

3.1: Re-meme-bering, Romanticizing and Reframing the Obamas Online

Francesca Sobande

The author analyzes meme representations of Barack and Michelle Obama, and Barack Obama and Joe Biden, to illuminate how ideas regarding race, gender and politics are communicated in user-generated online content.

“Biden: I found a cool new apartment for us downtown” “Obama: Joe...Michelle and I are-” “Michelle: [covers Obama's mouth] are so excited!” This exchange is but one of an untold number of online meme representations of Barack and Michelle Obama and Joe Biden. I look at how these meme representations reflect on the Obama presidency and evoke social commentary about race, gender and politics, especially regarding interracial male friendship, heterosexual coupledness, and the Whiteness of idealized femininity. I draw on a critical technocultural approach to discourse analysis (Brock, 2016), which explores the interconnectedness, meaning-making, and ideological dimensions of online commentary.

An online meme is content assembled by users from photographs, videos, visuals, and text. Memes are commonly humorous and incorporate cultural references which make them relatable in ways that conjure a sense of intimacy. Memes are a source of entertainment and digital participatory community in-jokes, which can seamlessly bridge the perceived gap between politics and popular culture (Kanai, 2017; Mondé, 2017). Memes may express both the views of individual internet users and a culture’s collective sentiments – offering a glimpse into the public’s psyche. Just as advertisements invoke racially and culturally specific cues to engage target audiences (Grier, Brumbaugh & Thornton, 2006), so too do memes.

In line with my previous research concerning how YouTube content is entangled with ideas related to race, gender and the identities of Black women (Sobande, 2017), here I study

how memes are conduits through which messages regarding race, gender and politics are communicated and contested. I obtained memes for my analysis by searching for the keywords “Obama memes,” “Biden and Obama memes,” and “Michelle Obama memes.” Although issues related to race are not always explicitly noted in memes depicting the Obamas, the Obamas’ status as the only African American US presidential family means such memes exist within an omnipresent racial imaginary.

In what follows I present three main themes evident in the memes: framing the Barack Obama - Joe Biden relationship as a bromance, mourning the end of the Obama era, and the racism and sexism (misogynoir) of Michelle Obama’s representations.

(Bro)manticizing Barack and Joe

The portrayal of Barack Obama and Joe Biden in memes exemplifies online constructions of an interracial bromance (mens’ seemingly platonic yet intimate friendship) between well-known public figures. The close physical proximity between Obama and Biden in meme pictures is part of their sentimental presentation as an iconic interracial duo. In one frequently-used photograph, Obama sits clutching his face anxiously with Biden seated to his right, looking at Obama pensively. Biden’s image is slightly more blurred than Obama’s, thereby emphasizing Obama’s perspective.

In one version of this meme, a dismayed Biden refers to current President Donald Trump, telling Obama “you brought him into our home...the one we’ve shared for 8 years.” Another version states “I want someone to look at me the way Joe Biden looks at Obama.” Such content reinforces the imagined intimacy constructed between Obama and Biden.

In other meme images, physical contact between Biden and Obama is especially evident: Biden grips Obama's arm and shoulder as the two converse, they clench each other's hands during a meeting with others, and they share an emotional hug showing a teary and closed-eyed Obama. Such content indicates a behind-the-scenes intimacy which (bro)manticizes their relationship and the Presidency of Barack Obama.

The underlying sentiments of many memes featuring Obama and Biden relate to the notion that they are *bros*; indeed, Biden is often shown as wanting nothing more than for Obama to publicly proclaim this. Biden's adoration for Obama is commonly emphasized, even at times suggesting an unrequited element. One meme includes a photograph of Biden and Obama hugging and features the word bro(s) five times: "Obama: tell the world we're bros" "Biden: *whispers* we're bros" "Obama: bro why'd u whisper." "Biden: ur my world bro." "Obama: bro."

The extensive use of the word bro throughout the memes signals the platonic nature of their relationship and fuels the image of the idealized interracial bromance. It may also reflect heteronormative conceptions of masculinity and male friendship, which can result in a compulsion to explicitly establish the platonic nature of a physical embrace between two men.

