



BECOMING VISIBLE: ON THE ROLE OF PICTURES IN MICHELLE OBAMA'S *BECOMING*

Abstract: The article discusses the role of the photo illustrations in the performance of racial visibility in Michelle Obama's autobiography. In African American autobiographies, illustrations were traditionally used to authenticate the story of social ascent and make racialized bodies visible. The article argues that parallel to the book's main narrative of finding one's voice and becoming audible, the illustrations perform the project of changing the female African American narrator's social visibility for the American gaze from a stereotypical racially biased version to a more personalized one closely connected to issues of education and self-help. The article claims that if the story of finding one's voice in the book is read along with the narrative on visibility the pictures tell, then the racial politics of book cannot be so easily criticized as some of its early reviews would suggest.

Key words: Michelle Obama, African American autobiography, finding one's voice, performance of race, class, and gender visibility, text-image interaction, women's transmedial empowerment.

1. Introduction

Michelle Obama's autobiography is known all over the world and is associated with its cover image: Michelle Obama, the beautiful colored woman in front of a pale blue background, behind white letters. This essay looks into the problem of racial visibility as it is thematized and performed by the text and its illustrations in *Becoming*.

Visibility is a central concept of the book. As a theme, racial visibility appears in the third section, where Michelle Obama, campaigning for First Lady, encounters the problem of the American gaze. The American gaze refers to the biased view a mainly white US audience see a colored public figure, one in relation to which a colored person remains "invisible" (Obama,

2018, p. 372). Obviously, the notion of visibility here refers to a general, socially constructed and overly politicized media image of a colored public figure. As Obama writes, her own early public image was stereotypical and antagonistic: that of the angry black woman disrespectful of white expectations. Obama comments that one of the main objectives of her work at the White House was to refashion that image into a more personal and popular one in order to be able to perform meaningful work there. The article argues that the illustrations of her autobiography are actively engaged in constructing Michelle Obama's redesigned racial visibility. In this sense, the story of the self-made woman includes the story of the colored woman who has become socially visible.

Early reviews of the book commented on the lack of definite criticism of racial prejudice in the US. A. Hirsch (2018) wrote: “[m]ost 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.” In other words, in the book Obama does not allow herself to be overtly critical (ibid.) of structural racial bias in the US. Another, softer way to put this is to criticize the “compulsive American optimism” (St. Félix, 2018) that permeates the text. St. Félix discusses Michelle Obama’s dislike of politics and easy immersion in the “soft power” of celebrities (ibid.) instead. Both reviewers are touched by the volume, but criticize its unproblematic processing of the American Dream for African Americans because they would expect more race-related issues to surface along the way.

The above critique sounds much like the problem of the “veil” in African American autobiographies Toni Morrison explains. In autobiographies written by African Americans for a primarily white audience, too sordid details of racial discrimination had to be veiled so that the book did not sound too critical of the white race in general (Morrison, 1995, p. 90). In fiction, these details can be imagined and reconstructed (p. 93), Morrison’s essay contends. Could Michelle Obama’s book be read as part of the tradition Morrison describes? This article studies the role of illustrations in the construction of racial identity and visibility in *Becoming* by placing it in the wider context of African American literature (as Eric Lamore did with Barack Obama’s autobiography, see Lamore, 2016, p. 3). In African American autobiographies, the story of freedom and social ascent has always been authenticated by the frontispiece (or later cover image) of the author. In Obama’s book, it is not only the cover image but also sixty-two illustrations that help authenticate the story, and the question looms large how this happens. An exploration into the relation between text and images can help one understand how the story of becoming racially visible is explicated by the

illustrations. Moreover, if this visibility is socially constructed, then the exploration also reveals how the illustrations target the racial bias in the ex-First Lady's earlier public image. And, last but not least, one can link the photographic narrative of becoming racially visible to the thematic commentary on visibility and finding one's voice in the book, eventually returning to the question of racial positioning.

