Ghetto Stereotype

Becoming powerfully illustrates how “reclaiming the ‘power of a free mind’ constitutes an important area of resistance” (Collins, 2000: 285). By delving into her own journey from the South Side to Princeton University, Obama highlights the transformative power of education in transcending socio-economic barriers and reshaping one's destiny. Her defiance against the ghetto stereotype is evident in her unwavering commitment to academic excellence and seizing opportunities for advancement, emphasizing the value of hard work and perseverance in challenging stereotypes about race, gender, and social class. Growing up in the working-class, Obama witnessed poverty and economic hardship firsthand. However, she recognized early on the importance of education in shaping one's identity and future. As she reflects, “I’d realized early on that school was where I could start defining myself—that an education was a thing worth working for, that it would help spring them forward in the world” (2018: 270).

Obama's engagement with students at Harper High School underscores the importance of education in empowering marginalized communities. She acknowledges the systemic challenges these students face, including inadequate funding and political indifference, yet she refuses to succumb to a narrative of despair. Instead, she emphasizes the inherent resilience and potential for success within these communities, echoing Collins' assertion that “the power of reclaiming these spaces for ‘thinking and doing not what is expected of us’ constitutes an important dimension of empowerment” (2000: 285). Obama's advocacy for education, exemplified through initiatives like Let Girls Learn, extends beyond individual empowerment to address systemic inequalities rooted in oppression. While her efforts are not exclusively dedicated to black girls, they are deeply rooted in challenging societal perceptions of young women's value, particularly within marginalized communities. Her reflections in *Becoming* also shed light on the significance of language in shaping identity and belonging. In a poignant childhood moment, she recounts being questioned by a cousin about her speech patterns, initially feeling embarrassed and denying any deviation from her family's norms. However, beneath her response lies a recognition of the cultural and educational influences that molded her language. Growing up with parents who emphasized proper diction and education, Obama's upbringing instilled in her a dedication to intellectual curiosity and self-improvement. She argues: “We were expected not just to be smart but to own our smartness—to inhabit it with pride—and this filtered down to how we spoke” (2018: 44). Despite her cousin's implicit suggestion that speaking in a manner associated with whiteness could betray one's cultural heritage, Obama insists that her speech patterns do not diminish her sense of belonging or cultural identity. Instead, they serve as manifestations of individual experiences and aspirations.

2.3. Challenging Black Patriarchy

Michelle Obama challenges patriarchal norms within her own family dynamics by restructuring daily routines and instilling values of independence and self-worth in her daughters. She establishes firm boundaries regarding dinner times, ensuring that the family's schedule revolves around the needs of her and her daughters rather than waiting for the arrival of the man of the house. By prioritizing punctuality and consistency, her

rejection of the patriarchal notion that the family's activities should revolve solely around the patriarch's schedule aligns with Salami's assertion that "knowing that is socially situated in womanhood is antipatriarchal" (2020: 4).

By prioritizing her own and her daughters' needs over traditional gender roles, Obama challenges the dominance of patriarchal norms within family dynamics. Reflecting on her grandmother's passive acceptance of mistreatment by her grandfather, Obama expresses frustration with the silence and complacency exhibited in the face of patriarchal dominance. From a young age, Obama defied this silence by speaking up against her grandfather's behavior, thus asserting the importance of women finding their voices and standing up against patriarchal oppression. Through her actions and experiences, Obama advocates for the value of strong familial bonds and the potential for African American families to thrive and pursue their aspirations, challenging stereotypes perpetuated by society about their inherent brokenness or incapability.

She also challenges patriarchal expectations surrounding motherhood by highlighting the diversity of maternal experiences and choices. She recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to motherhood, emphasizing that each mother's journey is unique and valid. Through her observations in a playroom, Obama learns that regardless of differing parenting styles, every child is cherished and thriving, demonstrating the collective force of women striving to nurture their children. Her own approach to motherhood defies conventional feminist expectations, as she embraces the role of "mom in chief" while her husband serves as President. Despite facing criticism for prioritizing her family, Obama remains steadfast in her commitment to her children and their well-being. She draws inspiration from her own mother, who demonstrated a balanced and pragmatic approach to parenting. Obama's mother provided guidance and support without over-managing, instilling in her children a sense of independence and responsibility from a young age. By rejecting rigid rules and embracing flexibility, Obama's mother fostered an environment conducive to her children's growth and development.

