

A critical-rhetorical analysis of Michelle Obama's messages on the abduction of the Nigerian Chibok girls

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Abstract

Several existing studies have examined the feminist rhetorical strategies Michelle Obama used in her public addresses; however, there are no current studies that examine the rhetorical strategies she employed while communicating about the 2014 terrorist abduction of the Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls by Boko Haram. The response to the African plight, which gained global attention and generated several discourses, has been credited to Michelle Obama's involvement. As such, this essay uses the Afrocentric feminist epistemology with models of African feminism to examine how Michelle Obama rhetorically framed the kidnapping, strategically communicated about the African experience, and the way that the incident partially led to the subsequent program, *Let Girls Learn*. The analysis indicates that Michelle Obama's messages about the Nigerian schoolgirls' abduction are strategic in that they reveal her ability to be a connector, challenger, and an agent – when she connected through inclusive language, empathize with the situation, advocate for action as well as create an outlook that change is possible. Michelle Obama's actions portray her as an African feminist (a womanist and motherist) who utilized the Afrocentric worldview when speaking out against the incident.

Key Words: Afrocentricity, African Feminism, Boko Haram, Chibok Schoolgirls, Michelle Obama

Introduction

On the night to early hours of fourteen to fifteen April 2014, almost 300 female students were kidnapped from a government secondary school in the town of Chibok in Borno State, Nigeria (Blanchard, 2014; Iyekekpolo, 2016; Olson, 2016). The Chibok schoolgirls' abduction was claimed by an extremist terrorist organization based in Northeastern Nigeria called Boko Haram. The Boko Haram group, also known as *Jama'atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*, means Western education is a sin (Thurston, 2018). Meanwhile, soon after the terrorist attack, on May 7, 2014, former First Lady Michelle Obama posted a tweet on her @FLOTUS official Twitter account that addressed the abductees and their families and joined the trending hashtag #BringBackOurGirls (@FLOTUS44, 2014). By doing so, Michelle Obama's tweet on the issue became the most retweeted, having over 75,000 shared tweets, replies, and likes. A few days after her Twitter post, on May 10, 2014, for the first time, without President Barack Obama, Michelle Obama used the official weekly radio address to commemorate Mother's Day and condemn the abduction of the Nigeria schoolgirls (The Obama White House, 2014). The Washington Post also noted that in a

conference meeting with some international education experts on May 22, 2014, Michelle Obama reiterated the need to pay close attention to the tragic Nigerian terrorist issue and stressed the importance of educating women and girls (Thompson, 2014). These records indicate that it is the third time that Michelle Obama brought up a conversation about the captured Nigerian Chibok girls.

Her messages (see Appendices A, B, and C), which will be carefully analyzed in this study, communicated the urgency of the Nigerian kidnapping and ultimately helped contribute to the international recognition of the terrorist issue (McKelvey, 2016). Michelle Obama often uses social media to reach out to a wide range of audiences in ways that connect to the core of her personality, values, and policies; however, the same channel has been used to either discuss and spark criticism about her (Meyers & Goman, 2017; Paul & Perreault, 2018). In other words, her messages communicated to the public about the tragic kidnapping of the Nigerian Chibok girls aroused the world's responses and reactions.

It is crucial to highlight that the abduction of the Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls by the Boko

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Haram sect is not just a Nigerian, but also an African issue. Communication about Africa(ns) should be viewed from an African standpoint – through the awareness and expression of its challenges, strengths, values, and orientations. Molefi Kete Asante (2007) claimed that when communicating about Africa(ns), Africans must be located as agents and self-actualizers within the scope of its historical experiences. For example, positioning an African image to the rest of the world requires having some form of consciousness about its identity. For this reason, the purpose of this paper is to examine some of the rhetorical strategies employed by Michelle Obama in her three messages aired during the tragic kidnapping in Nigeria. I intend to understand the framework she used when communicating about the African plight. The Afrocentric feminist epistemology (Alkali, Talif, Wan Yahya, & Jan, 2013) with models of African feminism (Cruz, 2015) is used to argue that Michelle Obama viewed and communicated about the Nigerian kidnapping from an Afrocentric standpoint. This paper further examines the public's remarks when she spoke out concerning the Chibok girls' abduction and explain how her actions connect to 2015 *Let Girls Learn* initiative.

