

A Response to “Grief became my friend, my work’: Mary Todd Lincoln’s Uneasy Union with Memory in LeAnne Howe’s *Savage Conversations* (2019),” by Stefanie Schäfer

SIRPA SALENIUS

In her essay “Grief became my friend, my work’: Mary Todd Lincoln’s Uneasy Union with Memory in LeAnne Howe’s *Savage Conversations* (2019),” Stefanie Schäfer discusses some of the most prominent ideas that scholars and the general public have associated with First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln during and after her years in the White House. Schäfer starts by arguing that the November 2022 tweet from present First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, is an indication of her renewal of the traditional role of the United States First Ladies as hostesses and caregivers. According to Schäfer, this image is further tied to 19th-century ideologies, to “Republican motherhood, whiteness and settler state survival, but not (never!) to wage labor.” Her mapping of First Lady scholarship serves to contextualize Mary Todd Lincoln and helps to analyze the ways in which Lincoln is depicted in LeAnne Howe’s play *Savage Conversations* (2019).

Schäfer’s approach to the topic is intriguing. By examining First Ladies from a multidisciplinary angle, intertwining such diverse genres as academic publications, social media tweets, and theater, her analysis offers new insights into our understanding of what the role of First Ladies is, or could be. In my response, I contest the conventional idea of the United States First Ladies being merely hostesses and domestic caregivers by arguing that many of them refashioned their roles by actively participating in political, social, and cultural concerns. The fact that they were never monetarily compensated, not even for their highly significant political and social contributions, may perhaps be taken as indicative of the prevailing (disrespectful) attitude toward women in general.

Many First Ladies have been highly competent, often because of their upbringing and/or family background but also due to having obtained an excellent education at one of the most prestigious higher education institutions of the United States. Yet Dr. Jill Biden has been the first to maintain her professional career outside the White House. In addition to assuming a prominent role in the White House, many First Ladies have raised families, which means that they have simultaneously worked on multiple fronts, in the domestic and the public spheres. CNN has focused on six of these powerful women in their series on First Ladies, namely Michelle Obama, Jackie Kennedy, Nancy Reagan, Eleanor Roosevelt, Lady Bird Johnson, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. All of these First Ladies were dynamic women who projected an image of themselves as confident in the role of the leading ladies of their nation and conveyed an impression of their work as making a significant impact on social, cultural, and / or political issues. Defining First Ladies merely as “hostesses” and “domestic caregivers,” which is the traditional view of their role as Stefanie Schäfer suggests, would, then, seem somewhat limiting and dismissive; it seems to diminish the value of their contributions not only to national but also transnational change.

Although First Ladies may be expected to represent the nation’s mothers and dutiful, supportive wives, many of them have decided to refute such narrow definitions of their responsibilities. While it is true that certain expectations are set for First Ladies to perform in their role, ultimately it is up to them to choose to what extent they wish to be involved in social and cultural issues, what causes to support, if any, and how politically involved they wish to become. In other words, although their role is closely tied to that of their husbands during their presidency, First Ladies can assume agency, dedicate their time to pursuing personal ambitions, and promote causes they personally find particularly significant.

Betty Boyd Caroli starts her book on *First Ladies* by confessing her initial reservations about writing about women who were “footnotes,” who “owed their space in history books to the men they married” (xiii). She then realized that many of the Presidents’ spouses, as we may perceive them, came from social and economic backgrounds that were superior to those of the men they married. In addition, they shouldered responsibilities, had careers, and were exposed to politics early in life as many of their male relatives held political office.

Consequently, in some cases, the First Ladies are remembered equally as well as the Presidents themselves, and at times even better. This is the case of those who have become important players in various facets of social life, be it in culture, fashion, or politics such as the “unofficial President” Eleanor Roosevelt or Jackie Kennedy, Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, maybe even Frances Folsom Cleveland. All of them were influential, intellectual women, trendsetters who closely worked together with their husbands but also pursued causes in which the women themselves were interested. Others, instead, who may have remained overshadowed by their husbands or the political climate of their time, have left no legacy that we might still remember. And yet others may have preferred to remain disengaged from social, cultural, and political upheavals altogether or may be remembered for their weaknesses or insanity—like Mary Todd Lincoln—or may be erased from history altogether, like Rose Cleveland, the First Lady who loved other women. We have even forgotten many who wrote their memoirs: Edith Wilson, Helen Taft, Julia Grant—only a few would remember who they were. In a similar way, many of us have completely forgotten Lou Hoover’s feminist speeches.

The interesting question is what makes the First Ladies we clearly remember seem more significant or prominent than others; why can we name some and not others; why are some of them fiercely attacked and criticized? Is there a specific reason that their legacy is depicted as positive or negative? To what extent does First Ladies’ success depend on the popularity of their husbands?

The deliberate selection of material for constructing images of First Ladies can be seen as reflective of LeAnne Howe’s engagement with discourses of memory, politics, archives, and settler colonialism in her play *Savage Conversations* (2019). If images created of Native Americans as embodying the roles of a “Savage” or “Noble Indian” are both imaginative and unrealistic, in a similar way many First Ladies tend to have several, at times contradictory images created of them; what they all have in common is that to a great extent, these images may be defined as imaginary.

