

## **Student Engagement and Teacher Practices: Using Hillary Clinton's Presidential Campaign for Learning Purposes**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I reflect on the pedagogical decisions I made when I taught a course on gendered literacies during the 2008/2009 presidential campaign. I specifically focus on what I term the “Hillary” phenomenon, the media’s often negative and unflattering portrayal of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. I start with a brief exploration of my goals for teaching current events; I then discuss student perceptions of Hillary Clinton’s role in politics, and I show the importance of paying attention to students’ social influences that, in Arizona, are often marked by “fear and trepidation” when it comes to political change. I show the importance of using examples from Clinton’s writing, and I point toward pedagogical reasons for engaging students in discussions that address our positionalities in a variety of discourse communities. I conclude by pointing out that we need to encourage students to think critically about their own roles in perpetuating current value systems by challenging their assumptions about gender roles, race relations, sexual orientation, or class systems.

**Keywords:** Classroom practices, women and politics, women and the media, gender discrimination, social expectations, discourse communities, identity and literacy development.

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“Hillary will never be President. She is a woman!” This utterance did not come from George W. Bush, or from any of the opponents in the 2008 presidential campaign. It didn’t even come from the NPR announcers who seemed to disapprove of Clinton’s campaign from the day she decided to run. It wasn’t Rush Limbaugh either. It was Marilea, one of my students in a rhetoric seminar I taught in the Fall of 2008. She was 23. She was an English major. She had taken several classes focusing on rhetorical principles. Now she was enrolled in “Gendered Language Uses,” a senior seminar that asked students to apply the rhetorical principles they learned about throughout their undergraduate career to readings, audio, and video that specifically focused on gendered language uses. We used Hillary Clinton’s run for presidency as an example of women’s role in politics, encouraging them to think critically about the historical and contextual roles that women have played in U.S. society.

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### **Contextualizing Classroom Discussions: Women’s Roles and “Hillary’s” Run for Presidency**

Already in 1938, John Dewey let us know that “attentive care must be devoted to the conditions which give a present experience a worthwhile meaning” (p. 49). All individuals, Dewey pointed out, contribute to the process of meaning making (p. 56). Some 30 years later, Freire (1968) discussed “problem-posing education” where students and teachers engage in dialogue where “the teacher is no longer merely the one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 67). This emphasis on critical literacy, later revisited by scholars such as Henry Giroux (1992), bell hooks (1984), James Paul Gee (1987), and James Porter (1986), appealed to my own belief that learning takes place in context. In other words, as Freire and Macedo (1987) pointed out so convincingly, teachers need to read the word as well as the world in which our students function. My pedagogical framework, in other words, was influenced by my belief that learning is contextual, and that current events can contribute greatly to students’ acquisition of critical literacy skills which are not only necessary in academic settings but also in workplace settings and in the day-to-day interactions with friends, family, and community members. It was also shaped by Manuel Castells’ (1997) concept of “project identities” which allow students and teachers to “build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by doing so, seek the transformation of overall social structure” (p. 8). To accomplish this, it is necessary to leave our comfort zones and to address preconceived notions, stereotypes, and, most importantly, strategies for transforming and changing how we construct ourselves within a specific community.

Marilea’s comment about Clinton’s weakness — being a woman — was part of a presentation to her classmates. Her unwillingness to consider the implications of her comments, did not follow the pedagogical concepts I had outlined at the beginning of the course on gendered language uses, nor did it follow the notion of critical literacy acquisition. For her talk, Marilea had chosen Hillary Clinton’s and Barack Obama’s language patterns during the presidential campaign. She had put together a PowerPoint presentation, and she had brought in a video clip of Clinton and Obama during one of the final debates,

where discussions ranged from economic stimulus packages to the war in Iraq, to health-care, and to gay marriage. I expected that Marilea would follow up her initial statement by further explanation that would show that this sentiment was untenable in 2008. She would, I was sure, let us know that she based her statement on historical data — women have historically been discriminated against in politics, the workforce, and education<sup>1</sup>. We had all heard of the famous glass ceiling. We had discussed the scarcity of women CEOs, and the “glass cliff,” a term coined to show the “precarious and short-lived” tenure of female executives (Proudford, 2007, p. 434). We had a hard time naming women politicians except for Hillary Clinton, Janet Napolitano and Dianne Feinstein. We had read that, historically, women were placed into nurturing roles, not those of politicians. We had read Anna Julia Cooper (1892) and her argument for the higher education of women. Marilea had written a very pertinent response paper on Cooper’s (1892) expose of the follies of late 19<sup>th</sup> century attitudes toward women’s roles in private and public spheres. My students couldn’t fathom that anybody could still consider women as dangerous if they were educated. Such attitudes were outmoded and would never enter into 21<sup>st</sup> century discussions on gender roles. We were, they all agreed, “way beyond” this kind of thinking.