The paper discusses the problem of racial visibility in Obama's book in three sections. First, it surveys principles of picture-text interaction, and traditional uses of pictures in African American autobiographies. Section two surveys the actual images of the text in order to link them to their commentary, and to assess the relationship between the two. Thirdly, the narrative of images is connected to the issue of visibility and finding one's voice.

2. Picture and text in African American autobiography

The intermediality of the relation between pictures and texts remains a challenging yet extensive critical terrain. Let us just glimpse at its main questions in order to be able to locate its links to the use of pictures in African American autobiography.

2.1. Iconotext

An iconotext as defined by Nehrlich is the "use of an image in a text or vice versa by way of reference or allusion in an explicit or implicit way" (Wagner, 2015, p. 318). Peter Wagner extends the meaning of iconotext from actual images in texts to "such art works in which one medium is only implied, e.g. in the reference to a painting in a fictional text" (ibid.).

The potential of iconotexts lies in the fact that the relation between text and image remains polysemic. With a deconstructive terminology one can say that an illustration is not a window but a misrepresentation or distortion (Mitchell, 1984, p. 507). Yet, these distortions tend to have reasons. W. J. T. Mitchell has pointed out that the text-image contact may appear in three major different relations, but "*semantically speaking* [...] there is no *essential* difference between texts and images" (Wagner, 2015, p. 319). Rather, it is their relation, i. e., what they communicate that differs (Mitchell, 1984, p. 529). This is the so called why aspect, the ideological implications of the difference between text and image. In a similar vein, Nicholas Mirzoeff says visuality is the opposite of the right to look, because "the ability to assemble a visualization manifests the authority of the visualizer" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 2).

Furthermore, second-wave feminist criticism complicates the notion of the authority of the visualizer and the role of the visualized further by considering the possible counter-narratives feminine bodies generate in the semiotic process of visualization. McAra and Kérchy call the potential female bodies offer for challenging traditional theorizations of the text-image relation ‘women’s transmedial empowerment’ (Kérchy, 2017, p. 5).

In a similar vein, illustrations in Obama’s *Becoming* can be seen as iconotexts that have a polysemic relation to the written text. The ideological aspect of what is allowed to be seen by the visualizer is coupled by the problem of possible counter-narratives pictures of racialized feminine bodies generate here.

2.2. Pictures in African American autobiographies

African American autobiographies were traditionally illustrated by the picture of their authors, but the method of the illustration changed with improvements of printing technology. The frontispiece with the image of the author was part of the earliest African American narratives: this was usually an etching based on a daguerretype (discovered in 1839). The image authenticates the text, like in the case of the drawing of Olaudah Equiano, the author of the first African American slave narrative from 1789.



Fig. 1: The frontispiece of Olaudah Equiano’s *Narrative*.

Equiano’s image posed basic questions about the identity of the author. The African man is dressed in the elegant clothing of a well-to-do European gen-

tleman of the time, so the image provoked basic questions like: is the person African or European, literate or barbarian, civilized or savage (Casmier-Paz, 2003, p. 93)? The fact that he is holding the Bible in his hand open at Acts (12:4) about a man lame from birth cured by Jesus identified him not only with the cured man but with Jesus as well (pp. 95-96).

Casmier-Paz goes on to argue that in the nineteenth-century the Bible “loses its ability to clearly identify the African as a human being. [...] the narrative locates the humanity of slaves in a complex semiotic identification with whiteness and class privilege” (Casmier-Paz, 2003, p. 98). In their book on photography and race in nineteenth-century America, Wallace and Smith add that the photograph offered African Americans an unprecedented challenge before and after the Civil War. The photograph became “a political tool with which to claim a place in public and private spheres circumscribed by race and racialized sight lines” (Wallace and Smith, 2012, p. 5). Frederick Douglass, the author of the most famous African American autobiography from the nineteenth-century, also published his books with frontispieces. Douglass was well aware of the power of pictures beside those of words, so much so that in his essay “Pictures and Progress” he claims that “the picture making faculty” distinguishes humans from animals through catalyzing self-reflection (Douglass, 1886, p. 461). He published his autobiography in three different versions, with a different frontispiece each (*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, American Slave*, 1845, intr., William Lloyd Garrison; *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 1855, intr., James M'Cune Smith; *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1881, intr., George L. Ruffin). The most widely-known image of Douglass comes from *My Bondage* (1855).



