

“It’s something to own”: A psychobiographical exploration of the life story of Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama

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Abstract

Objective: On January 20, 2009, when Barack Obama placed his hand on the Bible and completed his oath of office as the 44th President of the United States, Michelle Obama instantly was First Lady. The purpose of this psychobiography was to interpret the meaning of Michelle Obama’s life during a significant life transition.

Method: The research design included a social constructivist epistemological stance, a case study design, and an iterative process of narrative interpretation of Michelle Obama’s *Becoming* memoir and documentary. My narrative inquiry led me to crystalize the research question, How does Michelle Obama narratively process her lived experiences and draw upon a pattern of autobiographical reasoning to curate her life story?

Results: My interpretive analysis illuminated how she curated her life story with autobiographical reasoning that employs a “phenomenal woman” script and narrative metaphors based in the sound of striving and the concept of location.

Conclusion: This psychobiography supports the life story theory of identity and self-defining memory research about enduring goals of the self. It also elevates the role of positionality as a form of sociocultural methodological integrity within psychobiography. Autobiographical authenticity of her agentic self is a profound force in Michelle Obama becoming a person who can garner worldwide status as a social change agent.

KEYWORDS

African American women, life story, Michelle Obama, narrative identity, psychobiography, scripts, self-defining memory, social change

1 | INTRODUCTION

“Even when it’s not pretty or perfect. Even when it’s more real than you want it to be. Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own” (Obama, 2018). Michelle Obama’s choice to open her autobiography, *Becoming*, with these three statements, establishes the power of narrative authority within imperfect and jarring life situations. As a dimension of

personality, narrative identity functions alongside a person’s temperament, personality traits, motivation, personal goals, enduring concerns, characteristic defenses, emotional intelligence, developmental tasks, and the relational dynamics of situations within their larger context (see Adler, 2012; Bauer & McAdams, 2004; McAdams, 1995, 2001, 2015; McAdams & Adler, 2010; McAdams et al., 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013; McAdams & Pals, 2006; McLean et al., 2020; Singer, 2005). Narrative

identity is an internalized, integrated, and evolving story of self.

However, it is not just any kind of story. Narrative identity is a self-defining life story. The idea that identity is a life story has roots in Erikson's (1968) proposition that the formulation of identity is an important psychosocial developmental milestone in the transition into adulthood. In his analysis of the identity formation of the 15th-century Protestant reformer Martin Luther, Erikson describes his notion that

to be an adult, means among other things to see one's own life in continuous perspective, both in retrospect and prospect. By accepting some definition as to who he is, usually on the basis of a function in an economy, a place in the sequence of generations, and a status in the structure of society, the adult is able to selectively reconstruct his past in such a way that, step for step, it seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned it. (Erikson, 1958, pp. 111–112)

Scholars across social science and humanities disciplines have elaborated on Erikson's notion that identity is a life story (e.g., Gregg, 1991; McAdams, 1995; Ricoeur, 1984).

My psychobiographical exploration of Michelle Obama's life story was guided by McAdams' (2015) theoretical conceptualization of life story as a first-person perspective of what the person considers at any given time the story of their life. It was also ultimately shaped by the model of narrative identity developed by Jefferson Singer and his colleagues (2013) to synthesize the advances in personality and clinical psychology. In this model, they describe fundamental narrative structures of narrative identity, as well as highlight two companion processes: generation of specific memories and meaning-making. The conceptualization of the study as "a psychobiographical exploration" was inspired by the title of the seminal work of Anderson (1988) on Henry A. Murray's early career that was published in the *Journal of Personality*.

1.1 | Psychobiography as a story of a story

What does it mean to explore a life psychobiographically? In many respects, psychobiography is a way of "doing personality psychology" through the practice of storytelling. It is a story of a story. Thus, this psychobiography reflects my story of Michelle Obama's life story. It is a story that was crafted through my sensibilities as a narrative personality psychologist and my lived experiences steeped in African American cultural knowledge and values. Thus, psychobiography is relational.

The theoretical orientation of this study to narrative identity as an internalized and evolving story of self is grounded in its social-constructivist view of how a psychobiographer contributes to the process of knowledge production. In her 2018 memoir, *Becoming*, the questions that guided Michelle Obama's introspective journey were "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to become?"

These questions reflect the same interrogatory preoccupations of personality psychologists curious about the narrative identity dimension of personality. Contemporary psychobiographical personality inquiry can bring the person back to the center of inquiry and aligns with the founding mission of personality psychology to study the whole person.

1.2 | The present study

After repeated readings of *Becoming* and an orientation to its genre as a memoir, I was curious about Michelle Obama's psychological self-defining story that I previously explained as a life story. Through an iterative process of psychobiographical inquiry over an extended period, the research question that crystalized became *How does Michelle Obama narratively process her lived experiences and draw upon a pattern of autobiographical reasoning to curate her life story?*

The organization of this psychobiography was informed by journal article style conventions within psychology. The article proceeds with a brief biographical sketch of Michelle Obama's family, economic, educational, professional circumstances, and accomplishments. I then summarize the methods used during my narrative inquiry. The section that follows the methods forms the nucleus of my interpretive analysis of Michelle Obama's life story. Finally, I discuss what it means for Michelle Obama to be a social change agent, as well as the implications of her life story for the psychobiographical study of individuality within personality psychological science.