Although several existing studies have examined the (feminist) rhetorical strategies employed by Michelle Obama in her public addresses and messages to diverse audiences (see Ebben & Garza, 2017; Hanson & Osei-Hwere, 2015; Natalie & Simon, 2015; Vigil, 2015), none have applied the Afrocentric framework, let alone approached it from an African feminism perspective, when analyzing her messages about an African situation or issue. Even though research on Michelle Obama's tweets and social media use mentioned the role that she performed and emotions she expressed during the international terrorist crisis in Nigeria (Johnson, 2018; Paul & Perreault, 2018), none analyzed her messages about the abduction of the schoolgirls, nor connected it to *Let Girls Learn* initiative. Thus, this study builds on the existing research on African feminism (Alkali et al., 2013) and explores the framework Michelle Obama used to achieve her aim. This paper proceeds as follows: I begin by reviewing literature that explores Michelle Obama's mothering role, specifically towards African descendants (that is, African-Africa and African Americans), which is connected to her interests in education and advocating for young girls both nationally and internationally. I then offer a theoretical framework drawn from the literature that positions Afrocentricity and African feminism in context.

Next, I describe the method of analysis and move on to highlight the situation surrounding the terrorist incident and analyze Michelle Obama's messages through the binoculars of African Feminism. Afterward, I underscore the world's reaction by reviewing prominent media publications. Finally, I conclude by discussing Michelle Obama's rhetorical strategies, the advantage of telling an African narrative from an indigenous perspective, the contribution of the analysis to first lady scholarship, and the need to have more scholarship that uses the African feminism framework.

Michelle Obama's Maternal Role: Mothering African Descendants

Michelle Obama represents the "complexities of motherhood" (Kahl, 2009). Sara Hayden (2017) pointed out that Michelle Obama draws from multiple maternal contexts, reflecting different interpretations of her maternal rhetoric. Hayden highlighted that Michelle Obama had been strongly perceived as one who exhibits the following maternal performances: (a) an intensive mom (because of her focus on her maternity status over her professional accomplishments); (b) an embodiment of African-American motherhood (because she enacts maternal discipline as a way to debunk negative public perceptions of Black motherhood); and (c) an Othermother-in-chief (because of her manner of accepting mothering responsibilities for nonbiological children). Hayden further asserts that understanding the role that "othermothers play in the lives of African-Americans [and African-Africa] offers yet another context through which Michelle Obama's [motherly] performances may be understood" (p. 20).

Michelle Obama maintains a maternal posture in ways that directly impact African descendants and their community. It is expressed through her love for education, her responsibility to serve as a role model, and particularly to mentor young African descendants (Duster, Seniors, & Thevenin, 2018). African descendants include heterogeneity of African origin populations consisting of Negro, Black, African natives, Black African, African Caribbean/Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-American/African American (see Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeel, 2005, and Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, for definitions). From Michelle Obama's first year in the White House to her last day as the First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS), she has been extremely strategic in mothering African descendants. She used "her family presence in the White House as a springboard for statements supporting racial

inclusiveness" (Kahl, 2009, p. 318). She communicated her lived experiences and personal narratives on public platforms (both in the United States and during her visit to several African countries) by rendering various kinds of speeches, posting a FLOTUS Travel Journal, publishing social media posts, etc. (Hanson & Osei-Hwere, 2015). Michelle Obama achieves influence in ways that motivate and encourage young African descendants to embrace education's power and importance (Hanson & Osei-Hwere, 2015; Meyers et al., 2017; Natalle, in press; Paul & Perreault, 2018). Also, she extended her role as the first lady and became a *mother* to the nation's children. Through her organized events, campaigns, and policy choices, Michelle Obama intentionally worked with women, girls, students of color, and disadvantaged youths from low-income/minority communities (Hayden, 2017; Natalle, in press). And splendidly, she takes on the moniker of *mom-in-chief* (Vigil, 2019).

A testament to the way that Michelle Obama applies her mothering role is evident in Yasmine Huggins' (2018) statement. As a fellow African descendant, she acknowledged that the establishment of Michelle Obama initiative(s) "proved a step in the right direction by providing more resources and opportunities for black women and girls" (p. 37). Besides, Michelle Obama's dedication to mothering Africa's descendants is evident in her visits to Africa, when she spoke on the value of education, family, and the African legacy. These rhetorical situations at home and abroad demonstrate Michelle Obama's successful mothering performances such that her symbolism as a mother figure was accepted worldwide.

Afrocentricity: Situating African Feminism

To understand the rhetorical strategies employed in the messages communicated by Michelle Obama, I use the Afrocentricity framework through the lens of African Feminism. Afrocentricity is the conscious process, quality of thoughts, and an actionable mode of analysis wherein Africans seek, from a place of agency, to locate and assert positions within the context of African history, culture, and content (Asante, 2002, 2007; Karenga, 2003). The Afrocentric paradigm also allows African descendants to view and define their existence based on their African heritage. As Hecht, Jackson, and Ribeau (2003) explained, "Afrocentricity is a way of seeing the world, it challenges us to shift perspective and see the world differently" (p. 10). Given that an Afrocentric approach entails having an African-centered orientation to the world, it should be evident in the ways that African histories, cultural

experiences, and narratives are told to distinguish it from controlling structures (Asante, 1987; Hecht et al., 2003; Mazama, 2016). Molefi Asante (2007) asserted that being an African descendant doesn't make one Afrocentric. Instead, "only those who are consciously African, [and value] the need to resist annihilation culturally, politically, and economically can claim to be adequately in the arena of Afrocentricity" (p. 67). Little wonder Bekerie (1994) argued that Afrocentric theory is a proposition to validate, regenerate, create, and perpetuate African life and living, whole and unhindered, informed by African perspectives and world outlook.