2.4. Michelle Obama as a Womanist and an Eco(Black)feminist

Michelle Obama's narrative unfolds as a captivating exploration of womanism and ecofeminism, traversing themes of empowerment, solidarity, and resistance against oppressive norms. Echoing Collins's assertion, empowerment within the hegemonic domain necessitates the construction of new knowledge that challenges prevailing societal norms and offers alternative perspectives (2000: 286). Throughout her memoir, Obama embodies this dimension, reshaping dominant narratives and advocating for the empowerment of marginalized voices. Scrutinizing Obama's journey through the lens of womanism and ecofeminism provides valuable insights into her challenging conventional notions of power, identity, and agency.

Obama's womanist perspective permeates her advocacy for the cultural elements that sustain black women, such as music, food, and sisterhood. Her childhood was immersed in the sounds of music, which served as a backdrop to her upbringing and family life. The amateur melodies emanating from her great-aunt Robbie's piano resonated throughout her home, creating an atmosphere of striving and learning. From a young age, Obama was drawn to the piano, inspired by the music that filled her surroundings. She felt a natural affinity for the instrument, sensing that it was something she was meant to do. Her family's deep connection to music further enriched her musical experiences, with relatives involved

in various musical endeavors, from professional bands to church choirs. Central to this musical milieu was her grandfather Shields, whose infectious laughter and joyful presence added to the musical tapestry of her childhood.

Through these familial connections and experiences, music became a fundamental part of Obama's identity and upbringing, shaping her appreciation for artistry and creativity and serving as a tool for self-expression and cultural connection.

Friendship is also a central womanist theme in Obama's life, providing her with solace, support, and empowerment amidst life's challenges. Reflecting on her college years, she finds refuge and camaraderie in the company of her girlfriends, describing their bond as "keeping a close and high-spirited council of girlfriends—a safe harbor of female wisdom" (2018: 45). However, she also acknowledges the absence of deep connections with her white peers, partly attributing it to her own caution and adherence to familiarity. Despite this, she cherishes the friendships she has cultivated among her black friends, recognizing the enriching diversity and shared experiences they offer. Her understanding of friendship aligns with Salami's definition, emphasizing reverence for women's diverse experiences, knowledge, and traditions. This broader sense of sisterhood transcends mere friendship, encompassing a collective commitment to ending the oppression faced by women (2020: 97).

Within the womanist discourse, black sisterhood holds significant importance as a space for bonding and empowerment among black women. As articulated by Alice Walker, a womanist appreciates and prefers women's culture and strength, emphasizing love and solidarity among women (2005: xi). Obama's friends, predominantly black women, embody resilience and determination, balancing demanding responsibilities with a commitment to self-care. Many of them navigate busy family lives and demanding careers, yet prioritize moments of camaraderie and relaxation. This ethos resonates with Obama's own journey towards self-discovery and fulfillment. Through her advocacy for self-care and the power of tradition, Obama champions the importance of prioritizing one's well-being and asserting individual agency. As she reflects, "My friends made me whole" (2018: 297).

Obama's upbringing instilled in her a deep appreciation for the significance of food and nourishment, both physically and emotionally. Her mother's practical and reliable presence provided a sense of stability and comfort, with food serving as a tangible expression of love and care. Obama's mother ensured that there was always food in the fridge, not just for her family but also for their friends, embodying a nurturing spirit that extended beyond her immediate kin. This emphasis on hospitality and sustenance shaped Obama's understanding of the importance of food in fostering connections and providing refuge. Her awareness of the importance of food led her to initiate conversations and spearhead efforts to address systemic issues related to nutrition and access to healthy food options. Inspired by her understanding of how the food industry impacts public health, she envisioned initiatives like the Let's Move! campaign. This campaign aimed to empower individuals, especially those in marginalized communities, to make healthier choices and combat childhood obesity. Through her advocacy for food justice and health initiatives, Obama exemplifies a womanist perspective by prioritizing the well-being and empowerment of individuals and communities. Her efforts challenge societal norms and advocate for systemic change, particularly in areas where access to nutritious food is limited.