1.3 | Biographical sketch in brief: The journey from "the Southside of Chicago" to "the world's most famous address"

Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama was born on January 17, 1964, in Chicago, Illinois. Her father, Fraser Robinson III (1935–1991), was employed by the Municipal Water plant. Her mother, Marian Shields Robinson (1937–), was a full-time homemaker until Michelle went to high school. Then, she worked as a secretary at Spiegel's Catalog. Her father's family was from the Low Country coastal region of South Carolina. Her great-great grandfather, Jim Robinson, was born enslaved in 1850 on the

Friendfield plantation near Georgetown, South Carolina. Michelle Obama grew up in a multigenerational and working-class household on the Southside of Chicago.¹ Her parents rented an apartment from her Great Aunt and her husband, who lived on the first floor, while on the second floor Michelle lived with her parents and older brother Craig with whom she has always shared a close bond. Her grandmother and cousins lived within a five-block radius of their apartment.

Michelle Obama's educational trajectory included public schooling both within her neighborhood and across town at Whitney Young High School. This high school was the first school in Chicago created for high achievers after the city faced pressure in 1975 to comply with the 1954 decision passed by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* to end school segregation. Highlights of Michelle Obama's accomplishments in high school include making the honor roll and being elected senior class treasurer.

Following her graduation from high school, as a member of the National Honor Society and Salutatorian of her class, she enrolled at Princeton University. There, she majored in Sociology and minored in African American Studies. Her senior thesis at Princeton was entitled "Princeton Educated Blacks and the Black Community." She graduated in 1985, cum *laude*. She later received her professional education at the Harvard University Law School and earned her juris doctorate in 1988.

She then returned to Chicago and became a junior associate at Sidley Austin, LLP, one of the city's largest and most prestigious firms. She specialized in intellectual property law. A year later, she met Barack Hussein Obama when he came to the firm as a summer associate. And in October 1992, they were married.

After a great deal of contemplation, which included conversations with her mother and husband, she decided that her interests and values were better aligned with the work of people who served their communities and their neighbors. When she transitioned from corporate law in 1991, she was first assistant to Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley and then in 1992, he appointed her as Assistant Commissioner of Planning and Development in City Hall. In 1993, she founded the Chicago chapter of Public Allies, an AmeriCorps leadership-training program for young adults that prepares them for public service. She served as the Executive Director until 1996.

In 1996, Michelle Obama was appointed as Associate Dean of Student Services at the University of Chicago and helped developed the university's community outreach programs. Her daughter, Malia Ann, was born on July 4, 1998, followed by the birth of her second daughter Natasha (Sasha) on June 10, 2001. Her daughters started their early childhood education in the University of Chicago Lab School.

In 2005, Michelle Obama was appointed as Vice President of Community and External Affairs for the University of Chicago Medical Center where under her leadership, volunteerism rapidly increased.² When her husband decided to run for election to the United States Presidency in 2008, Michelle Obama took a prominent role in his campaign, and he later was elected the 44th President of the United States.

On January 20, 2009, when Barack Obama placed his hand on the Bible and completed his oath of office as the 44th President of the United States, Michelle Obama instantly was First Lady. During her time as first lady, Obama supported multiple causes and created initiatives to promote change in the lives of others. Among the most well-known globally were her campaign to end childhood obesity, her collaboration with Dr. Jill Biden to support military families, and her advocacy for education of women and girls throughout the world. In 2018, two years after leaving the White House and service as First Lady, she published her memoir, *Becoming*, because as she characterizes it, "I am in a new place, with lots to say." Michelle Obama organizes her storytelling with three section titles: "Becoming Me," "Becoming Us," and "Becoming More." Two years after *Becoming* was published, Netflix released a documentary with the same name.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | The research process: Design considerations

2.1.1 | Preregistration: Psychological inquiry as "Open Science"

When the *Journal of Personality* required authors of this special issue to "pre-register" our methods, I pushed myself to comply with the request (see <https://www.cos.io/blog/looking-back-prereg>). I described the features of the research design of my psychobiographical exploration at that time as follows: This psychobiography (1) adopts a social constructivist epistemological stance; (2) employs a case study research design; (3) uses a dual intrinsic case and instrumental case study orientation (see Yin, 2003); (3) anticipates use of thematic content and discourse analytic methods. However, the reality of the research design features I envisioned at preregistration seemed strange as my psychobiographical exploration developed beyond the registration.

Some of the research design features I envisioned at pre-registration rendered my psychobiographical exploration unrecognizable at times throughout the remainder of the research process. They did not fit with the iterative research process that is the hallmark of narrative inquiry. I persisted beyond my preregistration anticipated design features and I continued an iterative process of inquiry that

offered me the interpretative freedom to more deeply delve into Michelle Obama's memoir. As a result, the possibilities for my psychobiographical exploration expanded. Bound by time, APA journal article reporting standards, and the peer review process, I overcame preregistration constraints.

2.1.2 | Primary data source: A case as a bounded system

Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becoming*, was the primary autobiographical data source. I also selected complementary sources aligned with the general timeframe of the primary source. These sources included community discussions, b-roll video, and dialogue within the Netflix documentary, *Becoming*, that was released shortly after the memoir. I also consulted a sampling of news articles to inform the development of Michelle's Obama's biographical sketch and public positions about her daughters' privacy.