At times, Biden is shown using African American Vernacular English, which implies a yearning to be more like Obama, albeit in ways that denote an uneasy mimicry. In addition, memes abound present imagined dialogue between Obama and Biden about Biden's desire to refer to Obama as "my nigga." Such content crystalizes how memes are vessels through which issues concerning race, gender and friendship may be communicated. The intended humor of these Obama-Biden memes reflects perceptions of cultural norms pertaining to friendships between Black men, as distinct from those regarding interracial male friendships. Reference to

the word “nigga” inescapably grounds such memes in the legacy of US slavery, including the word’s power to offend especially when spoken by a White person. Such language transforms otherwise innocuous images of Obama and Biden into content confronting social tensions involved in interracial relations.

Although memes stress a sense of solidarity between Obama and Biden, they frequently reiterate Obama’s authority such as when Obama light-heartedly schools Biden, telling him “sit down, Joe” or “Joe, go home.” The power that Obama is depicted as wielding over Joe reflects an emphasis on Biden’s servitude and support of Obama in many memes. This contradicts long-standing stereotypical images of Black men as subservient to White people.

The relationship constructed between Obama and Biden in memes can be further understood through Donald Bogle’s (2006) notion of the huckfinn fixation, a concept rooted in the racial politics of Mark Twain’s 1884 novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Bogle argued that Huck Finn is cast as a noble White man who challenges corruption, leading to a camaraderie between Finn and “a trusty black who never competes with the white man and who serves as a reliable ego padder” (Bogle, 2006, p. 140). Reversing the roles in the huckfinn fixation, the meme (bro)manticizing of the Obama-Biden friendship frequently constructs Biden as Obama’s ego padder; admiring and supporting Obama’s status, without any competitive inclination. As such, meme portrayals of Obama and Biden may to some extent point to societal shifts regarding interracial relations.

The power dynamics signaled in Obama-Biden memes often position Obama as calm, collected, and self-assured, in contrast to the unbridled eagerness and goofiness projected onto Biden. Although such memes don’t symbolize an end to racism, they buck historic trends of portraying Black people in buffoonish ways. They are also consistent with media discourse

regarding the allegedly post-racial nature of the US, claims of which became a hallmark of the perceived symbolism of Obama's presidency (Carbado & Gulati, 2013).

Mourning the End of the Obama Era

A crucial ingredient of many Obama-Biden memes is a sentimentality that reflects a public mourning of the end of the Obama era. These include wistful statements such as “end of an era,” and memes – even well after the inauguration of Donald Trump – proclaiming #MyPresidentisBlack. In one meme Obama and Biden are pictured in the midst of a hushed conversation. Obama leans back in his chair to privately speak to Biden who is attentively huddled over him, with his hand propped close to Obama's neck. The apparent seriousness becomes silliness with the addition of text such as “No, Joe, you can't ask him if his hair is a horcrux.” This is a further example of how memes are vehicles for grieving the departure of beloved public figures from their posts. The *Harry Potter* reference (“a horcrux”) also highlights the intertextual nature of memes, which often refer to various popular culture content.

Interestingly, the “him” referred to in many Biden–Obama memes is Obama's successor in the White House, Donald Trump. Despite being visually absent in most Obama–Biden memes, Trump is alluded to as a villainous looming presence. The memes contain ominous and anonymous rhetoric. We know who “he” and “him” is, although his name is rarely used. Thus, these memes simultaneously frame Obama and Biden fondly in comical and positive ways and indicate contempt for Trump. Consequently, they stress a sense of public mourning of the pair (Obama and Biden), as well as the politics that they represented.

Meme gestures to Trump's presence in the White House reflect the divide between his political perspective and that of Obama and Biden, thereby reinforcing a sense of nostalgia for

the recent political past. For example, the “make America great again” slogan that surrounded Trump’s presidential campaign is mocked in a meme that features the following imagined conversation between Biden and Obama: “Biden: Hey Barack, why does Trump wanna ban preshredded cheese?” “Obama: Joe please!” “Biden: TO MAKE AMERICA GRATE AGAIN.”