African feminism, on the other hand, involves new dimensions of theories or models of Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Nego-feminism, all emanating from Africa, employed by African descendants, and filling the gaps in feminist literature when referring to the practices of African women (Alkali et al., 2013; Cruz, 2015; Hayden, 2017). The long-standing erasure of African women's narratives, the incapacitation and restrictive opportunities for African women, and the discrimination against African women created an avenue for the establishment of African feminism. In a sense, African feminism in literature involves freeing African women from historical disadvantage relative to men and gender injustices. Its use requires elevating the African woman to the enviable (international) status of positive freedom devoid of any egoism (Alkali et al., 2013). More so, the relevance of employing the Afrocentric feminist epistemology or having a sense of African feminism is because it "has the power to collapse (almost) all the needs of the state of womanhood into the logical global practice" (Lie, Kong & Zainudin, 2012, p. 2) and help reimagine feminist organizing in global times (Cruz, 2015). For example, African feminism is particularly useful to understand how poor African women and marginalized groups challenge exploitative systems. As an Afrocentric descendant, an African feminist, a mother, and a researcher who advocates for liberating African women from historical enslavement and European disadvantage, I consider it appropriate to analyze Michelle Obama's messages through this theoretical framework.

Rhetorical Method

This study examines some rhetorical strategies employed by Michelle Obama in her messages aired during the Nigerian Chibok girls' tragic kidnappings. It analyzes Michelle Obama's perception and communication about the African plight from an Afrocentric standpoint. All three

messages communicated by Michelle Obama concerning the abduction of Nigerian Chibok girls were selected, fully transcribed, and analyzed in the order they were published: (1) her official tweet on May 7, 2014 (see Appendix A) (2) her Mother's Day official weekly radio address on May 10, 2014 (see Appendix B) and (3) her communication with some international education experts on May 22, 2014 (see Appendix C). Information concerning the public's responses was derived from five news sources – four Western and one African. These include *The New York Times*, *British Broadcasting Commission*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, and *Channel News*. Following some of the recommendations by Molefi Kete Asante (2007) on communicating Africa and enabling the centrality of Africans and Africa, I draw some conclusions from this feminist critical-rhetorical analysis to further the case of Michelle Obama as an Afrocentric mother and rhetor.

Rhetorical Analysis: The Abduction of the Schoolgirls

In the wake of the Nigerian Chibok secondary schoolgirls' kidnappings, the nation and the world were in turmoil. Many who heard of the abduction of the Nigerian schoolgirls by the heavily armed Nigerian terrorist group members, Boko Haram, were in total despair (Fenton, 2016; Nossiter, 2014). Aminu Abubakar (2014) reported that since the beginning of 2014, about two thousand other women and children were kidnapped by the militant group. One reason for the shock of the perpetuated wide-scale acts was because the group has long waged a campaign of unending violence across Nigeria, terrorized the people of West Africa, and opposed Western-style education – particularly for girls and women (Olson, 2016). Given the terrorist group's ideologies, many wondered what might befall the schoolgirls and voiced their concerns through various (mediated) communication channels. The news of the incident was featured in several national news headlines, and most people around the world joined Nigerians on April 23, 2014, to use the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls (BBC Trending, 2014). Two weeks of cyber-activism with the hashtag finally brought the issue to mainstream international attention. On May 7, 2014, Michelle Obama made a public tweet and used the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. The hashtag was mentioned more than four million times in 2014 (BBC Trending, 2014; The Stream, 2015), and the top three countries that are known to influence the movement were Nigeria 27%, the United States 26%, and the United Kingdom 11% (BBC

Trending, 2014). These statistics set up the gravity of the situation surrounding the kidnapping of the Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls and the centrality of the role played by Michelle Obama in the international persuasion advocating for their release.

