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Liliana Castañeda Rossmann

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# Tears, Unity, Moose Burgers, and Fashion: A Tale of Two Candidates

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## Abstract

Candidates Hillary Rodham Clinton and Sarah Palin, although they did not run against each other, have been compared on many levels. This essay analyzes the storytelling process by the media, by their respective campaigns, by their supporters and opponents and argues that, in its complexity and polysemy, such process engenders mutually contradictory stories. Suggested here is the idea that stories act as fundamental meaning-making resources. Both candidates, although in the public eye at different times, encountered parallel yet contradictory story constructions; both engaged the story-making process guided by different resources and experienced different results. The following essay outlines a proposal for a taxonomy of stories that is then used to analyze the stories privileged in constructing the public image of both candidates.

## Keywords

storytelling, social construction, presidential campaigns, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin

That the 2008 U.S. presidential election was historical is no revelation: the first African American man elected to president, the first woman running for president to be considered a serious contender and who also did well in the primaries,<sup>1</sup> and the first woman to run for vice president under the Republican ticket.<sup>2</sup> That this election saw an unprecedented number of voters also will be memorable. That the media engaged in sexist reporting unfortunately may be historic only in terms of the level (high) and quality (low) of it. The two major 2008 female candidates, Hillary Rodham Clinton

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and Sarah Palin, both acknowledged the sexism in reporting, albeit differently framed. Although much has been written about Clinton's image in the media, her presidential run and reporting of it in and by the media are just now being seriously considered. Stevens (2007) discusses Clinton's campaigning strategies, which include primarily the Iraq war and health care and secondarily social security, the economy, energy, and education. In Stevens's view, Clinton serves the interests of women fairly by speaking out on topics little discussed by male candidates, such as Title IX and a constitutional amendment ensuring gender equality. Perhaps because of Clinton's image or despite of it, women register her concern and threw their support her way.

Women's support for a female president arises from the more liberal attitudes women have toward gender roles and political attitudes. Simon and Hoyt (2008) posit that a shared social identity constitutes a third significant factor for increased support by women for women presidential candidates.

In Latin America, a nascent body of research has been advanced to understand the conditions under which women become actively engaged in politics as legislators. Saint-Germain and Metoyer (2008) analyzed interview data to explain the rise in women's political involvement as legislators in the past 20 years. Sure, there were women in office in Latin America, but they were isolated cases, and these found it challenging to take strides toward making change. What facilitated their entry in the 1980s and 1990s? Saint-Germain and Metoyer identified three predictors: the presence of a crisis, a substantial pool of women who have political experience, and the level of consciousness about issues of gender in a particular culture. Women elected to offices soon began to effect structural changes for the betterment of everyone in their society to levels not seen previously when only one or two women were in politics, even in highly visible positions. In short, as Latin American campaigns slogans for women candidates storied their beliefs, when a woman enters politics, the woman changes, but when women enter politics, politics itself changes.

Women in U.S. politics have made gains since Geraldine Ferraro ran for vice president in 1984 as the first woman to appear on a major party ticket. In challenging assumptions about women in politics, Kim (2008) observes that, even if Palin did not embody the model of female politicians that feminists hope for, she managed nonetheless to make relevant the themes of her family, her motherhood, and her homemaker skills as qualifications for office. Moreover, Clinton's concession to Obama of the 2008 election could have ended the discussion about the interplay between sexism and feminism, but if Palin's presence alone contributed to enduring storytelling about issues that in the end concern everyone, such as reproductive freedom and a woman's place, then substantial gains could be felt. Back in 2006, when so many women legislators came into office, storytelling about women in politics gelled around the transferability of mothering skills into leadership skills. For example, Nancy Pelosi's five children served in a veiled way as a testament to her management skills. Mothers in office might bring about the kind of structural change that Saint-Germain and Metoyer (2008) encountered in Latin America. If 2006 was not the "year of the woman" just yet

because, although substantial, the number of women elected to office still did not represent the country's diversity, there was progress nonetheless. Until, that is, "the year of the woman running for president—which could be 2008" (Arnold, 2006).

Sarah Palin, at the announcement of her vice presidential pick, said, "Hillary left 18 million cracks in the highest, hardest glass ceiling in America. But it turns out the women of America aren't finished yet, and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all." For her part, Clinton reacted to the news by saying, "We should all be proud of Gov. Sarah Palin's historic nomination, and I congratulate her and Sen. McCain. Although their policies would take America in the wrong direction, Gov. Palin will add an important new voice to the debate" ("McCain Taps," 2008).