Trump’s questioning of Obama’s US citizen status is also a source of meme humor, including dialogue involving Biden claiming to have left a Kenyan passport in Obama’s White House bedroom prior to Trump taking residence. In a similar meme, the following commentary is included: “Biden: cmon you gotta print a fake birth certificate, put it in an envelope labeled ‘SECRET’ and leave it in the oval office.” Such memes are arguably a humorous mechanism for publicly expressing grief surrounding the departure of Obama and Biden from the white house. This includes by poking fun at how President Donald Trump has attempted to undermine Obama in the past, and alluding to the role of racism in this.

Other memes that reflect the sense of loss that some felt subsequent to the Obama administration, reference Trump’s controversial statements about Mexican immigrants. In one, Biden changes the wi-fi password to “ILoveMexicans” and proposes painting a Mexican flag in the White House. Such memes mobilize messages related to race and politics, based on the underlying premise that the post-Obama political environment is dogged by racism.

The meme mourning the end of the Obama era also extends to the relationship between Barack and Michelle Obama and suggests reluctance to acknowledge the couple’s exit from the White House. Besides holding up Barack and Michelle as the pinnacle of #CoupleGoals, memes revering the Obamas are used to indicate disdain for the current US president. Throwback pictures of Barack and Michelle as a young couple are used in memes that ascribe their

relationship an authentic but fairy tale quality, while reminiscing about their residency in the White House.

Nevertheless, this emphasis on their personal coupledness can perpetuate restrictive expectations of gender roles and relations. For example, one meme juxtaposes a photograph of a youthful Barack and Michelle alongside a recent one, accompanied by text saying “stick by his side” and one day “he’ll give you the world.” The meme’s heteronormative tone reinforces the position of First Lady as distinctly passive. Hence, although memes portraying Barack and Michelle are used to mourn the couple’s departure from the White House, they can also uphold normative ideas regarding heterosexual coupledness and the unequal societal role of men (who provide) and women (who assist).

Misogynoir and Policing the (Un)Femininity of Michelle Obama

In contrast with much of the humorous and pro-Obama content I found when searching for Obama-Biden memes, memes that depict Michelle Obama are often disparaging, with images and text reflecting the systemic oppression that Black women face. These memes reflect not only Moya Bailey’s concept of misogynoir as elaborated by Trudy (2014) and Bailey and Trudy (2018), but also Crenshaw’s (2017) outline of intersectionality. Misogynoir relates to the racist fueled misogyny that is inflicted on Black women specifically. This is connected to White supremacist interracial gender relations that have historically involved Black women’s subjugation, due to the intersectional nature of racism and sexism, amongst other forms of structural oppression.

Examples of misogynoir in memes about Michelle include those in which her perceived friendship with Beyoncé becomes a harsh critique of both Black women. One meme pairs

images of Beyoncé onstage and Michelle's earnest face. The picture of Beyoncé is used to denounce Michelle's criticism of Trump's "sexual boasts," by suggesting that Beyoncé presents a hypersexualized public image – which is a greater cause for concern than Trump's statements, as is Michelle's association with Beyoncé. The normalization of the debasing objectification of Black women is just one facet of how misogynoir operates. Further, the image of Beyoncé appears to have digitally enhanced the visibility of her nipples through her clothing, underscoring how hypersexualized stereotypes of Black women can be, quite literally, projected onto them. Imagery of Michelle in memes compares her to a gorilla and is accompanied by language describing her in bestial ways with racist overtones. These represent another component of misogynoir, which is the dehumanization of Black women, and dismissal of Black women's femininity and denial of their desirability.

Moreover, in an effort to challenge Michelle's feminine credentials, her image is often placed in comparison to other First Ladies, such as Jackie Kennedy and Melania Trump. The implied punchline of such memes is that Michelle is inelegant and inferior to these White women. Such comparisons emphasize the racialized nature of idealized femininity, against which Black women are often framed as the antithesis of. Images of Michelle used as part of such content include pictures of her appearing animated and impassioned, in the midst of speaking to an audience, or with her arms raised in action at an event. The ways that photographs of Michelle talking, or on the go, are presented as evidencing her unfemininity, reinforce normative feminine ideals (Hermes, 1995) regarding expectations of the submissive and so-called "respectable" nature of women, who are expected to look immaculate and to be seen rather than heard.