Why then, did she insist that “Hillary will never be president”? Why did she use the candidate’s first name when we had just talked about how we show respect by using last names? I imagined and hoped that Marilea would include a slide that discussed current U.S. politics, popular culture, media coverage, and how easily people are influenced by what is handed to them on a media platter. We had spent more than two months analyzing a multitude of texts, videos, images, and sound clips to dig deep into what influences American perceptions of gender and sexuality. But my very bright and very conscientious student didn’t offer any further insights about her statement. And I didn’t get a chance to ask additional questions to encourage students to do what I thought I had taught them throughout the semester: think critically, apply the rhetorical principles to question modernist truth, explore their own biases, and reflect on the irresponsibility of unfounded assumptions.

Instead, the rest of the class of mostly Anglo working and middle-class 21-26 year olds chimed in. Angelina called out: “You are right. There is no way she’ll get enough votes. It would be Bill Clinton all over again.” Michelle followed up: “She is a bully. She doesn’t even want to talk to the press.” And Theresa delivered the ultimate condemnation: “Did you see the dress she wore? And her hair? She needs a fashion consultant.” Joey brought in the dreaded husband: “What would Bill do? He’d run the country again. He couldn’t help himself.”

Opinions were shooting from one end of the classroom to the other. I could feel the missiles being directed at Clinton, the personification of what seemed to be scary, unprecedented, unwanted. I was reminded of the words of Anna Julia Cooper (1892) when she points out the reasons why many men did not want to sanction the higher education of women, “higher education was incompatible with the shape of the female cerebrum, and that even if it could be acquired it must inevitably unsex woman, destroying the lisp, clinging, tenderly helpless, and beautifully dependent creatures whom men would so he-

roically think for and so gallantly fight for, and giving in their stead a formidable race of blue stockings with corkscrew ringlets and other spinster propensities” (p. 65).

In this excerpt, Cooper (1892) discusses 19<sup>th</sup> century male attitudes and fears about women’s education, but her comments come very close to what students found so “un-womanly” in Clinton, and what the media had promoted for many years. For example, Camille Paglia (1996) in *The New Republic*, pegged Clinton as an ice queen, a drag queen, a snow queen, a man-woman, and, if that’s not enough, a bitch-goddess (pp. 24-26). A *Spy Magazine* (1993) cover shows Clinton barely clad in black leather lingerie, evoking an image of a dominatrix who will use her sexuality to her best advantage (Cover photo, 1993). Media portrayals of Clinton’s harshness, single-mindedness, coldness, unsmiling countenance, and unemotional behavior reinforced stereotypes and fears that Cooper (1892) had already discussed more than one hundred years ago.

My students had read Cooper (1892) and many other texts on women’s changing roles in society and also on media’s influence on gender stereotyping. Our previous discussions of historical and current gender issues made the initial out-pouring of anti-Clinton sentiments even more surprising. To analyze our reactions, I decided to revisit some of the feminist scholars we had read in class, and to investigate our strong, largely emotional, reactions to Clinton’s candidacy in light of the theories we had discussed. We needed to explore the exigency for our emotion, the imperfection in our midst (Bitzer, 1968) that provoked our responses. We needed a new president, certainly, and we needed to decide, as a country, who the best choice would be. And before all that, we needed to decide who would be the candidate for the Democratic Party. The Republicans had already chosen John McCain, and he had already chosen Sarah Palin. Why did my students harbor such strong feelings against Clinton, and why did I want to support her and defend her against the negative outpourings? Why was Barack Obama considered a better choice, and why was Palin considered a great running mate for McCain by two thirds of the students in my class?

I knew that my students were aware of scholarship that addressed women’s historical, social, and political roles in the U.S. Why, then, could they not apply the critical thinking skills that they had honed over the course of the semester? Why did emotion outshine reason in both my male and female students? If I prescribed to John Gray’s (1992) theory that “men are from Mars, and women are from Venus,” then we should at least have had some of the students move away from emotion and give some space to reason. If I thought that Deborah Tannen (1990) was right when she explained that the phrase “you just don’t understand” refers to the overall inability of men and women to communicate successfully, then why were my male and female students so successful in their communicative endeavors to undermine Clinton’s intellectual endeavors, her professional success, and her political run for presidency?