Fig. 2: The frontispiece of Douglass's *My Bondage*.

The picture shows an impeccably clad serious and defiant young mulatto man with “tragic whiteness” (Casmier-Paz, 2003, p. 99). The ambiguity of the picture lies in the expensive clothing, the facial features, and the signature that do not conform to contemporary Northern expectations about slaves as poorly dressed, markedly black, and illiterate. Douglass was playing upon the ambiguity of his own image for political ends, exposing the contradictions of slavery.

A different nineteenth-century pattern of illustration is present in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents*. She published her autobiography about the sexual abuse she encountered as a young slavewoman. The book was published under the pen name Linda Brent, without the need of an author image to authenticate it. At the beginning of her narrative Jacobs claims she would have preferred to remain silent as she is ashamed to tell her own story even to her own children, would it not be for the thousands of colored women suffering from the same plight (Jacobs, 2001, pp. 2-3), hence the lack of pressure to authenticate the story.

The psychological reason for the lack of visual authentication was backed by a social one at the time of the first publication. In mid-nineteenth century America, middle class femininity was defined in terms of four basic values: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, constituting the so called cult of true womanhood (Welter, 1966, p. 152). The psychological conflict for slave women defenseless from their masters physically was that they could not possibly conform to the norms of the cult (Sherman, 1990, p. 167) although they have been raised in accordance with them. Accordingly, Jacobs feels ashamed even at the time of telling her story and also a failure for not having a home of her own for her children. Ironically, the lack of authentication led to a critical mistake, as the book was considered to be fiction, a “fake” autobiography until 1987 when archival research revealed its author’s identity and it was published under Jacobs’ name (Yellin, 1987, p. 14). The book’s 1987 cover image depicts an elderly, respectable woman in a domestic setting, seated in an armchair: Jacobs at the time of writing, not Jacobs the alluring young woman and mother. The image represents the view Yellin’s generation had of Jacobs.

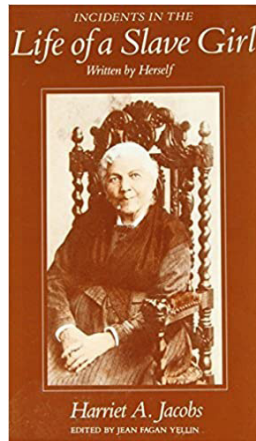


Fig. 3: The frontispiece of Jacobs' *Incidents*.

In the late nineteenth century the discovery of half-tone technology in printing enabled cheap illustrations in newspapers, journals, and books as well (Trachtenberg, 1993, p. 122). By the early twentieth century, extensive illustrations became hallmarks of African American autobiographies. (Foy, 2016, p. 89). At the time of Jim Crow, the nuanced institutionalized racial discrimination in the US, these texts showed that African Americans were actually able to ascend socially, and showcased middle class African American lives (p. 90). Foy analyzes the use of pictures in William J. Edwards's 1918 *Twenty Five Years in the Black Belt*, where although one can find the usual frontispiece, it is not so much pictures of African American bodies but rather of improved African American housing that dominate the illustrations.

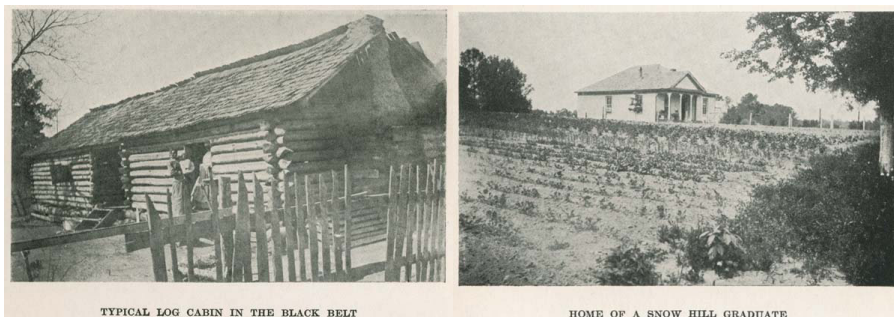


Fig. 4: Illustrations from Edwards' *Twenty Five Years* (p. 60).

