Michelle Obama's right to bare arms

In her official portrait, the first lady wears a sleeveless dress that reveals her much-discussed toned arms. (JOYCE N. BOGHOSIAN/THE WHITE HOUSE VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS)

By Vanessa Jones
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Along with the foreclosure crisis and the cratering job market, it is the story that just won't quit: the first lady's penchant for sleeveless garb. For months, the press has leapt on every sleeve-free dress that Michelle Obama has worn: The purple she wore when the president addressed Congress! The black Michael Kors she donned for the official White House portrait! The fuchsia number on the cover of Vogue!

And then, there are the arms themselves, strong and defined, muscular and elegant, as if for the duration of the campaign she'd lugged weights in her carry-on bags along with voters' not-insubstantial hopes for change.

Of course, Michelle Obama is hardly the only first lady to endure a public fascination with her appearance, her fashion choices, her style. Hillary Rodham Clinton, in the early years of her husband's administration, was rarely photographed without a headband. Nancy Reagan adored her red gowns. Jackie Kennedy set the standard for White House fashion. Nor is Michelle Obama the only first lady to pose with her arms exposed in her official portrait. As Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian at the National First Ladies Library, noted in a Huffington Post piece, Mamie Eisenhower also went sleeveless.

So why the renewed obsession every time Michelle Obama reveals a tricep? Is it, as Anthony says, simply one element of the public's interest in the new first lady and the first family? Or does it reflect deeper issues of racism and sexism?

William Jelani Cobb, a professor of American History at Spelman College, thinks the litany of stories about Michelle Obama's arms indicates some thing malicious is afoot. The discussion, says Cobb, subconsciously reflects the intimidation some feel because the current first lady is a black, accomplished woman who's an imposing 5 feet 10 inches tall.

"Arms gate" - as the stories have been dubbed by bloggers on the popular website Jezebel - is part of a long line of racially offensive stories about the first lady that began early in her husband's presidential campaign. Hand-wringing columns wondered whether the first lady belittled her husband. Subsequent articles have objectified the first lady by talking about her buttocks and hair. Some scholars say that Michelle Obama, with her law degree from Harvard, successful career, and acute fashion sense, represents a type of black woman to whom some sheltered whites aren't exposed. She doesn't fit the loud and angry black female stereotype often presented in the media.

"I've often said," says Cobb, "about Michelle Obama that people do not have a language to discuss her. She didn't fit into any of the convenient boxes that are there when it comes to understanding black women. What has resulted is a lot of awkward and sometimes ridiculous comments."

Some of the chatter about the first lady's arms inadvertently summons the Sapphire stereotype (named after a female character on the "The Amos 'n' Andy Show," which began as a radio show in 1928 before becoming a controversial television program) that defines black women as emasculating and angry, and further suggests that her muscular arms aren't quite feminine. In a recent New York Times column about the first lady's arms, Maureen Dowd writes ". . .it is Michelle who looks as though she could easily wind up and punch out Rush Limbaugh, Bernie Madoff, and all the corporate creeps who ripped off America."

Beyond playing on racial stereotypes, the focus on Obama's fashion choices also reflects a sexism that has long been in existence, says Anthony. Despite Hillary Rodham Clinton's prestigious law degree and her effort to create health policy when her husband was president, the media often focused on her hair and clothes. Jackie Kennedy and Pat Nixon were the first first ladies to graduate from college, says Anthony. But when their husbands battled for the presidency, all the media talked about was how the women dressed.

"Those two women in the 1960s were accomplished women," says Anthony. "Nobody paid attention. It was how they looked, just about the clothes."

It happens to men, too. Former presidential hopeful John Edwards was teased about his hair. People often mention President Obama's attractiveness, and the blogosphere exploded when he was photographed, taut and muscular, in a swimsuit in Hawaii. But neither topic became a popular obsession, says Cobb.

"It's an oversimplification," Cobb adds, "of who this woman is as an intellectual, as a role model, as someone with these opinions about service, families, and the work/home balance. We've reduced it to what her arms look like and what she's wearing."

Anyone plugged into the circus that is celebrity pop culture has seen the press and public take notice when high-profile women reveal muscular arms. As pop icon and workout queen Madonna bulked up her arms in recent years, the chatter reached a fever pitch, with gossip magazines and bloggers sniping that she looks too thin, too sinewy, too scary. Actresses Linda Hamilton and Angela Bassett both became the object of commentary for their sculpted arms - and fitness writers began pumping out stories about how readers could, with only a few thousand reps, look just like them.

Mandi Norwood, a former magazine editor whose book "Michelle Style: Celebrating the First Lady of Fashion" comes out in May, says the first lady's muscular arms signify something else in this uncertain cultural moment, something much deeper than a superficial interest in her workout regimen or her preference for sleeveless clothing.

"Toned arms are one of the few signs of youth," Norwood says. "When we see our first lady's arms and we see them regularly enough, they just remind us that we have this very youthful presidency in office. . . . If nothing else, we hope the strength and passion of youth will get us through these trying times."