The Rhetor: Michelle Obama, Contemporary Womanist

An extension of the Othermother-in-chief's rhetorical context, proposed by Sara Hayden (2017), Michelle Obama situates her maternal performance within the African feminist tradition of Womanism. The philosophy of Womanism, as explained by Alkali et al. (2013), entails:

Daring black daughters on the well-being of the entire Africa-African and African-American communities, female, adults, and children, canvassing support for the importance of the African woman's trajectory by challenging the madness of all oppressive forces impeding Black woman's struggle for survival, which will include unacceptable stance for poor quality of life of the African woman and family freedom. (p. 239)

The Womanist perspective employed by Michelle Obama during the Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapping is evident in her ability to recognize the extreme cruelty to the African young women and express her concerns about the abduction. While she was not the first to initiate the hashtag movement and discourses surrounding the kidnapping of the Nigerian Chibok girls (BBC, 2014), her use of the trending hashtag #BringBackOurGirls indicates that she became a part of a community of online and offline activism. Such actions showed her support towards the movement and her insight in using the platform to spread her message to reach a wide audience range. For example, a day after her tweet, *The Washington Post* reported that #BringBackOurGirls has "now spread into a truly global social media phenomenon" (Taylor, 2016). Olson (2016) also noted that "the #BringBackOurGirls campaign is an example of the ways that activists are using social media to mobilize communities, influence the public conversation, and spur political action" (p. 779).

In her Twitter post on May 7, 2014, Michelle Obama wrote, "Our prayers are with the missing Nigerian girls and their families. It's time to #BringBackOurGirls. – mo" (@FLOTUS). Michelle Obama's tweet communicated via the social network site, three weeks after the

kidnapping, shows that she connected and empathized with the abductees and their loved ones before using the hashtag movement to assert her position. Michelle Obama's statement of sending "prayers" to the abductees and their families shows her support, empathy, and connection with them. It reveals her earnest hope that the Nigerian girls would safely return to their families. By tweeting about the girls, Michelle Obama took a Womanist stance that reinforced the importance and value of African girls and the oppressive tactics inflicted by Boko Haram.

Likewise, in the radio address aired on May 10, 2014, three days after her initial Twitter post, Michelle Obama's utterances indicate that she was aware that the brutal act carried out by Boko Haram was grounded in an insane, irrational logic and misogynistic gender oppression. She said:

This unconscionable act was committed by a terrorist group determined to keep these girls from getting an education – grown men attempting to snuff out the aspirations of young girls. And I want you to know that Barack has directed our government to do everything possible to support the Nigerian government's efforts to find these girls and bring them home (Obamas, 2014, para. 2).

As an African descendant and a Black daughter, Michelle Obama's statement demonstrates that she was interested in the African-Africa community's well-being, most notably, in young girls and women's progress. Michelle Obama's rhetorical performance of Womanism came to light in her ability to courageously acknowledge the existence of the criminal act committed against the schoolgirls, speak out against the underlying presence of gender inequality, and the restrictions from accomplishing a better quality of life – getting an education. Her statement implies that she not only challenged the oppressive forces (the terrorist group) but stressed the drastic effect of their sexist actions. Michelle Obama also confidently assured collaboration between the United States and the Nigerian government to rescue the Nigerian schoolgirls. Her statement raised the general public's hopes and mobilized the Nigerian government to work on searching for and freeing the girls. Through her maternal performance and an African feminist portrayal of a Womanist, Michelle Obama's rhetorical strategies was activated when she used the communal language of "our" to connect everyone to the

incident, empathized with the abductees and their loved ones by stating that "our prayers" are with them, and defining the abduction as a terrorist and oppressive act. Michelle Obama's rhetorical strategies persuaded the world that the situation was not only unacceptable but needed resolution through government intervention.

Othermothering as Rhetorical Strategy

The observance of Mother's Day in the United States, a celebrated event, is annually held on the second Sunday in May. It recognizes mothers, motherhood, maternal bonds, and the positive impact they have on society. Michelle Obama has been popularly known for honoring Mother's Day since she became the FLOTUS. She is also known for embracing and prioritizing her motherhood identity by assuming the signature *mom-in-chief*. As such, it doesn't come as a surprise to many when she honors all mothers during Mother's Day weekend. However, the 2014 Mother's Day address was unique because of the anti-terrorism and girls' education messages. Following the events that happened before the broadcast, Michelle Obama used the platform to inform the public about the abduction intensity. She communicated it as an issue of "great significance" (Obama, 2014) to her. Michelle Obama's deeds portray her as efficient in mothering her biological children and the children of nations. It is seen in how she extends her motherliness, or Othermothering (Hayden, 2017), as a rhetorical strategy to address the Nigerian Chibok girls' situation.