It is too early to tell when or even if Palin's candidacy, although much discussed by major media, blogs, and late-night shows alike, will command serious attention by academics in the future. One challenging aspect to studying this controversial figure is the enormous amount of contradictions in her story. Yet it is precisely contradictions and complexities in the social construction of the candidates' images that animate this essay.

The guiding argument here is that the storytelling process—by the media, by their respective campaigns, by their supporters and opponents—in its complexity and polysemy engenders mutually contradictory stories. For different reasons, history may not be kind to either woman, yet in this essay the arc of stories about them in multiple contexts and for multiple audiences is addressed. Suggested here is the idea that stories act as fundamental meaning-making resources. Both candidates, although in the public eye at different times, encountered parallel, yet contradictory story constructions; both engaged the story-making process guided by different resources and encountered different results. The following paragraphs outline a proposal for a taxonomy of stories helpful in guiding a subsequent analysis of the processes of storytelling that were privileged in constructing both candidates.

## **Storytelling: A Primer**

Storytelling is a distinctively human process yet has infinite manifestations and purposes. All humans tell stories, but the stories we tell are guided by an immeasurable amount of interpretive and cultural resources. Thus, the purposes and consequences of storytelling are equally immeasurable. In a useful attempt at classifying this fantastic array of human invention, Pearce and Pearce (1998) offer four forms of storytelling, which are summarized here to guide the analysis of the processes of storytelling about the female candidates in the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

The most easily accessible form in Western experiences is what they refer to as the "literalist." As the purview of science and jurisprudence, this form privileges facts. Ubiquity, comprehensibility, and pervasiveness make it highly regarded, prized, and sought. "Straight talk," "no nonsense," "just the facts" are among the clichés that storytellers of this form might use to describe themselves and by others.

By contrast, symbolism buttresses the second form of storytelling. This “symbolic” form, the mainstay of religious and mythical texts, places listeners in the position to reject or ignore contradictions, *non sequiturs*, logical fallacies, or otherwise unaccountable aspects within the story. To extend the logical force of this form, both storytellers and story listeners invoke so-called “sacred texts”: the Bible, the Constitution, or an organization’s mission statement.

As both storytellers and story listeners exercise further cognitive complexity, the “social constructionist” form of storytelling appeals to them, for in it they recognize the communicative consequences of their choices. As they see that words and deeds have power, both storytellers and story listeners accept responsibility and demand accountability for the impact that generating different stories in different settings creates. Furthermore, social constructionist storytelling enjoys a unique advantage in transforming social worlds, as it privileges the interactional nature of communication. Stories are thus given the import demanded to act purposefully by engaging storytellers in the story listeners’ social reality. This joint performance is recognized and enacted to achieve a common goal. Ethnography of communication and ethical journalism exemplify this type of storytelling.

The fourth and final form of storytelling transcends the process in that it encompasses the other forms singly or totally. As it does so, transcendent storytelling weighs the contextual advantages and disadvantages of the other three forms. Indicative of its reflexive possibilities, storytellers of this form transcend the previously discussed forms by placing themselves in the position to recognize their multiple roles in the process, as creators, listeners, and participants. A story that comments on other stories, such as participatory action research, achieves transcendence. As various storytelling communities engage with some aspects of the story and not others, they do so through the use of a “grammar” indigenous to that particular community. Grammars of transcendence (Rossmann, 2004) emerge as actors join various storytelling communities without rejecting one and accepting another wholesale. Despite the fact that various communities may tell contradictory stories, a grammar of transcendence permits their peaceful coexistence.

The methodological approach taken here is eclectic because it does not focus on content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980/2009), although a brief summary of media coverage of the candidates is provided as an example of a specific type of storytelling. Storytelling about Clinton and Palin is analyzed by looking at women’s, both supporters and critics, op-ed pieces in various major newspapers. The aim here is not to ascertain the “real” story about either candidate, to measure levels of negativity, sexism, or partisanship in media coverage, and to “control” for sexism by analyzing only women’s writing. Rather, the objective is to elucidate how the four forms of storytelling identified above function to create, manage, and transform the meanings for the candidates’ words and actions. Through this analysis some insight is offered to expand understanding of storytelling in political elections.