As Freire and Macedeo (1987) have pointed out, the world around us shapes our approaches to the words we learn and the words we use. In retrospect, my initial reading of students’ “words” did not include a reading of the “world” that they inhabited. Certainly, our backgrounds, our cultural, social, political, and religious affiliations had an impact on

our understanding of who the best choice for president would be. Students understood the need to elect a president because George W. Bush was leaving office. To some, this was an imperfection, “a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer, 1968, p. 221). Life, they were sure, would be easier if he could stay for a third term. According to many, Bush had done an excellent job saving us from terrorism, bringing democracy to Iraq, and making sure that America’s foes were kept in check and aliens were kept out of Arizona. But since the American constitution needed to be upheld, it was urgently necessary to elect a president who would continue to support Bush’s policies on war, taxes, education, and healthcare. It was also paramount to make sure that neither Hillary Clinton nor Barack Obama would stand a chance in the elections, and that instead John McCain would be elected as the next president.

It was not surprising to hear these sentiments from my students. The university is happily situated in McCain country and in a state that has voted Republican for many presidential elections. But there were some exceptions. From the 1932 to the 1944 presidential elections, Arizonans voted for Franklin Roosevelt four times, and even though Bill Clinton did not get the Arizona vote in 1992, the population revised its opinion in 1996 and voted for him 47 to 44 percent (Leip, 2009). Most students didn’t remember that the state had voted for Bill Clinton. They also didn’t know that different counties within the state had almost exclusively voted Democrat ever since the inception of the state, including the county in which their current academic institution was located. All they knew was that they needed to be worried about changes in gun control legislation, abortion, and religious freedom. Hillary Clinton, for many, personified a disruption to long-held beliefs. It was a disruption that needed to be stopped.

### **Contexts and Texts: Opinions Unveiled**

When I reflected on my reactions to students’ comments, I realized that I needed to put into practice my theoretical understanding of Bitzer’s discussion of rhetorical situations. Clearly, students saw a reason why this situation — the election of a new president — called for a specific response. I was teaching in Arizona, which was and is McCain territory. However, we also had enjoyed a successful and well-liked woman governor for many years. Janet Napolitano wasn’t only a woman; she was a Democrat in a majority Republican state. Arizona media outlets were mostly kind to her when she supported education, health care for everybody, and immigration reform. Sarah Palin was also greeted by a supportive media in the State of Arizona, but Hillary Clinton’s reception was harsh and biting.

It would be too easy to blame students for making uninformed statements without looking more closely at what influenced their decisions and their comments. Their statements might have been very well informed. The news talked about “Hillary” as if they owned her but didn’t know what to do with her. She was Hillary mostly, Clinton hardly ever. *Saturday Night Live*, a major news source for many of my students, portrayed her as pushy, catty, frumpy, unemotional, uncaring, and willing to walk over dead bodies. Although SNL was trying to be funny and sarcastic, the unflattering portrayal of Clinton seemed to have stuck with many of my students. It was reinforced by most media outlets,

and was taken to new heights by the right. Michelle Malkin (2007) uses “The Frightful Specter of Hillary Clinton,” as one of her headlines (Malkin, 2007). Phyllis Schlafly (2008) argues that Clinton lost the presidential campaign “because she simply is not likeable,” and she blames “the whining” of feminists (especially Steinem) for the misconception that women have not achieved equality in the United States (Schlafly, 2008). And Ben Shapiro (2007), who also authored *Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth*, sees her as using a “passive-aggressive victim role” (Shapiro, 2007) If Bill was the anti-Christ, Hillary was the devil incarnate in a Prada pant-suit for the religious right.

Even though it is tempting to solely fault media’s anti-feminists and the right side of the country for my students’ reactions, such an easy solution to the “Hillary” burning-at-the-stakes leaves out the many liberally minded men and women who made sure that their voices against Clinton (or for Obama) would be heard. Oprah, for example, reversed her 2005 support for Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign and endorsed Barack Obama in 2008.

A bit closer to home, one of my colleagues explained to me why she wouldn’t — just couldn’t — support Clinton. My colleague is one of the strongest and most vocal advocates of women’s rights. Women are the focus of her research; she makes sure that women are represented on committees; she is willing to volunteer to make sure that women’s rights, perspectives, and agendas are part of the agenda; she teaches on historical and current women’s issues. She is well-respected across campus, and she is well-known for her feminist research.

Her first comments can be summarized very briefly: “I just can’t see her as the President. She doesn’t have what it takes. And I am just worried that she’ll be too influenced by Bill. She couldn’t build coalitions because everybody would remember him.” Deep down, at the bottom of my conscious thinking, I too felt a faint flickering of doubt about Bill’s role in the White House. “The first gentleman” didn’t have a very convincing ring to it.