Michelle Obama's utterances reveal that she could take on the African Motherism role in ways that situated the Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls as central to valuing all girls in Africa and supporting women's and girl's freedom in Africa. She positioned the African plight and located the terrorist act within the context of African culture and experiences. African Motherism, a contrast from the Western notion of mothering, considers nature, nurture, and respect in the mother-child space as the center of any motherist actions and the expression of motherist concerns (Alkali et al., 2013). We see these characteristics in her statements. Michelle Obama not only established herself "as the mother of two young girls" (Obama, 2014), she also shared her connection with the Nigerian schoolgirls by declaring that she and Barack Obama see their daughters in the girls. Michelle Obama expressed how "outraged and heartbroken" (Obama, 2014) she felt about the kidnapping. And she took it upon herself to provide a rationale for the abductees and their

families as innocent victims. In her address, she argued:

We see their hopes and their dreams, and we can only imagine the anguish their parents are feeling right now. Many of them may have been hesitant to send their daughters off to school, fearing that harm might come their way. But they took that risk because they believed in their daughters' promise and wanted to give them every opportunity to succeed. The girls themselves also knew full well the dangers that they might encounter. Their school had recently been closed due to terrorist threats, but these girls still insisted on returning to take their exams. They were so determined to move to the next level of their education – so determined to one day build careers of their own and make their families and communities proud (Obama, 2014, para. 2,3).

Again, as evident in the first sentence written above, Michelle Obama was compassionate towards the abductees' parents. Using the inclusive phrase, "we," she imagined and communicated the abductees and their loved ones' feelings and provided justification for their decisions, which is associated with their desire to get an education and succeed in the long run. As such, Michelle Obama's utterances emerge from a place of agency. She canvassed support to condemn the terrorist act while situating the Nigerian Chibok girls' experiences within the context of African culture, struggles, and experiences.

Being aware of the Boko Haram terrorist attack is necessary but understanding the situation and sharing the African narrative from an African womanist perspective is far more rhetorically powerful. Michelle Obama understood this rationale and applied such an Afrocentric philosophy when speaking about the Nigerian Chibok girls and their families to the general public. It can seem effortless to slip into judgment and criticize the victims, families, and authorities when aware that the terrorist group previously and severally made threats before the incident happened. But Michelle Obama understood the values and priorities that Africans, especially the abducted schoolgirls' families, have toward ensuring that they earn an education and use it to advance the greater good. She understood that a vital part of African heritage is that Africans value situating themselves in their cultural experiences and standing firm to take risks even in the face of

severe dangers. As expected within African cultural practices and rhetorically positioned by Michelle Obama, these Nigerians (the girls, their families, and authorities) were aware of the risks that they might face. Nonetheless, their perseverance to press on to complete their education felt more relevant than yielding to the terrorist group's threats.

Africans persevere and courageously cope with the demands of life despite numerous limitations encountered. And where it concerns getting an education, Africans forge ahead fully aware that completing an education, regardless of its level, is a stepping-stone towards attaining enlightenment and freedom. Michelle Obama's utterances persuade us that she neither told the African plight to draw attention to herself nor to garner support from the public aimlessly. Instead, she consciously communicated about the incident by placing Africans (the Nigerian schoolgirls) in the center, as the actors of their own experiences. In Michelle Obama's representation of African Motherism, we can deduce that she enthusiastically utilized the strategy of being an agent, an African voice, who situates and tells the African narrative from an empathic Womanist perspective – mothering the children of African descendants. Anchored in the matrix of motherhood, Michelle Obama considered the African plight's circumstances and cultural experiences.

Let Girls Learn: The Path to Freedom

I have offered evidence for Michelle Obama's rhetorical maternal performances grounded in the African feminist tradition of Womanism and Motherism, and her African-centered orientation when communicating about the African plight to the world. Michelle Obama has also shown that issues concerning girls' education are of great significance, not just to her but also to the world. In the weekly radio address, she connected the Nigerian Chibok girls' abduction narrative to Malala Yousafzai (a Pakistani activist for girls' education who experienced similar violence in another context). The connection was to "serve as a call to action" (Obama, 2014) and motivate the world to do something about girls' education. Michelle Obama didn't stop there; she took the Nigerian schoolgirls narrative and the issues with girls' education one step forward. She highlighted the relevance of looking into the Chibok girls' abduction and related it to the more than 65 million girls worldwide who are concerned about getting an education. She also used the Nigerian schoolgirls' struggles and story to inspire the young American children – those she symbolically

nurtured as the first lady. In the radio address, Michelle Obama said:

So, education is truly a girl's best chance for a bright future, not just for herself, but for her family and her nation. And that's true right here in the U.S. as well. So, I hope the story of these Nigerian girls will serve as an inspiration for every girl – and boy – in this country. I hope that many young people in America who take school for granted – any young people who are slacking off or thinking of dropping out – I hope they will learn the story of these girls and recommit themselves to their education (Obama, 2014, para. 5).