## Literally, Symbolically, Socially Constructed, Transcending Hillary Rodham Clinton

An arbitrary beginning of a symbolic story about Clinton's candidacy begins with her indicating early in her senatorial career her intentions to run for president (Dowd, 2002), although there have been accounts about her lifelong duplicity and her every life decision as indicative of her goal of becoming president of the United States (Olson, 1999). According to a symbolic story summarized by Olson and mild in comparison to others, her ambition, blind, vast, and calculated, even brought her to attempt enlisting in the Marine Corps, an attempt which was met with failure. Yet for those willing to tell and listen to a symbolic story of the extent of her greed (Olson, 1999, p. 8), this move could have been to save Bill Clinton from criticism for "draft dodging" or to give her an advantage as a female candidate. This set of symbolic stories also tells us about an incident in her childhood in which she was hit by a bully, and her mother, rather than comforting her, told her that there was no room for cowards in her house (Olson, 1999, p. 27).

Campaigning for Barry Goldwater as a teenager gave way to (some say radical) social activism in college for a young woman who grew up in a strict and strictly Republican household and was better known for her academic accomplishments than for her interpersonal charm. Despite this latter challenge, she was known for focusing her leadership skills to engage opponents and supporters alike to build coalitions, that is, until a major turning point in her life defined her as no longer capable of sitting on any fence but very much committed to the left side of the ideological spectrum. The incident has been mythologized in stories as exemplary of her character, where she had agreed to say one thing but in delivering it gave it another sense so as to subvert the intended politeness into combativeness (Olson, 1999, p. 40). Coincidentally, this "trait" of hers is consistent with the characteristics of social constructionist storytelling, about which elaboration follows shortly.

The momentous event, known as "The Speech," is characterized by Hillary detractors as a "hopeless meandering of feminist platitudes and catchy soundbites" (Olson, 1999, p. 43). Clinton asserted that

[p]art of the problem with empathy with professed goals is that empathy doesn't do us anything. We've had lots of empathy; we've had lots of sympathy, but we feel that for too long our leaders have used politics as the art of making what appears to be impossible, possible. (Rodham, 1969)

Responding to her Wellesley classmates' suggestions, she focused on integrity, trust, and respect as she exhorted them to seek liberation as the goal of education. As such, this theme again constitutes Clinton's social construction storytelling, contrasting with the symbolic form enlisted to demonize her by those who either do not understand it or wish to eviscerate her for seeking such "liberal" goals.

Once a public figure undergoes a negative characterization, as Hillary Rodham Clinton has so early in her life, every one of her moves is co-opted to serve the needs of a symbolic storytelling that attempts to “prove” the figure as evil. As an example, witness Olson’s (1999) syllogistically alluding to Saul Alinsky’s influence on Clinton’s power-searching tactics and then faulting her for failing to recognize “the classical liberal critique that the relentless pursuit of power is antithetical to democracy” (p. 50). Clearly one of the worst accusations any person in the United States, much less anyone seeking the presidency, can suffer is that of being a liberal or worse yet, a communist, if only by association: Clinton is no exception. Once that accusation is levied, McCarthy style, there is little one can do to refute it, as it becomes a fact as given in an impenetrable symbolic story. Denying the liberal label would be counterproductive, for if she did she would be seen as disingenuous; embracing it would be used by others in “Gotcha!” fashion to buttress a symbolic story with little need or concern for skepticism.

Part of the successful appeal of symbolic stories lies on the ridiculing of opponents’ positions, such as the explanation offered by Olson (1999, p. 53) of Clinton’s agreement with the idea that law is a “social construction” and should be used to create social change. Ultimately, the symbolic story claims that “power” is the object of Clinton’s irrational pursuit and the goal of every one of her life’s decisions. Symbolic stories such as those that vilify Hillary Rodham Clinton display little patience for character development and for changes in her commitments to one cause or another. Similar to charges about previous presidential candidate John Kerry’s “flip-flopping,” Olson writes that throughout her life Clinton “has been marked by a desire to dedicate her life to achieve a transcendent ideal. That ideal has changed over the years” (Olson, 1999, p. 63), and to prove it, Bill Clinton has often been characterized as merely a rung in her ladder of power (Olson, 1999, p. 68). “I have a burning desire to do what I can,” explained Clinton in an interview with Sherrill (1993). “A desire to make the world around me—kind of going out in concentric circles—better for everybody.” Never mind that, as Sherrill also claims Clinton herself readily admits to changing her mind: “The answer to our problems, she says, is not simply more programs, more benefits, more security. It requires a shift in perception, a flip-flopping, a new kind of . . . politics.”