Mary Todd Lincoln is a good example of how elusive such contradictory depictions can be. She was pretty, well educated, ambitious, never shying away from the limelight, and her admirers applauded her excellent taste in clothing, entertaining, and redecorating the White House, going as far as referring to her as the “Republican Queen” (Caroli xvi, xx, 60, 71, 73). But she was also found to be unreliable, disingenuous, insecure, capricious, and was also perceived as jealous, petty, selfish, and manipulative, and was accused of being a spy and traitor by those who disliked her (Caroli 71–75). Rumors and untrue stories of her behavior circu-

lated in the nation and were published in the media, contributing to the declaration of her as insane. Consequently, she was locked up in an asylum and for a long time has been remembered as the mentally unstable, crazy First Lady (Caroli 80). Schäfer observes that much has been written about Mary Lincoln, particularly of her (presumed) mental illness; and what Schäfer identifies as an uneasy connection of her presence in the White House to national memory is due to the negative, distorted image of the First Lady. In this context, Elizabeth Keckley's autobiography, in which Mary Lincoln plays a prominent role, is fascinating as it blends the narrator's own story with a form of a biographical narrative of the First Lady. In Keckley's memoir the Black woman's gaze targets one of the most powerful white women of the period, only to make the reader realize that it is not the woman herself who is powerful but her position. Lincoln is placed in a situation from which she has access to power and to using it, but ultimately it is up to her what she does with it.

When the First Ladies' actions become topics for public discourse and then national memory, they also become intertwined with other people's interpretations and assertions. Similar to constructs of First Ladies and Native Americans, the United States Presidents themselves have become symbolic representations of the nation's memory and past. As Schäfer points out in her essay, the figures of the United States Presidents and their lives have become material for "a memorialization frenzy," triggering the creation of myths and cults in which their presidencies, deaths, funerals, and material objects such as photographs or clothes, or their bloody gloves, are transformed from simple objects and events into national relics, into reminders of the nation's dramatic loss (Tuggle 23; Hodes 233). The same is true of their spouses. The pairing of Mary Todd Lincoln and the "Savage Indian" in Howe's play underscores the ways in which historical legacies are remembered and celebrated or completely forgotten. As with Howe's play, the reading of First Ladies, their personalities, contributions, and roles depends on what observers wish to see or prefer to ignore. Like the Rope in Howe's play, the First Ladies' images are the result of uniting certain carefully selected features with their publicly scrutinized characters; these images are thus staged and the characters' achievements and personas are to a great extent illusory.

Consequently, some First Ladies become celebrated and mourned, others fade into oblivion, and yet others have been attacked for various reasons: Mary Lincoln for being extravagant, Nancy Reagan for "getting people fired," Hillary Clinton for "making her husband look like a wimp" (Caroli xxi).

It is clear that many US First Ladies have been active participants in their husbands' careers and many of them, such as Hillary Clinton, have campaigned on their husbands' behalf. Later many of these women gave advice to their husbands, represented the President at official events, initiated reform, pushed for bills and programs. Others, such as Jackie Kennedy, are known to have contributed to making their husbands' presidencies legendary, which is no small undertaking. It is evident that only a powerful person could do something similar with the success that Jackie Kennedy managed to obtain. And yet, the women who follow their husbands into the national limelight as the spouses of newly elected Presidents receive no instructions on how to behave: there are no rigidly defined roles but rather quite a great amount of flexibility, perhaps even responsibility, to re-define what "First Lady" stands for. Nothing prepares you for the role in the White House, observed Nancy Reagan (*The White House*), who has been characterized as a "useless" First Lady. Michelle Obama echoed her, when stating that "there is no handbook for incoming First Ladies of the United States" (Obama 309). In this, the leading ladies in the United States greatly differ from royalty in the United Kingdom, who are connected to rather rigidly set expectations and follow a protocol and traditional role models.

To conclude: Some First Ladies have been extremely significant figures, not only for the careers and the image created of their spouses but also of their own right. Many of them could have made great Presidents themselves. Is it then legitimate to consider them as hostesses and caregivers, or as mere assistants and partners to the President? Perhaps the United States First Ladies represent women in more universal terms, and the response to their personality, physical appearance, activism, and work in general is a reflection of the ways in which women still continue to be defined and perceived. The underlying reasons for the United States failing to appear ready for a woman to become the nation's President may reflect the general belief that women should be physically attractive and nurturing rather than assume the roles of leaders and decisionmakers; the preference among society's most authoritative voices would be to see them as hostesses and wives of prominent men rather than as powerful women. Indeed, according to the Pew Research Center's study from 2017, Americans have set different expectations for men and women: "While many say that society values honesty, morality and professional success in men, the top qualities for women are physical attractiveness and being nurturing and empathetic" (Parker, Horowitz, and Stepler). Perhaps that is why, as historian P. Robert Watson argues, the First Lady functions as a "barometer for the status of women in society and its shifting views of 'wom-

anhood” (see Schäfer). The shift appears to be a very slow one. But the ultimate question is: What IS the role of First Ladies – should they serve their husbands or work for their nation? It would appear that many of them do both. I only wonder to what extent their husbands would have been able to do the same.

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About the Author

Sirpa Salenius, PhD, is Associate Researcher at the *Laboratoire de Recherche sur les Cultures Anglophones* (LARCA) in Paris, France, an External Affiliate at the University College London (UCL) Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation (London, UK), and is affiliated with the University of Eastern Finland (Joensuu, Finland), where she worked as Senior Lecturer in American Studies. She was the recipient of Terra Foundation for American Art Senior Fellow at Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2020–21. She is presently dedicating her time to doing research in Florence, Italy where she resides.



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