Both research design and pragmatic considerations informed my decision to create a boundary for the primary data sources in the form of memoir. Yin (2003) in his conceptualization of case study research design defines a case as a bounded system. For example, in this kind of design the bounded system could be a school, a person, or phenomenon. As an intrinsic case study, my interest was in Michelle Obama's life story as the bounded system as represented within the genres of memoir and documentary that were developed within a shared timeframe. And as an instrumental case study, my focus was on how my psychobiographical exploration of the life story of Michelle Obama was an instrument to learn more about narrative knowing with respect to narrative, personality, and success.

2.1.3 | Interpretive analytic procedures: The boundaries of the timeframe of psychobiographical inquiry

It is hard to specify chronologically and demarcate the inception of the present psychobiographical study. My fascination with how to interpret Michelle Obama's psychology of success has been a long-standing interest. It manifested after her fist bump with then 2008 presidential candidate, Barack Obama, which led to hyper media scrutiny and obvious disrespect of Michelle Obama, as a person and as an African American woman. Most prominent in my mind is *The New Yorker* cover of Michelle Obama that imaged her in ways that were, from my vantage point, a continuation of the tremendous disrespect African American women have endured for centuries within the culture of our racialized gendered society

(see Kelly, 2017). What is particularly striking, though is the contrast to *The New Yorker* and related imaging of Michelle Obama and my own. To me, Michelle Obama is so familiar...she is "a woman like me," like my sister, like my mother, like my cousin, like my aunt, and like so many other women I know. And she is a woman to be admired, lifted, and respected. In a journey that does not really have a start date, I have passively, until now, observed Michelle Obama's persona.

To develop the successive drafts of this psychobiography, I used an iterative process of inquiry and writing. I also leaned into my artistic creativity as a storyteller while attuned to my knowledge about the lived experiences of African American women.

I used the methodological approach described by Josselson and Hammack (2021) in their book *Narrative Analysis*. This approach directed me to engage in multiple readings, listening, and viewing of *Becoming* in its different forms (e.g., print, audio, video). I also consulted the accumulation of my analytic memos that I developed over the span of my curiosity about Michelle Obama's life story. Once I refined the research question and case study research design features, I returned to the iterative process of continuous reading, listening, and viewing *Becoming*. In retrospect, it is difficult to pinpoint specific questions that were the catalyst for each of these iterations. Next, as recommended by Josselson and Hammack (2021), I employed varied levels of critical thinking (see Winston-Proctor, 2018) to craft a Gestalt to inform next levels of interpretive analysis. Finally, in writing this report of my psychobiographical exploration I selected data extracts that served as exemplars for Michelle Obama of many other memories that she constructed within the life story data sources.

2.2 | Methodological integrity: Positionality in psychobiographical inquiry

During the research process in my role as analyst, I often questioned how my identification with facets of the lived and shared experiences of Michelle Obama shaped what I was able to identify and interpret, as well as what I did not perceive. I aimed to be thoughtful and specific in my reflections about the subjectivity within my psychobiographical inquiry. Thus, within my interpretive analysis about the meaning of being an African American woman within Michelle Obama's life story, I highlighted our positionality as analyst and subject. At the end of the written report, I drew a few conclusions about the nature of methodological integrity in psychobiographical inquiry. The APA Publication Manual (2020) section on *Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Research* (JARS-Qual)

describes there are instances in which the researcher's positionality statement extends beyond the method section (see Levitt et al., 2017).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Michelle Obama's life storytelling and forms of narrative knowing

From the outset of my psychobiographical exploration, I was intrigued by the literary genre of memoir. And I was amazed that Michelle Obama's memoir resonated with so many people within the United States and throughout the world. In 2020 the New York Times reported that the memoir *Becoming* sold 14 million copies worldwide, including more than 8 million in the U.S. and Canada. And Crown Publishing of Random House translated the memoir in 49 other languages <https://becomingmichelleobama.com>.

My curiosity was ignited about Michelle Obama's life story construction at the height of middle adulthood that coincided with a period of her life transition away from the public service of First Lady of the United States. In the introduction of her memoir, she situates herself with two simple statements intertwined with psychological complexity: *"I am in a new place. I have so much to say."*

In 2018, when Random House published her memoir, it was only two years after she left the White House. Michelle Obama autobiographically depicts the affective, cognitive, and sociocultural experience of the day she departed.

It was a very emotional day. But then we got on Airforce One and when I got on the plane, I think I sobbed for 30 minutes. I think it was just the release of for 8 years just trying to do everything perfectly. One day, you are a normal family. An election happens and your life changes instantly. It is like you are shot out of a cannon. We did not have time to, like, adjust. Being the first lady has been the greatest honor of my life. But how many people have been in that position when the entire attention of everything is you? Every gesture you make, every blink of an eye is being analyzed. You have the world watching every move you make. Your life is not yours anymore. The whole idea of doing a tour is having time to reflect. What just happened to me?