Similar to many of my women colleagues and students, I too was brought up in a traditional, male-dominated household, was for a long time a registered member of a Christian religion that strived on patriarchal hierarchies, and went to schools that re-enforced girls’ roles as caretakers and not scientists. And I chose to become an English professor, not an engineer, computer scientist, biologist, or other high-paying professional mostly associated with men’s prerogatives. Despite my consistent training in acceptable women’s roles, I try to listen to the voices of Naomi Wolf (1991), Judith Lorber (1994), Susan Faludi (1991), Gloria Anzaldúa (1999), Barbara Ehrenreich (2003), bell hooks (1984) and Betty Friedan (1986) who remind us of the long-standing gender discrimination in social, cultural, political, and workplace environments. They also show us our own contributions and our participation in a gendered and patriarchal community; they point out the exploitative practices of the advertising and fashion industry; they show us the importance of the Equal Rights Amendment; they address the backlash against feminists in the 80s;

and they point out the importance of understanding the connections between racism, sexism, and classism.

### **“We’ve Come a Long Way, Baby!” Have We?**

When I reflected on students’ reactions to Clinton, I asked myself many times whether the anti-Clinton sentiments were based on long-held beliefs about women’s roles in a well-functioning patriarchal society. As a feminist scholar and teacher, I had read much about women’s fights for being acknowledged as thinking human beings, as deserving voting rights and equal rights, and for the right to decide over their own bodies. In my class readings, I include texts about the suffrage movement which gained strength with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. We talk about the 1848 Seneca Falls “Declaration of Sentiments” still resonates with many women’s rights activists. We read Anna Julia Cooper (1892), who reminds us of men who considered women as mere objects and play-things. She points to several male compatriots of her time: “Lessing declared that ‘the woman who thinks is like the man who puts on rouge — ridiculous;’ and Voltaire in his coarse, flippant way used to say, ‘Ideas are like beards — women and boys have none.’ Dr. Maginn remarked, ‘We like to hear a few words of sense from a woman sometimes, as we do from a parrot — they are so unexpected!’ and even the pious Fenelon taught that virgin delicacy is almost as incompatible with learning as with vice” (p. 64). She makes sure to discredit these opinions and to show why women should have a right to a higher education. We also engage in discussions about Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1898) who in *Women and Economics* pointed out women’s abilities to contribute equally to the economic well-being of the country. In addition, Betty Friedan encourages my students to explore women’s roles when, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), she addresses the question that she saw many women ask themselves: “Is this all?” Friedan, similar to late 19<sup>th</sup> century feminists, points to the implicit and explicit gender discrimination in industrialized nations that restricts women in their endeavors to participate in the political, social, and workplace communities. Later on, we read Barbara Ehrenreich (2003), who, in *Maid to Order*, continues the discussion of women’s role by focusing on the service industry, showing that women are overwhelmingly employed in underpaid service jobs.

The United States, and especially academia, has certainly progressed in its views on women. Students learn that women are no longer restricted by their virgin delicacy, and many are now part of the scholarly elite, full of ideas and always thinking. We can’t explain why girls avoid math and science after age 11, but it’s not because girls and women can’t think. When my students read that the Association for Women in Science (AWIS, 2009) believes that “women in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] are prevented from reaching their full potential — not because they are less able or less willing — but because of barriers that exist in scientific workplaces.” (AWIS), they readily agree with AWIS’s conclusions. As AWIS points out, only eight percent of enrolled graduate students in engineering were women in 1966, which increased to 20 percent in 2001 (AWIS, 2009). Students were happy to read that, bolstered by the steadily — even though slowly — climbing numbers, women have continued to move into male-dominated professions because they are able and willing to work hard, take on intellec-

tual challenges, and show that they too make important contributions to politics, science, business, and industry. By 2008, women had become part of the political landscape in the United States, not only because Hillary Clinton ran for presidency, but because 24 percent of state legislators were women, and the country had elected eight women governors.

However, I also address in my classes that the steady increase of women in positions of authority does not preclude a continued attitude of condescension in higher education, politics, industry, and business. In 2005, Lawrence Summers (2005), president of Harvard University, let it be known at a Conference on “Diversifying the Science & Engineering Workforce” that the lower number of women in the sciences is due to “different availability of aptitude at the high end.” As he put it, “there are issues of intrinsic aptitude, and particularly of the variability of aptitude” (Summers, 2005, “Remarks”). Discrimination, he pointed out, is not likely since that would not be smart economically speaking. Socialization is also not a factor, since research has shown that it isn’t (Summers, 2005 “Remarks”).