The meme policing of Michelle's femininity and physical appearance includes her facial expressions, hair texture, and the shape and cleanliness of her body -- right down to the details of

her underarms. One meme theme suggests that Michelle Obama is in fact a Black man. A photograph identified as Michelle Obama is actually male actor and former athlete Terry Crews wearing a long-haired wig. Michelle features in numerous memes based on hypothetical scenarios involving her being denied entry to a women's bathroom. The standards against which Michelle is measured in memes are often ones related to her perceived gendered looks and racial palatability (Carbado & Gulati, 2013). The emphasis on degrading her physical appearance is conducive with misogynoir-related behavior, which frequently involves scrutinizing and spectacularizing the embodiment of Black women in both racist and sexist ways.

The Power of Memes

Images of the Obamas are decontextualized and recontextualized during the creation of memes, which may pay homage to or critique the Obamas and the Obama presidency. Besides being a user-generated way to communicate political positionings, memes can both resist and reflect contemporary stereotypes and expectations regarding racial and gender identities and relations. This is evident in portrayals of the perceived intensity of the Obama-Biden interracial friendship. These, to some extent, challenge stereotypical notions of masculinity as prohibiting expressions of emotional vulnerability and intimacy. They also seem to resist racist constructions of a Black man as inferior to a White one. However, damaging stereotypes are clearly seen in the memes of Michelle that are embedded in misogynoir. Additionally, memes praising the Obamas and their marriage can also entail a heteronormative framing of the relationship between Barack and Michelle, and in so doing reinforce commonplace expectations that men provide for women, in ways that dilute her identity as an individual.

Ultimately, the re-meme-bering of the Obamas is one that contains myriad messages demonstrating different perspectives of the 44th President and First Lady of the United States. Upon further inspection, the sub-text of this re-meme-bering conveys much about societal perceptions regarding issues of gender and race, such as some of the nuances of interracial male friendship, and the continued degradation of Black women.

It's Your Turn: What Do You Think? What Will You Find?

1. Why do you think memes are used as part of online discussion about politics and politicians? What effects do you think that these memes have?
2. Do you make use of memes as part of your online activity? If so, what sort of memes and why? What sort of people tend to feature in these memes?
3. Using an online meme generator, create your own political meme. What message do you want to communicate? How will you achieve this? Who do you want it to speak to and why? Do you think that social media has changed the way in which US Presidents are remembered?
4. In what ways do memes compare to political cartoons in print media and online? Which do you believe is more influential and why?

References

- Bailey, M. & Trudy (2018). On misogynoir: citation, erasure, and plagiarism. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18, 762–768.
- Bogle, D. (2006). *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American films*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Sobande, F. (2019) "Re-meme-bering, Romanticizing and Reframing the Obamas Online". In R.A. Lind (ed.) *Race/Gender/Class/Media*, pp. 47–50. New York: Routledge.

- Brock, A. (2016). Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, 30, 1012–1030.
- Carbado, D. W. & Gulati, M. (2013). *Acting White?: Rethinking race in post-racial America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (2017). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. New York: New Press.
- Grier, S. A., Brumbaugh, A. M. & Thornton, C. G. (2006) Crossover dreams: Consumer responses to ethnic-oriented products. *Journal of Marketing*, 20, 35–51.
- Hermes, J. (1995). *Reading women's magazines: An analysis of everyday media use*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kanai, A. (2017). On not taking the self seriously: Resilience, relatability and humor in young women's Tumblr blogs. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Advance online publication. 10.1177/1367549417722092.
- Mondé, G. C. (2017). #BlackDontCrack: a content analysis of the aging Black woman in social media. *Feminist Media Studies*. Advance online publication. 10.1080/14680777.2018.1409972.
- Sobande, F. (2017). Watching me watching you: Black women in Britain on YouTube. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20, 655–671.
- Trudy (2014) *Explanation of misogynoir*. Retrieved from <http://www.gradientlair.com/post/84107309247/define-misogynoir-anti-black-misogyny-moya-bailey-coined>.
- Sobande, F. (2019) “Re-meme-bering, Romanticizing and Reframing the Obamas Online”. In R.A. Lind (ed.) *Race/Gender/Class/Media*, pp. 47–50. New York: Routledge.