Foy argues that the illustrations in Edwards' text problematize the expectation of racial visibility permeating African American autobiography at the turn

of the century (Foy, 2016, p. 92), and the need for middle-class invisibility is interposed on the expectation of racial visibility as a sign of social ascent, that is why facades of well-to-do middle-class homes take the place of the narrator's images.

In contrast to Edwards' book, the extensive photo illustrations in Michelle Obama's *Becoming* depict black bodies. Therefore, beside the adherence to the generic expectation for photos, it would seem that the expectation of racial visibility is not problematized. Yet the social visibility of racialized people is a central issue of the text and *Becoming* argues for the need to end the social invisibility of colored women especially. There seems to be a contradiction here, so let us have a look at exactly how racial visibility is constructed by the illustrations of the book, how the images 'illustrate' the issue of visibility.

3. Pictures and text in *Becoming*

Michelle Obama's autobiography contains 63 images altogether: apart from the cover image, 6 images each on the front endpaper and the back endpaper, and 16 pages of inserts with 50 pictures.

3.1. Cover image

The most widely known and important illustration of the book is the cover image. The portrait depicts the upper body, the face, shoulders, the arms; the title and the logo of Oprah's Book Club form part of the image.



Fig. 5: The cover image of *Becoming*.

There is a marked contrast of light and dark between the background and the foreground, as the pale blue background and her white clothes highlight Michelle Obama's black hair, eyes, and rich brown skin. Also, there is a bare shoulder exposed, it makes the image playful, flirting, feminine. The make-up of the face also accentuates feminine features, the painted eyebrows, the lush eyes, the silky downpour of hair. All in all, the image depicts a playful, feminine, markedly and proudly colored woman, in a setup that is definitely not to be expected on an official portrait.

In African American autobiographies we have seen that the frontispiece always posed a question about the identity of the narrator. Equiano's image contrasted the high-end white clothes with the African features of the face, the contrast accentuated by the Bible is open in his hand at Acts (12:4). In Douglass's case the daguerreotype made one ponder because of the contrast between the expected and the seen, the *not* so African features and the elegant clothes. Jacobs's image as a respectable matron on the cover of her book on the sexual abuse of a young colored woman again presented a question, this time about the respectability of the narrator.

Michelle Obama's image highlights her femininity and there is a contrast of light and dark in it, but it presents no immediate question of racial identity to be pondered. However, the silky waves of her long hair and the bare shoulder catch the eye: they do not fit the idea of the 'angry black woman' projected by the conservative white media against the wife of the Democratic presidential candidate back in 2008.



Fig. 6: *Becoming* and the *New Yorker* cover from July 28, 2008. NPR

The caricature by Barry Blitt on the cover of the *New Yorker* grasped the heart of the problem the American gaze presented, as it depicted Michelle

Obama as the feared militant colored woman of the Civil Rights movement, with big Afro hair and in guerilla gear with her husband in the White House. In contrast to that depiction, the cover image of her autobiography presents a playful, feminine, and smiling colored woman. The image on the cover of the autobiography is interposed on the earlier biased image: the real person on the earlier stereotype.

3.2. Inserts

The next most important section of the book is the insert made up of 16 unnumbered pages of colored photos, altogether 50 of them. Although they are not separated by sections, the images follow the three-part narrative of the autobiography: individual story, two of us, and the service for the community. The pictures are accompanied by commentary, each image with three or four lines of text that do not originate from the main text but seem to repeat its ideas. Thus, the relation between images and main text, and the relation between images and their commentary are the two areas that will be analyzed here.