Since “research,” not cited in Summers’s (2005) “Remarks,” has shown that socialization isn’t a factor, my students address the possibility of women’s inability to think at higher levels. Lessing and Voltaire, two of the 19<sup>th</sup> century men’s voices explaining women’s inferiority, seemed to have influenced Harvard’s former president, who did resign from his post, but who was given the Charles W. Eliot University Professorship at Harvard, with offices in the Kennedy School of Government and the Harvard Business School. And students also learn that he is currently the director of the White House National Economic Council, promoting tax cuts, but hopefully no longer promoting differential intrinsic aptitudes. Students have connected Summers’s (2005) comments with Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s (1994) *Bell Curve*, in which the authors argue racial differences in intelligence persist (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994, chapters 13 and 14). Considering Barack Obama’s ethnic background, students have pointed out that such comments might not be wise.

Several of my students pointed out that the former Harvard President’s comments on women’s aptitude might not have been popular with a large majority of women and men, but they also acknowledge that we do continue to see women in positions of authority struggle to receive recognition. Even when women are recognized as capable, hard-working and intelligent, their career is often in jeopardy because of social and cultural stereotypes. When women run for political office, Kira Sanbonmatsu (2002) reminds students that gender plays a significant role in voters’ preferences. Women politicians were believed to be less qualified to deal with foreign affairs and the crime problem — “a stereotypically male issue” (p. 27) — but were seen as being better qualified to protect social security — “a stereotypically female issue” (p. 27). Clinton, in her campaign, encountered similar belief systems, being applauded for her health care reform but being lambasted for her stance on the war in Iraq. Furthermore, her intelligence and hard work as a lawyer, for example, were continuously undermined and promoted increased attacks on her character and on her ability to “integrate[...] her intelligence with her sexuality” (Paglia, 1996, p. 26).

## What We Really Want: Women, War, and Peace

Despite my students' theoretical knowledge about women's positions in society, they continued to hold strong beliefs about women in positions of power. Their viewpoints were close to those explained by Deborah Rhode and Barbara Kellerman (2007) who point out that Clinton's run for presidency, and women's push into positions of authority, did not erase gender stereotypes. Their description of gender stereotyping in leadership roles is in close accordance with many of the experiences attributed to Clinton's campaign. As they put it,

men continue to be rated higher than women on most of the qualities associated with leadership. People more readily credit men with leadership ability and more readily accept men as leaders. What is assertive in a man can appear abrasive in a woman, and female leaders risk appearing too feminine or not feminine enough. On one hand, they may appear too "soft" — unable or unwilling to make the tough calls required in positions of greatest influence. On the other hand, those who mimic the "male model" are often viewed as strident and overly aggressive or ambitious. (p. 7).

My students were exposed to similar societal perspectives about women than I was and still am. In the political arena, many media outlets, many reporters, and many talk show hosts willfully forget that -- even though the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, in a 2009 comment, thinks so -- women are not "God's best gift to men," but that they participate in the intellectual, social, and political landscape of the country. Looking back, it is difficult to know whether Hillary Clinton's bid for presidency was undermined by the media's dislike of her husband or of her pantsuits. We will never know whether the country would not have been ready for a woman president, a sentiment that I heard many times during the democratic convention. "We are at war, you know," my women's studies colleague said. "I know," I responded, "but why would that disqualify Hillary Clinton?" "We need a strong leader to get us out of it," commented my colleague. "And it needs to be somebody who doesn't have the history the Clinton's have. Nobody will want to negotiate with her."

My colleague's comments reflected a common sentiment that was also explored in a 2004 article on gender beliefs and social relations. As Ridgeway and Correll (2004) point out in their work, "when hegemonic gender beliefs are effectively salient in a social relational context, they bias the extent to which a woman, compared to a similar man, asserts herself in the situation, the attention she receives, her influence, the quality of her performances, the way she is evaluated, and her own and others' inferences about her abilities at the tasks that are central to the context" (p. 519). Unfortunately, these sentiments about women's differential abilities — seen as a negative — also influenced the world in which my students lived. Even though Clinton was well-liked overseas, and even though women leaders around the world have successfully led their countries through peace, have avoided war through diplomacy and negotiation, and have also waged war as successfully and unsuccessfully as their male counterparts, my students remembered and were influenced by the media and also by historical depictions of women. They didn't

know that many other countries -- among them Sri Lanka, Israel, India, Great Britain, Portugal, Pakistan, Germany, Canada, Poland, Turkey, Ireland, New Zealand, and Panama — have had women prime ministers, chancellors, or presidents, and have often managed to promote a more positive image of their countries than other male-headed democracies.