Thus, she tied the Nigerian Chibok girls' abduction to a broader struggle to give every girl, across various contexts, access to the education they deserve. Right here, her message exhibits African Motherism qualities.

Twelve days after the weekly address, *The Washington Post* reported that Michelle Obama "dropped by a roundtable of experts focused on international education . . . to speak out again about the Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by the terrorist group Boko Haram" (Thompson, 2014). The publication noted that in her meeting with fourteen international education experts, she specified that Nigeria's tragic incident is a reminder of the need to educate women and girls. Again, Michelle Obama linked the issues of girls' education with "millions and millions of girls around the world who are not in school" and posed a rationale that "it is not because they [the girls] don't want to be in school. It's because they don't have the opportunity" (Thompson, 2014, para. 2). At this point, Michelle Obama was fully aware of the public attention on the Nigerian schoolgirls' kidnappings that she saw as an opportunity to become a more forceful advocate for the advancement of girls' education. For example, she affirmed, "Now that we have a bit of the world's attention on this issue, we have to seize upon this moment and take the opportunity to really push to make some significant changes" (Thompson, 2014, para. 2). Michelle Obama's statement "marks a cautious move into international causes" (Natalle, in press, p. 3), and the possible emergence of the *Let Girls Learn* initiative.

The *Let Girls Learn* initiative, established in 2015, is a global girls' education program to help girls worldwide go to school and stay in school. The initiative's establishment is partially grounded

in the horrendous incidence that happened to the young schoolgirls and Michelle Obama's love for education and girls. Inspired by the situation surrounding the 2014 Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls abduction, the passion of an education activist for girls, Malala Yousafzai, and the growing issues with girls' education worldwide, Michelle Obama initiated the girls' education program called *Let Girls Learn*. Natalle (in press) confirmed that this United States government education program is the "strongest collaboration among American and global government agencies and maybe the most effective of Mrs. Obama's effort over the long term" (p. 2). Indeed, as Natalle claimed, Michelle Obama's shrewdness to connect the Nigerian terrorism issue to the right to girl's education by speaking out for the Chibok schoolgirls' safety served as a "rare adventure into foreign policy" (p. 2) and global advocacy. Thus, this reveals Michelle Obama's ability to address under-educated youngsters' problems on a worldwide scale while still exhibiting her Womanist and Motherist characteristics of an African/Afro-centric feminist is worthy of emulation.

Public Responses to Michelle Obama's Messages

The 2014 Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapping by Boko Haram drew the world's attention to the issue for the following reasons. First, the trending hashtag #BringBackOurGirls reached many people across various social network sites and attracted significant response. Second, both national and international media sources disseminated the news about the kidnapping to multiple audiences. Third, the Africans' official protest, within the continent, in the diaspora, and among supporters, brought the world's attention to the issue. Fourth, the inclusion of Michelle Obama's visual image and public address also caught the attention of some prominent people, such as world leaders, celebrities, and many more. However, when examining the impact of Michelle Obama's messages, it is essential to highlight that social network sites were heated over her rhetoric, given her position as the FLOTUS and a public icon.

Michael Shear (2014), in the *New York Times*, stated that the kidnapping of the girls prompted a viral Internet campaign on their behalf, with several people around the world taking to Twitter and other social media to demand the return of the girls to their families. For example, some Nigerian activists and eminent individuals such as Aisha Yesufu, Obiageli Ezekwesili, Alicia Keys, Angelina Jolie, etc. joined the protest held at various locations to rally on behalf of the schoolgirls and called for people to help the

Nigerian schoolgirls (Channels, 2014; McKelvey, 2016). *Channel News*, one of Nigeria's largest broadcasting media sources, reported that the #BringBackOurGirls campaigners in Africa urged Nigeria's federal government to improve military welfare and focus on rescuing the girls. As stated, one of the campaigners insisted that the kidnapping should be taken seriously as a global and not a local issue, since Michelle Obama considered it heart-wrenching. Also, Ken Wiwa, an adviser to Nigeria's former President, Goodluck Jonathan, stated that it was reassuring that the world cared about the girls (McVeigh, 2014).

On the contrary, some critics (both conservatives and other terrorist groups) mocked and criticized Michelle Obama's messages. Terrence McCoy (2014) reported that Michelle Obama's #BringBackOurGirls sparked criticism of American drone strikes. Not only that, her image and message turned against her through tweets and hashtags such as #WeCantBringBackOurDead and #BRINGBACKOURHUMVEE. The #WeCantBringBackOurDead tweet referred to the drone strikes in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and other countries, which was perceived as the divisive defining element of President Barack Obama's foreign policy. And the #BRINGBACKOURHUMVEE tweet, employed by supporters of the radical Islamic State of Iraq and Syria group (ISIS), referred to the American-made vehicles and weapons seized by ISIS after the Iraq army retreated (Chambers, 2014; McCoy, 2014). Many of these critics dispatched somber images of themselves holding a sign – the same way Michelle Obama did – to indicate that her intentions weren't welcomed. The backlash politicized and condemned her actions. Take, for instance, George Will, a contributor to *Fox News*. He said:

I do not know how adults stand there facing a camera and say, 'Bring Back Our Girls.' Are these barbarians in the wilds of Nigeria supposed to check their Twitter accounts and say, 'Uh-oh Michelle Obama is very cross with us, we better change our behavior?' This is not intended to have any effect on the real world (Richinick, 2014, para. 4).