My theoretical orientation toward personality, and its development across the life course, shaped my characterization

of Michelle Obama's memoir as a personal project of life story telling. Her life story telling generates self-defining memories and narrative scripts. These two affective, cognitive, and motivational narrative structures within narrative identity development are processes used by the person to create connections and associations across experiences. The form of these structures varies in their specificity but can be significant meaning-making devices as a person strives to bring unity, continuity, and maturity to their identity (see Bamberg, 2004, 2007; Bauer & McAdams, 2004; McAdams, 2001; McLean et al., 2007; Singer, 2004; Singer et al., 2013). To elaborate on this theoretical orientation, Singer et al., 2013 offer a model of narrative identity that describes narrative structures, and their significance as follows:

Autobiographical memories related to critical goals in a lifetime period lead to life-story memories, which in turn become self-defining memories when linked to an individual's enduring concerns. Self-defining memories that share repetitive emotion-outcome sequences yield narrative scripts, abstracted templates that filter cognitive-affective processing. The life story is the individual's overarching narrative that provides unity and purpose over the life course. Healthy narrative identity combines memory specificity with adaptive meaning-making to achieve insight and well-being. (p. 1)

In the subsequent sections of the results and discussion, I offer my interpretation of a selection of Michelle Obama's self-defining memories. These particular memories along with complementary autobiographical extracts are exemplars of others in her life story telling that cast the theme of an agentic self in situations that Michelle Obama portrays as affectively charged, vivid, and illustrative of her self-definition of success.

Across the interpretive and writing processes, I remained mindful of how my sensibilities as the analyst and Michelle Obama's as the subject became woven together as a version of "narrative knowing." Mine is admittedly anchored in my knowledge of narrative personality psychology, as well as experientially rooted in my strong identification with Michelle Obama as a person. And I know that my positionality in this regard influenced my interpretative emphasis on Michelle Obama's use of a style of autobiographical reasoning anchored in a meaning making script of striving and locating self with excellence, love, and autobiographical authenticity. My memories of my undergraduate literature courses at Howard University likely stimulated my analytic sensibilities toward the dignity within

Michelle Obama's autobiographical reasoning. That is, I was keenly aware of African American women autobiographers working in the literary tradition who emphasized dignity of African American women as a form of self-affirmation, protection, liberation, resistance, modeling, thriving, and wholeness (e.g., Braxton, 2009; Bray, 1998; Hurston, 1942; Jacobs, 1861; Traylor, 2005; Washington, 1972; Wells, 1970; Wheatly, 1938).

3.2 | Michelle Obama's autobiographical reasoning: Self-defining memories and narrative scripts

3.2.1 | Narrative as “the sound of striving”

I spent much of my childhood listening to the sound of striving. It came in the form of bad music, or at least amateur music, coming up through the floorboards of my bedroom—the plink plink plink of students sitting downstairs at my great-aunt Robbie's piano, slowly and imperfectly learning their scales.

Michelle Obama creates a brilliant rendition of sound as a metaphor through an achievement-optimism sequence as her introduction to persistence within her life story. In this self-defining memory brimming with sound, she describes her childhood sense of persistence toward achievement that she garnered from observational learning through the floorboards of her extended family's home. Striving in the face of challenge becomes a facet of socio-cultural meaning if considered in a larger context of high expectations modeled by her great aunt Robbie and other family members. Inherent in her autobiographical reasoning about achievement is the value of persistent hard work with hope in the form of optimism. Autobiographical reasoning is a form of a person's conscious thought linked to their autobiographical knowledge base (see Conway et al., 2004; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Singer & Bluck, 2001; Singer, 2004; Singer et al., 2013).

Her self-defining memory of the inner psychological environment her great-aunt Robbie cultivated also illuminates a narrative sequence repeated across multiple self-defining memories. In this narrative sequence, Michelle Obama reconstructs these vivid, affectively charged memories along a continuum from imperfection to perfection in achievement. And within her self-defining memory of the sound of striving in her bedroom beaming up from her great aunt Robbie's apartment below, it is not just her striving upon which she casts this sequence but does so with respect to other children whom she observed within her

multi-generational family home environment. And these others join Michelle's narrative socialization that her aunt Robbie deemed necessary to learn to play a piece of music through continuous investments of practice.

“Every story needs a soundtrack, and Motown has provided so much rhythm to my life.” Here, Michelle Obama also uses sound to characterize a form of composition that offers a patterned accompaniment to her life story. In the opening scene of Michelle Obama's Netflix documentary film, *Becoming*, Michelle Obama walks out of her home, through the garage, enthusiastically greets her secret service detail with “Hi Josh! What's happening?”. She then climbs into the large Black SUV that awaits her arrival. After she clicks in her seatbelt, she reaches for her phone, puts in her headphones, and explains *“I usually listen to my music. This is what I do in the car. I have an eclectic taste in music. It depends on the mood. Whether I want to be inspired or whether I want to thump it out. Hit me!”*. She then presses play and hears the melody of her gospel musical selection, *God Like Mine*, by Grammy winner Kurt Franklin, begin to play. And within each refrain of the song Michelle Obama is listening to is the verse “Everybody wanna be like you. They want power and grace like you. But see...no God like our God. There is no one like you.”

3.2.2 | Narrative as location

Michelle Obama positions herself within her self-defining memories through the narrative metaphor of location. In contrast to a geographic location, which is characterized by spatial physical dynamics in relationship, narrative as location is an affective psychological dimension. In one of her community events, she engages in a conversation with a young African American girl that leads her to emphasize narrative as location,

So little of who I am happened in those 8 years.
So much more of who I am happened before.
So, I am doing what you guys are doing. It takes time to process what it all means to your life and figure out walking around with all of this ability. I am asking what do I want to do, what can I do?

Similarly, she engages narrative as location at the introduction of her book.

For me, becoming is not about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey does not end.

As she reflects on the sociocultural role of wife and its meaning, Michelle Obama engages narrative as location.