Furthermore, Obama's initiative to create the White House garden serves as a powerful embodiment of her ecofeminist approach. This approach views concepts historically associated with women—such as emotion, body, and nature—as interconnected and equally significant to their perceived opposites, like man, reason, and culture (Vangeli, 2022: 62). Ecofeminism embraces the belief that the oppression of the environment and the oppression of women within patriarchal societies are deeply interconnected issues that must be addressed simultaneously. They often use the image of “the web of life” to express themes of cooperation, interdependence, and harmony (Tolan, 2006: 325). By championing the garden, Obama not only promoted sustainable practices and healthier eating habits but also symbolically reclaimed and elevated the traditionally undervalued associations between women and nature. Despite not being a gardener herself, Obama recognized the importance of promoting fresh, healthy food options over processed foods often advertised to families. By planting the garden, she aimed to address the lack of emphasis on fresh produce in mainstream media and encourage a shift towards healthier eating habits. Beyond being a personal endeavor, the garden was a political statement, sparking conversations about nutrition, especially in schools and among parents. Obama envisioned it as an outdoor classroom where children could learn about food growth and develop a deeper understanding of its origins. Hosting students from Bancroft Elementary School to help with planting underscored the garden's educational aspect, instilling values of environmental stewardship and healthy living from a young age. Its success in yielding over ninety pounds of produce within ten weeks demonstrated its practicality and effectiveness in promoting self-sufficiency and sustainability. Despite initial skepticism, the garden quickly became a source of pride and inspiration, highlighting Obama's eco(black)feminist approach to addressing societal issues like food insecurity and public health. Also, Obama's eco(black)feminist journey parallels Salami's statement of knowledge as “both the seed and the fruit of the culture it produces” (2020: 3), as she metaphorically plants the seeds for future generations of black girls to break barriers and occupy spaces where they are underrepresented.

Michelle Obama's journey, as depicted in her memoir, is a testament to the resilience and determination required to navigate societal expectations and challenges. In the face of efforts to label her as “other”, she counteracts falsehoods about her identity. Salami's argument about the perception of knowledge as a possession to be acquired (2020: 14) resonates deeply with Michelle's narrative. In a society with hegemonic knowledge that subjugates minorities and black women in particular, Michelle shows her commitment to “use multiple strategies in her quest for the constructed knowledge of an independent voice” (Collins, 2000: 119). Throughout her memoir, Michelle reflects on the importance of remaining grounded in one's truth and pursuing one's passions despite external pressures. As a mother, wife, professional, and public figure, she navigates the complexities of identity with grace and resilience. Her experiences underscore the significance of self-empowerment in confronting societal expectations and forging one's path. In essence, Michelle Obama's story serves as a reminder of the transformative power of authenticity and self-assurance. By challenging prevailing notions of knowledge acquisition and embracing her identity in the face of adversity, she embodies the ideals of resilience and empowerment. Her journey inspires others to embrace their true selves and pursue their aspirations with courage and conviction.

3. Becoming: A Lived-Experience Narrative

Michelle Obama's emphasis on lived experiences enhances *Becoming* as a black feminist epistemology. Her storytelling not only chronicles her personal journey but also highlights the broader significance of personal narrative in shaping the understanding and credibility of her knowledge claims.

Collins argues that individuals who have directly lived through certain experiences are often more credible and believable when making knowledge claims than those who have only read or thought about such experiences (2000: 257). This notion emphasizes the importance of authenticity and firsthand knowledge in validating one's perspective. Since the traditional epistemological stance may not adequately articulate black women's consciousness, Collins proposes an alternative method of producing and validating knowledge claims consistent with black women's criteria—based on the lived experiences of black women themselves. These experiences, shared and passed on among black women, form collective wisdom and serve as the foundation for their standpoint.