Other critics and conservatives took on a positive approach by saying, "Standing there, holding a sign does not bring the girls back, but it could ratchet up the pressure that could lead to some more international assistance" (Richinick, 2014, para. 7). Still, phrases like "cheap hashtag

activism" overcrowded the Internet. These public responses to Michelle Obama's messages came in both positive and negative light. Regardless of the reactions, she made a significant effort to restore the girls to their home. The fact remains that through African Womanist rhetorical strategies employed in her messages, Michelle Obama remains one of those who utilized the terrorist incident to make change possible.

Conclusion

Michelle Obama is a deliberate African American rhetor. Her timeliness and ability to address the terrorist problem in the heat of the crisis amplifies her intelligence and wisdom. Faced with the complex and horrendous terrorist act that victimized the young schoolgirls, Michelle Obama took it upon herself to extend her maternal role to African descendants when she passionately spoke up against the kidnapping of the Nigerian girls, connected the girls' experiences with millions of girls around the world, and established the *Let Girls Learn* education program to help girls around the world to go to school and stay in school. As a public and cultural icon, Michelle Obama used her position as the FLOTUS to bring the world's attention to the terrorist incident. Through her broadcasts via the social network sites, Michelle Obama drew public attention to the issue and garnered their support by her strategic choices when communicating about the abductees, their families, and terrorist acts to the general public. Despite the negative criticism targeted at her and her messages, Michelle Obama persisted in advocating for the release of the young Nigerian schoolgirls and highlighting the value of educating young girls.

This paper analyzes the Womanist and Motherist rhetorical strategies that Michelle Obama employed in her messages communicated to the public during the kidnapping of the Nigerian schoolgirls. Michelle Obama's strategies were shown in how she expressed her concerns, canvassed support for the Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls, and situated the African narratives in the context of its experiences and struggles. Her rhetorical choices were characterized by the use of inclusive language, empathy with the abductees and their families, mobilization of the American and Nigerian governments to jointly work on searching and freeing the Nigerian Chibok girls, communicating the African plight to the world, linking the African incident with other ongoing global issues concerning girls' education, and establishing a scheme to reduce the problems (gender inequalities and undervalued education for girls).

Joelle Cruz (2015) noted that the African feminist communicative lens helps global times and is relevant to contemporary African societies. And a better representation of African descendant's experience entails using an Afrocentric feminist perspective to understand their experiences and acknowledge the context in which they live (Collins, 1999). Michelle Obama showed us through her messages that she gracefully performed the qualities of an Afro-centric feminist. I argue that Michelle Obama utilized an Afrocentric standpoint by centering the African story in the context of African cultural experiences and from an indigenous perspective. Given the relevance of Afrocentric philosophy for African descendants and my views as an African feminist, I have used the analysis to expand feminism's scholarship flowing from Africa, advance the African feminist rhetorical literature, and contribute to first lady scholarship.

Besides, this paper also raises several questions for future studies. One rewarding avenue for future research could be in conducting a (critical) rhetorical analysis of all Michelle Obama's public speeches that took place after the Nigerian schoolgirls' abduction up until the establishment of the *Let Girls Learn* initiative to examine other performances and rhetorical actions she made during this timeframe. Another way to extend this study would be to explore the impact and outreach that the *Let Girls Learn* education program has on African schoolgirls' lives. Overall, Michelle Obama's ability to employ noteworthy rhetorical strategies to meet the situation has made change possible, where it concerns the retrieval of the Nigerian Chibok schoolgirls from their abductors.

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Appendix A

Retrieved from: <https://twitter.com/FLOTUS44/status/464148654354628608>



First Lady- Archived

@FLOTUS44

Follow



Our prayers are with the missing Nigerian girls and their families. It's time to [#BringBackOurGirls](#). -mo



2:03 PM - 7 May 2014

74,548 Retweets 96,699 Likes



11K

75K

97K

Appendix B

The Obama White House

Office of the First Lady

May 10, 2014

The First Lady Marks Mother's Day and Speaks Out on the Tragic Kidnapping in Nigeria

– Five minutes and Twenty-four seconds (5.24).