For many women, including myself, “wife” can feel like a loaded word. It carries a history. If you grew up in the 1960s and 1970s as I did, wives seemed to be a genus of white women who lived inside television sitcoms—cheery, coiffed, corseted. They stayed at home, fussed over the children, and had dinner ready on the stove. They sometimes got into the sherry or flirted with the vacuum-cleaner salesman, but the excitement seemed to end there. The irony, of course, was that I used to watch those shows in our living room on Euclid Avenue while my own stay-at-home mom fixed dinner without complaint and my own clean-cut dad recovered from a day at work.

The narrative metaphor of location offers a person an opportunity to draw meaning that is relative to the landscape of time, place, role, and situation. Michelle Obama's use of narrative as location offers her the psychological capacity to curate a sense of self that is ordinary even in the context of extraordinary life experiences, like that of being the First Lady of the United States. Both in her book and film *Becoming*, she declares “*All you need to know about who I am is that I am from the Southside of Chicago.*” At the height of her service as First Lady, a reporter for *People* magazine asked her “*If you could be anybody in the world, who would you be?*” “Beyoncé” was her response.

Michelle Obama's life storytelling casts her as a person who signifies with her “Southside” community, as well as with an extraordinary African American entertainer whose art, aesthetic, and business acumen has translated into her billion-dollar net worth. To some other analysts, Michelle Obama's signification may be interpreted as a paradox. However, as a narrative personality psychologist deeply rooted in the importance of a cultural-historical analysis of life story telling, my observation is that African American women, irrespective of their status, must develop the capacity for a distinctive form of psychological agility to cope, survive, and thrive within the context of a racialized-gendered society.

3.2.3 | The phenomenal woman script

It's nature

The subtleties of Michelle Obama's autobiographical reasoning captivated me as my psychobiographical exploration expanded. I was struck by a narrative script that I identified and named the phenomenal woman script.

Her storytelling illuminated subtleties in her style of autobiographical reasoning about the situations in which she located herself. I was particularly intrigued by those that I interpreted to strike upon the meaning of being an African American woman.

Michelle Obama's pattern of narration casts the self and other in dynamic arrangement on poles that resemble how Maya Angelou poetically does the same in her *Phenomenal Woman* poem published in her book, *And Still I Rise* (1978). Within each stanza of the poem, Angelou creates situations coded in extremes of self and other. And then she concludes each stanza with three declarative statements about her “who ness:” “I am a woman phenomenally. I am a phenomenal woman. That is me.” (see https://www.huffpost.com/entry/maya-angelou-poems_n_5403816). Excellence-love form the arc of the subtle but powerful meaning of what it means to be a phenomenal woman.

When you are First Lady, America shows itself to you in its extremes. I've been to fundraisers in private homes that look more like art museums, houses where people own bathtubs made from gemstones. I've visited families who lost everything in Hurricane Katrina and were tearful and grateful just to have a working refrigerator and stove. I've encountered people I find to be shallow and false and others—teachers and military spouses and so many more—whose spirits are so deep and strong it's astonishing. And I've met kids—lots of them, all over the world—who crack me up and fill me with hope and who blessedly manage to forget about my title once we start rooting around in the dirt of a garden. Since stepping reluctantly into public life, I've been held up as the most powerful woman in the world and taken down as an “angry black woman”. I've wanted to ask those people what they did not like about me—was it that I was “angry,” or that I was Black, or that I was a woman? I've smiled for photos with people who call my husband horrible names on national television, but still want a framed keepsake. Some people on the internet have questioned everything about me, right down to whether I'm a woman or a man. A U.S. congressman has made fun of my butt. I've been hurt. I've been furious. But mostly, I've tried to laugh this stuff off. There's a lot I still do not know about America, about life, about what the future might bring. But I do know myself. My dad, Fraser, taught me to work

hard, laugh often, and keep my word. My mom, Marian, showed me how to think for myself and to use my voice.

It's origins

What have I learned from my life story analysis of the subject of my psychobiographical exploration that might explain the development of Michelle Obama's excellence-love narrative script? The nature of her home environment offers clues. Michelle Obama's upbringing within a multigenerational home of men and women on the Southside of Chicago configured her observations, imagination, and cultivation of a sense of self that was encased in love in forms of warmth, high expectations, encouragement of questioning, positive self-regard, and creative survival. And through social learning, Michelle Obama developed the psychological agility to mark excellence as a personal standard through which to filter the meaning of her lived experiences. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines excellence as "the state or fact of excelling; the possession of chiefly good qualities in an eminent or unusual degree; surpassing merit, skill, or virtue, worth etc., dignity eminence" p. 495.

The relational dynamics of her family and their rich palette of life experiences offered her the opportunity to sketch a sense of the world that was at once distal and proximate to the nucleus of her childhood socialization. This context of her self-development provided symbolic cultural insight about the relative importance of self and other (e.g., family, community, and society) about what being an African American woman could mean across different periods of her life course. Michelle Obama describes this context of her self-development not only in her reflection below, but in other autobiographical extracts that open the psychobiography and one in which she describes what her father "taught" her and what her mother "showed" her.

I have high expectations of young people. It is the same expectations my family had of me. My grandfather Dandy expected us to be great. But he went through life being underestimated. Growing up, he was a brilliant young man. Somebody that loved to read books, loved to delve into things in a deep meaningful way. He could have been a professor. He could have been a doctor. But because of race and class he could not get into colleges. They did not have the money, the resources. And imagine walking around with all this ability and the world telling you no. No, you are not good enough. No, you are not ready. Watching people with half your

intelligence being promoted past you. You know, watching opportunities slip away. Not because you are not able but because nobody thinks you deserve it. That caused him a lot of disappointment and anger. That made him push us to be better.