3.2.1. Images and main text

The arrangement of the images shows a focus on the presidential years. Usually there are three images on one page, with variations (four/two). The first area represented is the Robinson family and Michelle’s schools, ending with a photo of the Obamas as a couple. Then come illustrations on their life together: marriage, family, Michelle as a working mum. Then public themes follow on 11 pages: the campaign trail, the presidential oath (full page with large images), then days and projects in the White House. The last two large images of the final page of photos center on Michelle the speaker and the participant of a march.

Section theme	Pages	photos	%
<i>Becoming Me</i> : family, schools	3	9	18
<i>Becoming Us</i> : Michelle and Barack	2	7	14
<i>Becoming More</i> : Community	11	34	68

Table 1: Arrangement of images according to theme

So, the arrangement of the images reveals that although the frame story of the book is about finding one's voice, most of the illustrations document the days of the First Lady, and within that, photos of increased size highlight the moment of taking the oath and Michelle the activist (speaker/march).

Three main thematic sections document the Obama family's road to the White House, and each highlights special points of interest. The first section on family and schools focuses on work ethic (father at work) and social interest (white exodus, colored girls in college, staying at Euclid Avenue of the South Side). Then follow pictures of the family and the working mother. Between the two, there is a gap: there are no pictures of either Harvard law School or Sidley and Austin (Harvard does not figure in the main text, either), only Michelle's places of work after she decided to work for community building. The third section on campaigning and presidency is illustrated by 11 pages, each one with an identifiable topic:

Subsection theme in <i>More</i>	Page	photos	%
Road to candidacy	6	3	6
Campaign trail: publicity, assistants	7	3	6
Family on the trail, election day	8	3	6
Taking the oath	9	2	4
Everyday adventures of the presidential family	10	4	8
Projects, meeting famous people	11	4	8
Projects, meeting ordinary people	12	3	6
Ordinary days in the WH	13	3	6
Assistants	14	3	6
Family and normalcy in presidential life	15	4	8
Michelle's tasks: alone and in community	16	2	4

Table 2: Arrangement of images in section *More* according to theme

Moreover, there are recurring general themes unrelated to chronology as well. First and foremost, the boundary between family and work is often shown as blurred. The children often appear in public photos (speech, oath, Oval Office) where spaces of the White House are reinterpreted from their perspective. In this respect the most spectacular photo was taken in the Oval Office (insert p. 9), where the family are hanging out in everyday clothes, defamiliarizing the space well known from newsreels.

Another general feature to be noticed is how well populated the photos are. Many other people appear in the company the Obamas keep: public personages and ordinary people are both on display while the couple's public projects are catalogued. Very often there is bodily contact in the pictures, too: a hug. On pages 10-11, five pictures out of 6 are representing hugs, the commentary only mentioning it in relation to the first, but the images repeating the gesture four more times, not mentioning the hugs by words. Michelle hugs a student, a mourning mother, her own daughters, and a dog. The power of physical contact is transmitted by the images only.

Publicity and visibility also occur in the images repeatedly as themes. There are two pictures about the Obamas eating a campaign trail breakfast, once in the company of the Bidens and once in the company of another couple and media workers.



Fig. 7: The Obamas having breakfast on the campaign trail. Inserts, p. 7.

These remind readers how each word and each action of a candidate becomes public, as it is not only the campaign crew that follow him around but hosts of media workers as well. In the text, we are reminded of the media hype Barack's asking for Dijon mustard created, and these images testify to how that was possible.

The difference between the two images lies in the use of frames. The first shows the media around the eaters, while the second does not. However, as the mediatized one appears first, by the time the second is looked at, it is easy to imagine the photographers around the two couples. In other words, the image is reinterpreted in the context of the series (pp. 7-8). A similar effect is created by the image about the Obamas with their security file on page 7. Taken from a distance, the image shows how the smiling couple is surrounded by security personnel. Had the picture been shot with a different frame, it would have only represented the happy couple – the way it appears now sheds light on the margins of presidential life not normally shown.

Visibility and publicity as themes reoccur on the final page of inserts as well. The two images of the final page show Michelle Obama's preferred ways of public action: Obama on stage preparing to speak, and Obama with her family, friends, and allies at a march for the memory of the Civil Rights movement. The opposition between solitude and community is strengthened by the colors, the movement, and the layout of the photos.