I did have some advantages over my students in developing an appreciation for women's leadership. During my elementary to high school years in Austria, we heard much — and always wanted to know more — about one Austrian woman who caught our imagination not because she was the mother of Marie Antoinette, but because she married for love, had 16 children, instituted mandatory schooling, and ruled over an entire empire with what we considered “panache.” In other words, she was larger than life. Maria Theresa, empress of the Austro-Hungarian Empire for 40 years in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, is considered one of the most capable rulers in the long succession of Habsburg emperors. She initiated financial and educational reforms, increased the army by 200 percent, and fought Fredrick the Great of Prussia to regain the lands that had been taken from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Several treaties ensured that land would change hands without further warfare. She established the first military academy as well as an academy of engineering science in 1754. She also insisted that the University of Vienna be given more money to fund the medical school.

Even though I have wondered whether K-12 education could incorporate a variety of accomplished and less-accomplished women leaders around the world, I don't blame them for neglecting to teach us about peace instead of war and to teach us about matriarchal systems instead of patriarchal systems. I am, however, convinced that a college and university education, which includes a liberal arts education, is responsible to teach students an appreciation of critical and analytical explorations that allow them to participate successfully in an ever-changing world. Because of this conviction, I wanted for students to look at different sources to increase their understanding of the complexity of gender roles in current U.S. politics. I wanted them to learn about Hillary Clinton's work not through her campaign promises, one-liners, and brief comments that were intended to get the attention of a crowd, but by reading various articles and books published by her or about her. Clinton's autobiography, which can easily be excerpted for students, provides a good starting point for moving away from media-dominated commentary that mostly excluded the work that Clinton considered important as a lawyer and politician.

Clinton's (2003) *Living History* showed her perspicacity and her ardent belief in the rights of children — and everybody — to healthcare, the rights of women to be treated as humans, and the rights of all to be active participants in a community, because, as she put it in a previous book (Clinton, 1996), “it takes a village.” Clinton provides a chronological history, including, among other things, her work with Marian Wright Edelman on school desegregation in the South in 1972. She explains very convincingly that women's rights are human rights; and she is very candid when she admits that her health care task force under Bill Clinton was not successful, even though she is glad that the task force tried to change current policies that leave millions of people un-insured.

What students found especially pertinent in her discussions is her acknowledgment of her role as a woman and as a professional. She outlines the paradox that she experienced over and over again:

It seemed that people could perceive me only as one thing or the other -- EITHER a professional woman OR a conscientious hostess. Gender stereotypes trap women by categorizing them in ways that don't reflect the true complexities of their lives. It was becoming clear to me that people who wanted me to fit into a certain box, traditionalist or feminist, would never be entirely satisfied with me as me -- which is to say, with my many different, and sometimes paradoxical roles.

In my own mind, I was traditional in some ways and not in others. I cared about the food I served our guests, and I also wanted to improve the delivery of health care for all Americans. To me, there was nothing incongruous about my interests and activities. (Clinton, 2003, pp. 140-141)

Clinton's (2003) comments reflect many of the discussions that professional women in all fields have to contend with on a regular basis. Women have to defend themselves for a wide range of reasons, including their choice of staying single, of not having children, or of juggling a family with their professional lives, of putting their children in childcare, of taking off from work to stay with their kids, or of requiring their partners and husbands to contribute in equal parts to the dreaded "H" word: household chores. Susan Faludi's (1991) book raised awareness of the contradicting positions that women have to juggle, being expected to perform traditional housework but also being expected to contribute to the economic well-being of the family (Faludi, 1991). Clinton's (2003) discussion of her diverse roles fits nicely into discussions of women's roles in leadership positions. As Rhode and Kellerman (2007) argue, "women are expected to be nurturing, not self-serving, and entrepreneurial behaviors viewed as appropriate in men are often viewed as distasteful in women" (p. 8).

Many of my students remembered Clinton's comment about "baking cookies" which brought a collective gasp to the nation. She refers to the incident in *Living History*:

A reporter asked whether I could have avoided an appearance of conflict of interest when my husband was Governor. I said, "You know, I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was fulfill my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life. And I have worked very hard to be as careful as possible."

I could have said, "Look, short of abandoning my law firm partnership and staying home, there was nothing more I could have done to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest.

My aides suggested that I talk to reporters a second time. On the spot, I had a press conference. It had little effect. Thirteen minutes after I answered the question, a story ran on the AP wire. CNN quickly aired one too.

It turned into a story about my alleged callousness towards stay-at-home-mothers. Republicans labeled me the "ideological leader of a Clinton-Clinton Administration that would push a radical-feminist agenda. (Clinton, 2003, pp.109-110)

This comment about cookies and tea stayed in the American consciousness for many years and was also picked up by my students. Discussed and broadcast on March 26, 1992, on Ted Koppel's (1992) PBS *Frontline*, the infamous cookies came back to haunt her during the presidential campaign. Even though, as Jackie Judd on the show pointed out, Clinton "went on to say feminism means the right to choose work, or home, or both; the damage had been done. She'd been tagged an elitist and an ultra-feminist" (PBS, 1992, "Frontline"). Ruth Mandel, from Rutgers University, pointed out in the same show that the comments in the *New York Post* which called Hillary Clinton "a buffoon, an insult to most women," is "the old kind of feeling about 'uppity' women. Stay in your place. Here's someone who's stepping out of her place, here's someone ... you're able to describe with all the old stereotypes. ... If she's a woman, she's supposed to stand at his side, smile, look pretty, be quiet and say that everything he does is fine" (PBS, 1992, "Frontline"). In other words, it is the well-behaved women who should not be seen or be heard<sup>ii</sup>.