Autobiographical authenticity

Michelle Obama narratively navigates with autobiographical reasoning that in effect pulls on the theme of authenticity of the individual, collective, and relational self. In so doing, she embeds lessons of racial socialization that are characteristic of being an African American woman living in the culture of a racialized society. In a sense, this becomes another feature layered onto how she casts the features of her life story.

As the psychobiographer, I identify with many of Michelle Obama's autobiographical memories about what it means to be African American (and female). I claim a subjective analytic sightline. This sightline is embedded in the psychological environment that cultivated my sense of self and the value of autobiographical authenticity for African American women. "Women Like Me" and Michelle Obama double down on the lessons and identification with autobiographical authenticity that was nurtured (and tested) within our family, neighborhood, schooling, and *sistah* friendships.

My relational self that I press to maintain at the center of the meaning of my lived experiences threads shared experience with Michelle Obama. For example, I experienced fierce love, respect, nurturing, and belongingness from my parents, sister Lisa, cousin Gina, my aunt Cynthia, uncle Jerome, and godfather Larry. Like Michelle Obama, I have a crew of *sistah* friends whose unconditional love, support, and truth have sustained me for decades. They know who they are and here will remain nameless. And I too am blessed with a loving husband who not only adores and supports me unconditionally, but who also gave me the greatest gift of life, becoming a mother.

My collective self that I cling to as autobiographical authenticity is grounded in the neighborhood in which I grew up. My neighborhood, Shepherd Park in Washington D.C., signifies a cluster of families striving toward upward mobility. In the case of these families their upward mobility was as first or second-generation college, graduate, and professional school-educated individuals aiming at a move of their families from working class to middle class.

The world around me that I was born into in 1970 was in turbulent transition with the recent passing of the 1965 Civil Rights Act and the riots that followed. However, like Michelle Obama, my family offered me and my sister a seat at the dinner table where we could be respectfully

inquisitive and that gave us an indication that we belonged as brilliant inquirers. Our sense of the world, outside of our dinner table, took the form of Black art, the brilliance of Black scholars who founded and transformed fields of study (e.g., James Bayton, Mamie Clark, Francis Sumner, W.E.B. DuBois), legal cases about the Civil Rights of Black people in the United States, and the importance of Howard University as a world university that embraced education of women, admitting them since its founding in 1867.

Other facets of the relational self of autobiographical authenticity of Michelle Obama with which I identify are her African American cultural values of generativity, protection, and dignity across gender identity roles. These cultural values have had a distinctive character for centuries as African American women have searched for the meaning of being an African American woman.

It's up to us, as mothers and mother-figures, to give the girls in our lives the kind of support that keeps their flame lit and lifts up their voices—not necessarily with our own words, but by letting them find the words themselves.

My relationship with Barack was all about our partnership, if I was going to have an equal voice with this very opinionated man, I had to get myself up. I had to set myself off to a place where I was confident, I was going to be his equal. He was very different, and he was different for me. He challenged me in different ways...I knew he was a tsunami, coming after me and if I did not get my act together, I would be swept up. I did not want to just be an appendage to his dreams. So that forced me to work, and think, and make decisions like leaving law.

The phenomenal woman script laden with the meaning of excellence-love creates a psychological environment of security and safety for Michelle Obama's children so they too, like their mother, could cultivate their authentic selves. Michelle Obama's sense of self is amplified in her role as a mother who has the security and safety of her daughters at the top of mind, as well as the role as an adult daughter who intuitively knows she must convince her daughters' grandmother to move to the White House.

And I say all of this not just as First Lady ... and not just as a wife. You see, at the end of the day, my most important title is still "Mom-In-Chief." My daughters are still the heart of my heart and the center of my world.

In a Washington Post article in 2012 entitled, *President Obama's daughters' privacy is difficult to protect in Internet age*, Michelle Obama's spokesperson made the following statement:

From the beginning of the administration, the White House has asked news outlets not to report on or photograph the Obama children when they are not with their parents and there is no vital news interest, said Kristina Schake, the spokeswoman for first lady Michelle Obama in a statement early Tuesday. We have reminded outlets of this request in order to protect the privacy and security of these girls. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/president-obamas-daughters-privacy-is-difficult-to-protect-in-internet-age/2012/03/20/gIA5UGWQS_story.html)

4 | DISCUSSION

In my psychobiographical exploration, I became intrigued by the question of how Michelle Obama narratively processes her lived experiences and draws upon a pattern of autobiographical reasoning to curate her life story. In search of meaning, my inquiry sought to penetrate below the surfaces of semantic meaning, though at times it was instructive to do so. The meaning I was on the hunt for was more latent and sociocultural. My subjectivity in search of meaning was a force of the confluence of my personhood and my profession. My identification with Michelle Obama as a person gradually cohered with my knowledge of my profession's underdeveloped acquaintance with African American women's lives. These dual realities may have propelled my critical thinking toward a propensity to craft "the story of the story" in a style that would humanize African American women rather than only differentiate us from others.