Fig. 8: Michelle Obama standing alone and leading a community. Inserts, p. 12.

In the first picture Michelle Obama is standing alone, there is no movement. She is wearing black clothes in front of a black background, her face lacks the usual smile. She looks concerned, responsible: preparing to talk or having finished it. Her figure is situated in the corner of the image, while the biggest part of the image is empty, signifying the audience somewhere near. The picture projects a somber, dark atmosphere, it represents the duty of public speaking as a responsible personal task. The companion piece of the image depicts a colorful crowd marching, Michelle and Barack Obama with senator John Lewis in the lead. The picture is balanced, the crowd moves from the background towards the emptiness in the foreground, driven by a common aim. The crowd is marching with a sense of purpose towards something, the activity itself fills the participants with joy. The march is an act of communal remembrance and self-expression of a community, it encapsulates the essence of social action. So the final two pictures accentuate the importance of finding one's voice that can lead to communal action, they show how change starts with an individual story but is made to happen by communal action.

3.2.2. Images and commentary

The commentaries of the pictures authenticate the events and add detail to the stories in the main text. When the picture shows an official occasion, then the commentary often complements a personal remark, or the other way around, a personal image often comes with a general remark. In the first section one can find two school photos with six years between them. The reader is eager to find Michelle in the pictures, but the commentary refuses to help in this as it goes on about the social transformation of the neighborhood between 1969 and 1975. Until the late sixties, her neighborhood in the South Side “was made up of a racially diverse mix of middle-class families” Obama writes (inserts, p. 2). The comment explains the “white flight” from the neighborhood that resulted in the disappearance of white faces from the class. The reader returns to mark this, and it will only be the third glance that identifies Michelle, as one of the class members, in the pictures.

The family picture about making the presidential oath combines the personal and the public in a similar way. The photo represents the act of the oath as a communal family enterprise (Inserts, p. 9): while Barack is repeating the text, Michelle is holding the Bible, the girls are concentrating very hard, keeping their fingers crossed metaphorically so that everything goes as planned. The commentary draws attention to a personal detail, the fact that Sasha had to stand on a box ‘so that her face is in line with the others’, for best photographic effect.

The second image of the page reveals an off-stage moment of the protagonists of the inauguration. The photo shows the presidential couple in party gear, heading off to their ten balls. Their chatting black and white duo is opposed to the group of official looking soldiers. The commentary runs on about the need for personal presence during official events. Interestingly, the commentary states that Jason Wu’s beautiful dress had a lion’s share in the fact that protocol could not triumph over personal feeling on the eve of the inauguration. One critic wrote that many female readers would have expected a style guide for Michelle Obama’s autobiography, for them, this is the only but key place where the performative power of clothes is mentioned, although Michelle is relying on it consciously all the time (Cartner-Morley, 2018).

In the examples, the commentaries make it necessary to take a look at the image for a second time and reinterpret our first understanding of it in a novel way, making us reflect on how what it actually shows may not be so obvious.

3.3. Endpapers

The book carries 12 half-tone images on its endpapers: the inside of the cover. It would seem there are so many images to show that they overspill to the endpapers, but a second glance shows there is more to them. The images repeat the major turning points and key themes in the life of the narrator. The front endpaper shows Michelle's family and her schools, the preparation for her becoming, while the back endpaper shows president Obama's family and presidency, with Michelle the speaker in the company of a microphone on the final image. These photos construct a mini narrative of the most important people in and influences on Michelle's life that promise a new beginning with Michelle having found her voice and being ready to use it in the future.

3.4. Implied sunrise

The book has a sixty-fourth illustration that remains invisible. Alma Thomas's *Resurrection* is only mentioned in the text but fits Wagner's definition of an iconotext even so. The Obamas hung this picture in the small dining room of the White House when they redecorated the room and opened it for the public. They altered the furnishing and the color scheme of the dining room when they began to use it for receiving official guests. As part of the new appeal, Thomas's picture was acquired and became part of the White House Collection.