Hello everyone, I am Michelle Obama, and on this Mother's Day weekend, I wanna take a moment to honor all the mother's out there and wish you a happy Mother's Day. I also want to speak to you about an issue of great significance to me as First lady and, more importantly as the mother of two young daughters. Like millions of people across the globe, my husband and I are outraged and heartbroken over the kidnapping of more than 200 Nigerian girls from their school dormitory in the middle of the night.

This unconscionable act was committed by a terrorist group determined to keep these girls from getting an education – grown men attempting to snuff out the aspirations of young girls. And I want you to know that Barrack has directed our government to do everything possible to support the Nigerian government's efforts to find these girls and bring them home. In these girls, Barrack and I see our daughters. We see their hopes and their dreams, and we can only imagine the anguish their parents are feeling right now. Many of them may have been hesitant to send their daughters off to school, fearing that harm might come their way. But they took that risk because they believed in their daughters' promise and wanted to give them every opportunity to succeed.

The girls themselves also knew full well the dangers that they might encounter. Their school had recently been closed due to terrorist threats, but these girls still insisted on returning to take their exams. They were so determined to move to the next level of their education – so determined to one-day build careers of their own and make their families and communities proud. And what happened in Nigeria was not an isolated incident. It is a story we see every day as girls around the world risk their lives to pursue their ambitions.

It's the story of Malala Yousafzai from Pakistan. Malala spoke out for girls' education in her community. And as a result, she was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman while on a school bus with her classmates. But fortunately, Malala survived, and when I met her last year, I could feel her passion and determination as she told me that girls' education is still her life's mission. As Malala said in her address to the United Nations, she said, "The terrorists thought that they would change our aims and stop our ambitions, but nothing changed in my life except this: weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power, and courage was born." The courage of hope embodied by Malala and girls like her around the world should serve as a call to action.

Because right now, more than 65 million girls worldwide are not in school. Yet, we know that girls who are educated make higher wages, lead healthier lives, and have healthier families. And when more girls attend secondary school, that boosts their country's entire economy. So, education is truly a girl's best chance for a bright future, not just for herself, but for her family and her nation. And that's true right here in the U.S. as well. So, I hope the story of these Nigerian girls will serve as an inspiration for every girl – and boy – in this country. I hope that many young people in America who take school for granted – any young people who are slacking off or thinking of dropping out – I hope they will learn the story of these girls and recommit themselves to their education.

These girls embody the best hope for the future of our world, and we are committed to standing up for them not just in times of tragedy or crisis, but for the long haul. We are committed to giving them the opportunities they deserve to fulfill every last bit of their God-given potential. So today, let us all pray for their safe return. Let us hold their families in our hearts during this very difficult time and let us show just a fraction of their courage in fighting to give every girl on this planet the education that is her birthright. Thank you.

Appendix C

Michelle Obama renews her call to #Bringbackourgirls (Posted 2014-05-22 18:10:16)

Thompson, Krissah. The Washington Post; Washington, D.C. [Washington, D.C] May 22 2014.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT

Seated in the center of a conference table with 14 people that her office described as international education experts, the first lady said that "what has been going on in Nigeria is a tragic reminder" of the need for educating women and girls.

FULL TEXT

Michelle Obama dropped by a roundtable of experts focused on international education Thursday morning and used the occasion to speak out again about the Nigerian schoolgirls kidnapped by the terrorist group Boko Haram. Seated in the center of a conference table with 14 people that her office described as international education experts, the first lady said that "what has been going on in Nigeria is a tragic reminder" of the need for educating women and girls.

"Now that we have a bit of the world's attention on this issue, we have to seize upon this moment and take the opportunity to really push to make some significant changes. Right now, today, there are millions and millions of girls around the world who are not in school," Obama said. "And it's not because they don't want to be in school. It's because they don't have the opportunity."

It was the third time the first lady has brought up the capture of the Nigerian girls, who were taken from a boarding school last month. The U.S. government recently deployed 80 troops to neighboring Chad to help find the kidnapped children. The first lady sent out a tweet two weeks ago, with a photo of herself holding up a sign that read "#BringBackOurGirls," indicating her solidarity with others calling for the rescue of the girls. Obama's message has been retweeted more than 58,000 times. On May 10, she made it the topic of the president's weekly radio address, which she gave for the first time.

Obama's embrace of the issue comes as she has become a more forceful advocate for advanced education, and it marks a cautious move by the first lady into international causes.

As she closed her remarks, Obama said the issue of educating women and girls internationally is important to her and she plans to work on it long after leaving the White House

A woman seated to the first lady's right remarked: "We don't doubt that we're going to be hearing from you."

The room erupted in gentle laughter.