What caught my students' attention about the *Frontline* interviews was the strong sense, from both political parties, that Hillary Clinton was a smart woman. It was an asset to some, and a threat to others. Ted Koppel, in his unfortunate way with words, perceives Clinton to be "a woman who is so smart and apparently independent in some strange way" (PBS, 1992, "Frontline"). Why Koppel called Clinton as "independent in some strange way" we will never know for sure. We do know, however, that her independence — and maybe her smartness — led to many conservative attacks when Bill Clinton ran for office in 1992. According to Lisa Burns (2008), Hillary Clinton was referred to as Lady Macbeth a number of times during that time (p. 142), evoking Shakespeare's story of Macbeth's wife who goads her husband to commit regicide so that he can become King and she can become Queen of Scotland.

### **Put Your Ear to the Pulse of the Time: Encouraging Critical Thinking**

My students had read that women who are seen as threatening, as independent, as smart, or as non-conforming to current standards have been vilified for many centuries. Since popular culture no longer accepts to lock up women in the attic, or in a mental institution, strategies for painting them as unacceptable to society have changed. Media conglomerates, religious groups, and internet communities have taken on the role of judge and jury, and the U.S. public has taken on the role of silent bystanders who acquiesce to the sound-bites presented to us. Maybe we were Clinton supporters, but did she really need to make that comment about cookies and tea? Did she really have to be so abrasive? Couldn't she be a bit more emotional? Why didn't she hug babies on the campaign trail? She could have worn more feminine clothes instead of pant-suits. She could have styled her hair differently, worn her purse differently. She could have been more like Sarah Palin, who seemed to personify "true womanhood" and who was called the "present-day Esther" by

the religious right (Strang, 2008). She could have been “woman” as defined by a patriarchal system that we so ardently have fought against for decades.

“Remember Sarah Palin,” my friend said. “She was something! She was so pretty. She was so elegant. Her clothes, her hair, everything about her was just amazing.” He couldn’t explain why everything was so amazing about Palin, but he could tell me that Clinton was just the opposite. “I couldn’t vote for her. She is such a bully. She isn’t really a woman. She scares me!” I admitted to him that I was scared too, not by Clinton, but by people who thought that Palin personified womanhood, that she was what men — and many women — considered an asset to a political campaign. Did she bake cookies? Did she hug babies? Did she wear dresses? Was her hair all pretty and long? Did she play into our perceptions of a good woman? Certainly, the out-of-wedlock grandchild didn’t please the religious right even though they bravely stood by her side until the bitter end when McCain and Palin lost their bids for presidency and vice-presidency.

My friend isn’t particularly partisan, but he had listened to mostly mainstream news, had taken in information from talk shows on popular TV stations, and had discussed the campaign with his friends who too were getting their information from the same sources. He didn’t question the validity and objectivity of the news, nor did he question the underlying assumptions that influence the media and that also influence the viewer. It didn’t matter to my friend that Clinton could point to a successful public career. It didn’t matter that she fought for children’s healthcare, helped reform Arkansas’ education system, and advocated for women’s rights all over the nation and the world. It didn’t matter that Chelsea Clinton didn’t show any ill effects of growing up with a strong woman role model. Nor did my friend think twice about how the comments would be interpreted by his career-oriented wife whose baking skills scared her children and her husband. In principle, he did, as most men, “support gender equality — but in practice [he failed] to structure [his] life to promote it” (Rhode & Kellerman, 2007, p. 11).

Similarly, my students were ardent supporters of equal rights for women, but they were not practiced in connecting what they learned in the classroom to situations that exposed hidden assumptions and latent stereotypes. As teachers, we can encourage students to think critically about their own roles in perpetuating current value systems by challenging their assumptions about gender roles, race relations, sexual orientation, or class systems. In other words, we can encourage them to acknowledge and take responsibility for what they communicate and how they communicate it. As Gunther Kress (2005) points out in his discussion on new forms of texts, knowledge, and learning, such “agency of the individual who has a social history, a present social location, an understanding of the potentials of the resources for communication, and who acts transformationally on the resources environment and, thereby, on self are requirements of communication” (p. 20). With this agency then comes responsibility to pay attention to how texts, written or visual, are encoded and constructed, how these texts came into existence, and how the consumer and reader of these texts is manipulated in her/his decoding of the texts.