However, this propensity in my storytelling should not be misinterpreted as denial of the psychological significance of race in the lives of African Americans. In fact, I have detailed in most of my interdisciplinary scholarship the theoretical and methodological challenges inherent to the reality that for African Americans the meaning of race in the culture of a racialized society both adds a layer of complexity to the self-system (e.g., Burrell et al., 2013; Terry & Winston, 2010; Winston, 2012; Winston & Winston, 2012; Wynn et al., 2012) and complicates the narrative processing of the meaning of race within their lives (e.g., Freeman et al., 2021; Winston & Winston, 2012; Winston-Proctor, 2022; Winston-Proctor & Winston, 2020). For example, master narratives of race have

been woven through the fabric of American society and culture based on racial ideology and treating “race as a thing” (see Winston & Winston, 2012). It is not race per se, but gendered racism that steepens within the lives of African American women generation after generation. Thus, African American women like Michelle Obama and me during our narrative identity development necessarily must contend with making meaning of lived experiences of gendered racism. Why? Because like African American men, our quest for meaning making a routine process of our narrative identity development that unfolds in a cultural historical context characterized as by what Jones (2003) refers to as a “universal context of racism” (p. 217). Reactions to this universal context of racism “form a common bond or *thematic psychological* [emphasis added] unity among Black Americans, but the behavioral and even psychological manifestations of those reactions will vary from person to person” (Jones, 1991, p. 314). Other scholars have also written extensively about the psychological significance of race across the lifespan within the lives of African Americans (e.g., Banks et al., 1995; Barbarin, 1993; Belgrave & Allison, 2013; Billingsley, 1968; Boyd-Franklin, 2013; Boykin, 1986; Boykin, 1997; Boykin et al., 1997; Bowman & Howard, 1985; Caldwell et al., 2004; Cokley, 2000; Cross, 1971, 1991; Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Harrell, 1999; Hill, 1972; Hill, 1997; Hines & Boyd Franklin, 2005; Jackson et al., 1996; LaVeist et al., 2001; McAdoo, 1988; McAdoo & Young, 2009; McAdoo, 2012; Nobles 1974, Sellers et al., 1998; Stevenson, 1995; Taylor et al., 1982; Mwendwa et al., 2013; Mbilishaka et al., 2020; Rice, 2022).

4.1 | Autobiography of African American women and agentic social change

The very act of Michelle Obama writing her memoir and the way in which she just walks around in the world enacting her life story are profound forms of social change. The subtle nature of both forms is paradoxically rich in psychological significance to individuals, communities, and societies throughout the world. The volume of sales and high number of language translations suggest the power of Michelle Obama's relatability and the interest in her life story telling and the “happenings.” The way that Michelle Obama brings forward her story, both in how she enacts it and tells it, is significant. The phenomenal woman script along with the metaphors of narrative as a sound of striving and location are indicative of Michelle Obama's self-mastery, which is an agentic form of social change. Within narrative identity research, agency and the agentic self are most often conceptually focused on individual change rather than social change or both.

There is a sense of cultural motion that her autobiographical reasoning reflects with respect not only to her

personal story but the collective story of African American women who also have “so much to say.” Michelle Obama, like other African American women who enter the literary tradition of autobiographical storytelling, has a dual agenda of storytelling as a vehicle of self-expression, discovery, and identity within the cultural historical contours of society that has required African American women to be in service of leading social change (see Bray, 1998; Davis, 1974; Hurston, 1942; Jacobs, 1861; Lorde, 1984; Traylor, 2005; Wells, 1892; Wheatley, 1938). Braxton (2009) describes the decision to use autobiography of African American women writers is a practice of “the black woman autobiographer to look back to look forward and to provide encouragement, direction, and guidance...reading, writing, marching, singing, dancing, loving, faring, black women exchange their letters for liberation” (pp. 146–147). In almost a more spiritual than analytic way, I sense the lineage and a connection among these African American autobiographers, Michelle Obama's storytelling in her memoir as a form of social change, and the selective interpretations about myself as the psychobiographer laying claim to my positionality.

Further exploration of self-mastery in autobiographical reasoning is an important research direction. For example, how do African American women develop the adaptive capacity in relation to self-mastery in their autobiographical reasoning without the anchor of love that was cultivated for and by Michelle Obama? What role does the phenomenal woman script play in healthy narrative identity development? How does the phenomenal woman script serve African American women's health and well-being in ways that the “strong Black woman schema” does not (Nelson et al., 2022; Woods-Giscombé, 2010)? The answers to these research questions have implications for research and practice that targets African American women's healthy narrative identity development and the long-term promotion of health equity (i.e., health disparities) (see Mwendwa et al., 2013). Singer et al. (2013) suggest that healthy narrative identity entails a capacity to narrate and draw meaning from emotionally evocative memories, while gaining freedom from narrative scripts that lead one in a damaging self-direction. Accompanying cognitive-behavioral changes produce revisions in the internalized life story, enhancing agency and redemptive possibilities.

4.2 | “The good story,” the artist, and methodological integrity in psychobiography

There are interpretive complexities inherent in the iterative process of narrative inquiry that psychobiographers use to study lives. For the psychobiographer to tell a “good story” they must be willing to intertwine its main

protagonists in a kind of triple “bookkeeping:” The analyst. The subject of inquiry. The reader audience. If the analyst’s orientation to their creation is like an artist’s perhaps they will be more likely to tell a “good story.” Although the standard of the “good story” to establish validity within narrative research has been upstaged by the recent introduction of the standard of methodological integrity, the notion that psychobiographers should aim to tell a “good story” that incorporates elements of artists’ orientation to their work is important. The “good story” notion still has currency within psychobiography.