Fig. 9: Alma Thomas, *Resurrection*. 1966. Source: The White House Historical Association.

The form of the rising sun is represented by this picture of an African American painter from the Civil Rights era, which was hung on the wall of the Obamas' dining room. Perhaps this limits the possible interpretations of the metaphor of the rising sun, in any case, it is definitely connected to the idea of change that has been formulated by many slogans of Michelle Obama's book as well: *Joining Forces, Let's Move!* The notion of change implies many areas as it ranges from personal change through political change to social transformation. It even has a religious aspect, as the term initially refers to spiritual rebirth. Because of all the thematic ties, Alma Thomas' work would fit the series of illustrations in the book admirably: although it depicts no humans, metaphorically and through its history it is connected to the project of 'becoming' explicated in the book. Its actual absence, inversely, draws attention to its importance: its invisible presence highlights the problem of visibility yet again.

4. Visibility and finding one's voice in *Becoming*

A central concept of the book is visibility that is present both thematically and materially. Thematically it appears in section 3 titled 'Becoming more,' in connection with the issue of political change. While telling the story of the first presidential campaign, the text criticizes the phenomenon of "the American gaze" (p. 372). The notion refers to the way the US (white) public views an African American public figure. It also refers to the biased stereotypes applied to an African American woman who takes on a public role. In the case of Michelle Obama, the American gaze made itself felt as a hurting presence when she was represented by the media as unpatriotic, unfeminine, an angry black woman (pp. 264-265, pp. 272-273) during the primaries. This is the time the slogan "When they go low, we go high" (p. 407) originates from. Michelle Obama's autobiography describes the process through which, in defiance of the American gaze, she made herself visible "differently" (pp. 267-269, p. 372) for the public; through writing she shares her strategies of turning her early stereotypical and negative public image into something more personalized and positive.

This strategically planned public visibility is embodied by the illustrations of the book that show Michelle Obama beyond stereotypes: engaging in personal projects, as part of a family, a community, or in the company of a microphone. These pictures construct a race, class, and gender identity of Michelle Obama that was not yet visible by the American gaze in 2008. Michelle

invests a lot into making herself visible for the American public in a new way (p. 372) by 2018. As she comments on minority students: “they’d have to push back against the stereotypes that would get put on them, all the ways they’d be defined before they’d had a chance to define themselves. They’d need to fight the invisibility that comes with being poor, female, and of color” (p. 319). In other words, class, gender, and race issues hinder one’s social visibility in combination. To counter the effect of the intersection of race, class, and gender bias, Michelle Obama created her own visibility by way of her own projects in the White House, by writing her autobiography.

The illustrations of the book play a significant role in constructing Michelle Obama’s new social visibility. As far as the basic story of American success is concerned, the pictures show her humble working class beginnings, her schooling, her family, the South Side she has exchanged for a secure middle class existence (for more on this, see my paper on Obama and African American autobiography (Kovács, 2018, n.p.). Her projects as First Lady on veterans’ families, healthy eating, doing sports, and gardening transform traditionally domestic interests into political ones. The class and gender emancipation of a “colored woman” results in a reassessment of the very category of the “colored woman.” Beside repeating key issues of the book, the pictures also reflect on the problem of visibility self-consciously. Several images play upon the questions “What can you see?” “Who makes you see that?” (insert p. 7), and the commentaries make you reinterpret your first idea of what you actually see in the image again and again, so that after a while you need to reflect not only on the social identity of the persons seen but also on the way you read images and interpret them. An invocation to Alma Thomas’s *Resurrection* implies a possible Civil Rights or spiritual motivation to the basic imperative for changing the way you look at things.