Michelle Obama's message about identity and resilience resonates deeply as she draws from her own experiences and ancestral history. Through her storytelling, she sheds light on the challenges faced by generations of marginalized individuals, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and confronting invisibility. By recounting her lineage and highlighting her connection to Jim Robinson, a slave whose existence was likely marked only by an unmarked grave on a South Carolina plantation, Obama underscores the enduring legacy of invisibility that has shaped her family's narrative. Despite the adversity inherent in this history, she offers a testament to the possibility of overcoming it. Her story serves as a beacon of inspiration, affirming the power of resilience and the ability to transcend the confines of invisibility. Michelle Obama “created her own visibility by way of her own projects in the White House, by writing her autobiography” (Kovács, 2020: 293). Her narrative also amplifies the voices of marginalized communities, reminding them of the importance of making their presence known in a world that often overlooks and marginalizes those voices.

In her memoir, Obama authentically shares her experiences as a black woman navigating various spaces, offering insights into personal triumphs, challenges, and reflections to foster empathy and a deeper understanding of systemic inequalities impacting marginalized communities. By grounding her narrative in her own lived realities, Obama enhances credibility and validates the perspectives of marginalized individuals whose voices are often dismissed, demonstrating the transformative potential of personal narrative in challenging dominant narratives and advocating for inclusivity. Delving into the intricacies of identity, intersectionality, and selfhood for black women, she gracefully navigates the complexities of race, gender, and class, empowering them to embrace unique strengths and challenge societal expectations.

Collins describes dialogue within African-American culture as a call-and-response discourse, where spontaneous interaction between speaker and listener punctuates the discourse. This mode of communication, deeply rooted in African-based oral traditions, permeates African-American culture and underscores the importance of mutual engagement and exchange in knowledge production (2000: 261). Obama's memoir operates as a dynamic call and response within the black community, validating and affirming shared knowledge claims while inviting reciprocal engagement. Through her narrative, Obama initiates a dialogue with her readers, leveraging her lived experiences to shed light on common struggles and triumphs. By sharing her journey, she prompts a response from

her audience, encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences and perspectives. Obama's storytelling also serves as a call to action, challenging prevailing narratives and stereotypes while affirming the resilience and agency of black women.

According to autobiographical scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Identities, or subject positioning, materialize within collectivities and out of the culturally marked differences that permeate symbolic interaction within and between collectivities" (2010: 32-33). Michelle Obama's multifaceted roles as a lawyer, mother, wife, social activist, healthcare worker, gardener, and artist serve to enrich her knowledge claims about black womanhood by providing diverse perspectives and insights into the complexities of her identity. Ultimately, her memoir serves as a vital conduit for knowledge production within the black community, amplifying narratives, shedding light on challenges faced by marginalized groups, and validating lived realities.

In conclusion, the analysis of Michelle Obama's narrative in *Becoming* through the lens of black feminist epistemology reveals profound insights into the complexities of identity, power, and knowledge production. Throughout the examination, several key findings and insights have emerged. Obama's storytelling reflects key principles of black feminist epistemology by delving into hegemonic knowledge and questioning the epistemology behind black people's and black women's oppression, offering a narrative that challenges the dominant discourse. *Becoming* provides a unique perspective on the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, offering valuable insights into identity formation and self-definition. Obama's experiences and achievements contribute to broader conversations about black women's empowerment, inspiring readers to challenge stereotypes and pursue their aspirations for positive social change. By centering her lived experiences, her memoir not only lends credibility to her narrative but also serves as a call and response between her and black women, validating their knowledge claims and highlighting the importance of communal knowledge in challenging dominant discourses and empowering individuals to reclaim their narratives. Reflecting on the significance of reading *Becoming* as a black feminist epistemology, it becomes evident that the text offers more than just a personal memoir; it serves as a form of knowledge production for the black community, particularly black women. By sharing her story with authenticity and vulnerability, Obama invites readers to engage critically with issues of race, gender, and power and to reflect on their own identities and experiences. Despite stating in an interview with *The Washington Post*, "I'm not that into labels. So if you laid out a feminist agenda, I would probably agree with a large portion of it. But I wouldn't identify as a feminist just like I probably wouldn't identify as a liberal or a progressive" (Obama and Rogak, 2010: 54), her commitment to black feminism is evident throughout her memoir, showcasing her dedication to challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for the empowerment of black women.

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