Artists use various media to create their work. For example, the portrait artist can select drawing, painting, sculpture, and photography. The psychobiographers’ ability to choose from multiple types of material offers them a distinctive opportunity to engage their personal proclivities throughout the artistic process of portraying the subject. It is essential that the psychobiographer considers sociocultural positionality as an essential form of methodological integrity in psychobiography. Imagine how this exploration of Michelle Obama’s “story of a story” would come off differently without entwinement of my sociocultural positionality.

Psychobiography affords the study of personality an approach to inquiry that can sharpen the theoretical and methodological approaches psychologists use to develop a more sophisticated, nuanced, and intricate understanding of human individuality and the sociocultural contexts of lives. At the same time, I have discovered in my journey of psychobiographical exploration that this orientation to personality inquiry can also contract the scope of the whole person at the same level. For example, I was unable to characterize other dimensions of Michelle Obama’s personality at the level of depth that I could narrative identity. In part, the scope of choice was necessary to develop a coherent, rich, and socioculturally anchored journal article length research report. Though I think the challenge of how much of the person is left on the cutting room floor to use a storied metaphor is a ripe area of discussion among psychobiographers.

I acknowledge that there are alternative stories that I could have told, different autobiographical memories that I could have selected as exemplars, and some constraints in my interpretations due to my personality and lived experiences. However, I offer my psychobiographical exploration of Michelle Obama’s life story at a turning point in her life as a contribution to magnify her storytelling within memoir and documentary for the insights it provides for narrative personality psychologists, like me, and the people throughout the world. *Becoming* is more than simply a book and a film. It is revolutionary at the individual and sociocultural levels of understanding excellence-love and achievement-optimism. Michelle Obama and I

have co-created a sense of deep beauty in the inner lives of African American women when we decide we are psychologically powerful. This is symbolic of the inner psychological sisterhood among African American women that rarely makes it into the stories told about our connection.

The conceptualization of psychobiography as a story of a story that guided my psychobiographical exploration contributes to the varied definitions and debates among personologists and psychologists about the nature of psychobiography (e.g., Is psychobiography theory, method, or both?) (see Anderson & Dunlop, 2019; Fouché, 2015; Kasser, 2017; Kőváry, 2011; Ponterotto, 2015, 2017, 2018; Ponterotto et al., 2015; Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2013; Runyan, 1982; Schultz, 2005; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). A storied conceptualization of psychobiography showcases the well-formulated arguments psychologists who study narratives and culture have made about their inseparability (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2008; McLean & Syed, 2016; Wang & Singer, 2021). Bruner (1990), for example, offers an elegant formulation of the constitutive nature of culture and narrative.

Personologists and their colleagues from within and outside of the discipline of psychology have moved the field of personality psychology forward in their study of individuals (e.g., Allport, 1965; Alexander, 1990; Anderson, 1988; Elms, 1994; Freeman, 2009, 2010, 2015; Schultz, 2005; Simonton, 1998; Singer, 2017; McAdams & West, 1997; Murray, 1938; Ponterotto & Reynolds, 2013). They have done so in multiple ways, but the most significant way is that they pave the way for recentering the person within psychology generally and personality psychology specifically (e.g., Allport, 1937. Carlson, 1971; James, 1893).

5 | CONCLUSION

My psychobiographical exploration of Michelle Obama supports the life story theory of identity, self-defining memory research about enduring goals of the self, and the utility of Singer et al. (2013) to study narrative identity. It also elevates the role of positionality as a form of sociocultural methodological integrity within psychobiography. My iterative and flexible approach to psychobiographical exploration is useful to illuminate how a person is “like all others” (human nature), some others (individual difference), and no others (human uniqueness) (see Kluckhohn et al., 1953). I also hope my psychobiographical exploration will inspire social change within the field of personality psychology. For example, imagine how theoretical and methodological development would be propelled in ways that have been unprecedented in the 21st century with more diversity equity,

and inclusion of African American women to study personality and lives (see Cole, 2009; Franklin et al., 1980; Ireland et al., 2018; Winston-Proctor & Winston, 2020).

Autobiographical authenticity is a profound force in Michelle Obama becoming a person who garners worldwide status as a social change agent. African American women's life stories beautifully illuminate the autobiographical complexity of individuality and sociocultural contexts of their lifespan development. Michelle Obama's life story showcases the impact of human nature to love and the psychological power of authentic autobiographical authorship. She owns her story!

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author was responsible for all phases of the research process. This included the development of the research design elements and their justification (e.g., the theoretical perspective, epistemological stance, methodology, and methods). In addition, the author was responsible for the iterative phases of journal article manuscript writing.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Obama, M. (2018). *Becoming*. Crown. at <https://becomingmichelleobama.com/>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: Obama, M. (2018). *Becoming*. Crown. <https://becomingmichelleobama.com/>. *Becoming*, Netflix BLM Documentary, <https://www.netflix.com/title/81122487>.

ENDNOTES

¹ See https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/08/science/lessons-in-community-from-chicagos-south-side.html?mc=aud_dev&ad-keywords=auddevgate&gclid=CjwKCAjw2P-KBhByEiwADBYWCuK5fVLVaQH1-2HnR590Mjxw-_w3ZtPdwyIAkxbxRTRUODuIx5UyVfxoCwoMQAvD_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds

² (See <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/realitycheck/node/357156>).

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