The illustrations of the book do not show but rather perform what the text tells about visibility. The text argues that “our” stories connect “us to each other,” that change is possible by sharing our stories: “our stories connected us to one another, and through those connections, it was possible to harness discontent and convert it to something useful” (p. 116). The text also argues that finding your voice happens when you find your own story: when the story of your life begins to be a story of something more, when it articulates an extra narrative, which may sometimes be called a lesson. Then you can share that narrative with others and by sharing, find a link to a community (be it a reading group or a film club, but primarily *not* a political party) (Kovács, 2018, n.p.). These stories need to be made visible and known for others so that they can understand events from “our” perspective as well, not only ac-

ording to “their” own existing views. The book articulates this general need of finding social meaningfulness in life and makes Michelle Obama’s own socially meaningful story known to the global audience. The illustrations of the book confront the reader with images of the private person in public scenarios (election night, Oval Office) or the public figure in domestic settings (with kids, in the garden, in the private quarters of the White House). The images construct the material visibility of Michelle Obama’s private story in direct defiance of actual stereotypical public misrepresentations of it. They perform the work of making the reader see Obama differently.

5. Conclusion

Illustrations provide not a “window” to but a “distortion” of our relation to ‘reality,’ J. Mitchell wrote (Mitchell, 1984, p. 507). The question is not about the authenticity of the image but rather about why and how the distortion takes place, who has the authority over it (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 2), whether it has some sort of disruptive potential to defy accepted strategies of representation. In the case of the illustrations in Michelle Obama’s autobiography, 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.

The cover image situates the enterprise of the book in opposition to the simplifying racial stereotypes best represented by the *New Yorker* caricature. The playful and feminine image of a bare black shoulder on the cover image is therefore no longer a sumptuous objectified part of a racialized female body, but a defiant gesture against official poses and simplified opinions about colored women as such.

At the same time, the image shows a well-to-do middle class colored woman who has successfully transgressed her working class beginnings. Like in preceding African American autobiographies of the self-made African American, the cover image provides the story with authority by representing the middle class dream of American success.

The illustrations also highlight the feminine aspect of the narrative. Michelle Obama’s book tells the narrative of a colored woman’s individual struggle against social invisibility. By telling the story it shares the female experience and offers an example for other women to follow as well. The meaning constructed by the female voice telling its own story draws attention to the narrative and visual performative quality of female self-construction, of ‘becoming.’

The visual process of self-construction has a marked feminine quality in that it focuses on the female body (clothes, motion/position) and promotes activities usually belonging to the domestic sphere (gardening, decorating, cooking, doing recreational sport) into issues of the public sphere by providing them with a public role. I find this a very socially constructive mode of women's transmedial empowerment.

In general, the images of the book appropriate the private sphere for public purposes in a very subtle and conscious way. The images of the inserts focus on the projects of the presidency, consistently blurring the boundary between private and public. They are populated by members of the Obama community who are connected by stories and also bodily contact. In this context, a hug becomes the bodily symbol of the private sharing of a public purpose. The illustrations construct a *different* Michelle Obama, made visible for the public by her own private projects in the seemingly private female sphere that becomes public through tackling basic social and political issues.

In addition, the images and their commentaries also provoke the reinterpretation of the pictures and, through that, they offer self-reflexive commentary on racial and feminine social visibility. Reading the autobiography together with the illustrations provides an understanding that positions the book as more race, class, and gender conscious and defiant than it seems at first sight. The images forefront black bodies, personal interaction, and counter-hierarchical actions in a medium of communication less regulated than the textual main part of a mandatory autobiography of an ex-First Lady of the US.



Michelle Obama at the DNC 2020. Source: New Yorker Aug. 18, 2020

There is good reason to expect more products of socially performative African American female self-construction indexed by the name 'Michelle

Obama.’ In 2019 the self-help version of *Becoming* has been published, a documentary film on the book tour for Netflix came out in 2020. Also, the documentary film *American Factory* produced by the Obamas won the Oscar Award for the best documentary in 2020. In 2019, Michelle Obama signed a contract with Spotify to post regular Podcasts with Spotify starting July 2020. Last but not least, her online speech for the Democratic National Convention 2020 sounded and looked like a State of Union speech delivered by your neighbor (as Doreen St. Félix noted, St. Félix 2020, n.p.). If *Becoming* is to be read as a cue, the list is far from complete and the discussions of social issues in subtly politicized domestic settings will continue.

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