In addition to helping students understand the importance and impact of their individual agency, teachers need to encourage students to see themselves as members of various

discourse communities that influence their perceptions of the world around them. Such group membership influences students' social and cultural identities, which in turn shape how they interact with members of other groups. Stephen Kucer (2004) put it well when he points out that "the group attempts to socialize — directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously — the individual into thinking and behaving in particular ways that are appropriate to the group's view of itself and its relationship with the broader society" (p. 205). Our students, then, follow guidelines which "impact the individual's beliefs and behaviors, and they frame his or her interpretations of and interactions with others. The knowledge, values, and behaviors that an individual comes to reflect, therefore, are not simply the products of his or her own unique and independent psychological interactions with the world. They also are the products of interactions and experiences with the various significant social groups of which the individual is a member, as well as the groups' interactions and experiences with other groups in the world" (p. 205). If students and teachers understand the impact of group membership and social networks, we can learn to understand the implicit and explicit reactions to images of women in positions of power, news broadcasts, campaign advertising, or readings that undermine societal norms.

Teachers certainly need to be aware of the impact of their students' group membership and individual student agency; however, we also need to understand our own agency and our participation in groups and social networks. In other words, we need to challenge our own assumptions that we bring to the classroom. Our behaviors and literacy practices are part of a larger network which affects our social identity. We are also part of what James Gee calls "dominant discourse" (p. 31), which is "inherently ideological" (p. 30). To make explicit our group memberships and our memberships in various discourse communities can help us contextualize our reasons for using specific pedagogical tools, incorporating specific topics into our curriculum, and encouraging agency, community outreach, or service learning.

If we believe, with Stephen Kucer (2004), that "by our very nature, we are social beings," and that we participate in community building, we are responsible for teaching students how to participate successfully and constructively in these communities. As The New London Group (1996) points out, the fundamental purpose of education is to "ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life" (np). This requires, then, that our pedagogy include a "teaching and learning relationship that creates the potential for building learning conditions leading to full and equitable social participation" (np). To create such environments, it is necessary to encourage students to question established social narratives such as gendered narratives and to participate in rewriting these narratives to show the shifting nature of our civic lives, incorporating what The New London Group calls "civic pluralism." Such pluralism creates spaces "where differences are actively recognized; where these differences are negotiated in such a way that they complement each other; and where people have the chance to expand their cultural and linguistic repertoires so that they can access a broader range of cultural and institutional resources" (np). Creating these spaces is the responsibility of an inclusive liberal arts education to which students in colleges and universities are entitled. To be successful in this endeavor means to incorporate learning experiences that allows students to be critical and analytical participants in their

varied discourse communities, that encourages them to re-evaluate unexamined beliefs, and that promotes social and cultural identity development that encourages openness and acceptance of difference.

### **Moving On: We've Got a Long Ways to Go!**

Newspapers, magazines, and talk shows vilified Hillary Clinton's character during Bill Clinton's years in the White House and throughout her run for presidency. David Rothkopf (2009), from the *Washington Post*, tells us that Hillary Clinton "has drawn more attention for her moods, looks, outtakes and (of course) relationship with her husband than for, well, her work revamping the nation's foreign policy" (Rothkopf, 2009). Her handbag and scarf choices, and her weight and hair, he points out, have drawn more attention even from self-proclaimed Clinton supporters than her work on foreign politics. He calls reporters from the *Washington Post* to task after they "mused about whether a brew called Mad Bitch would be the beer of choice for the secretary of state" (Rothkopf, 2009). Hillary Clinton, more than 250 years after Empress Maria Theresa ruled over an empire "where the sun never set," more than a 100 years after the Seneca Falls Declaration, close to a 100 years after women received the right to vote, and in an age when the Equal Rights Amendment has not been ratified by all states, can still say with Anna Julia Cooper (1892): "the chance of the seedling and of the animalcule is all I ask — the chance for growth and self development, the permission to be true to the aspirations of my soul without incurring the blight of your censure and ridicule" (Cooper, 1892, p. 66).

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<sup>i</sup> Even though Hillary Clinton was the first woman who was a serious contender for presidency, several women, such as Victoria Woodhall in 1872, Belva Lockwood in 1884 and 1888, and Shirley Chisholm in 1972, have run for presidency in the United States. (See Mandel, 2007).

<sup>ii</sup> Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich (2007), pointed out that "well-behaved women seldom make history," a phrase that has made it onto many bumper stickers and has led to much discussion among women and men.