Olson’s tale, although not exceptional in its genre, is exemplary of symbolic storytelling that curtails attempts to understand the subject as a complex human being. By claiming to be grounded in facts, Olson and others invoke the literal form to serve the symbolic form by directing selected anecdotes as “evidence” for the argument that Clinton seeks power, through every means. Symbolic stories are not always told to subvert, although their strength lies precisely in their being masked as literal, arguing for the indisputability of the teller’s commitment to telling “the truth.” Symbolic stories, on the other hand, often are used by politicians in their campaigns to create a near mythical figure of their candidates, a saint-like figure whose positive characteristics make him or her larger than life, all the while operating under the pretense that they are literal stories.

## Clinton's Own, Ongoing Transcendent Story

Clinton's goal as she sees it is to employ all her worldly and spiritual resources in the achievement of a goal, not power, but transforming people's lives toward a greater, ethical, spiritual, communal, responsible, and caring goal. Clinton herself recognizes the challenges faced by the social construction of this goal in language:

Words have a funny way of trapping our minds on the way to our tongues but there are necessary means even in this multi-media age for attempting to come to grasps with some of the inarticulate maybe even inarticulable things that we're feeling. We are, all of us, exploring a world that none of us even understands and attempting to create within that uncertainty. But there are some things we feel, feelings that our prevailing, acquisitive, and competitive corporate life, including tragically the universities, is not the way of life for us. We're searching for more immediate, ecstatic and penetrating mode of living. And so our questions, our questions about our institutions, about our colleges, about our churches, about our government continue. The questions about those institutions are familiar to all of us. We have seen heralded across the newspapers. Senator Brooke has suggested some of them this morning. But along with using these words—integrity, trust, and respect—in regard to institutions and leaders we're perhaps harshest with them in regard to ourselves. (Rodham, 1969)

Symbolic stories that treat Clinton as a protagonist and not antagonist, an opposite to the previously discussed literal or symbolic stories, are fewer and have far less titillating appeal, yet they find willing listeners nonetheless. Her campaign offered the obligatory ones; no campaign is complete without them. Yet there seems to be a paucity of symbolic stories provided by others without direct connection to or benefit from her. Independent stories that present Clinton in depth, as a complex figure, take a social constructionist form. If the previously discussed symbolic stories by Hillary haters focus on "power," the social construction stories function as a countervailing notion by agreeing that her moves are calculated and strategic, albeit directing all her energies to utilizing the available means to find The Answer through noble motives. "She clearly wants power, and has already amassed more of it than any First Lady since Eleanor Roosevelt. That ambition is merely a subcategory of the infinitely larger scope of her desires" (Kelly, 1993). Furthermore, by pointing out contradictions in Clinton's position, Kelly's "Saint Hillary" article is offered here as presenting a storytelling process that is socially constructed:

What Mrs. Clinton seems—in all apparent sincerity—to have in mind is leading the way to something on the order of a Reformation: the remaking of the American way of politics, government, indeed life. A lot of people, contemplating such a task, might fall prey to self doubts. Mrs. Clinton does not blink.



“It’s not going to be easy,” she says. “But we can’t get scared away from it because it is an overwhelming task.”

The difficulty is bound to be increased by the awkward fact that a good deal of what Mrs. Clinton sees as wrong right now with the American way of life can be traced, at least in part, to the last great attempt to find *The Answer*: the liberal experiments in the reshaping of society that were the work of the intellectual elite of . . . Mrs. Clinton’s generation. (Kelly, 1993)

This story takes Clinton’s words as deserving some consideration yet not necessarily privilege and allows her voice, motives, and resources to emerge as she might recognize them: “Let us be willing . . . to remold society by redefining what it means to be a human being in the 20th century, moving into a new millennium” (Kelly, 1993). Yet Kelly’s story, in true social constructionist form, also gives forum to her critics, who asked “‘what,’ in a question the First Lady finds to be a perfect small example of the cynicism she deplors, ‘was all that supposed to mean?’” The “concept of individual worth” through the “politics of meaning” is not an easy matter to define, especially if some part of the audience expects a purely symbolic story and instead is regaled with a socially constructed or even at times a transcendent one.

Mrs. Clinton says the right language remains to be invented. “As Michael Lerner and I discussed, we have to first create a language that would better communicate what we are trying to say, and the policies would flow from that language.” (Kelly, 1993)

Much to the delight of Hillary haters, Clinton herself shows a proclivity for celebrating the idea that answers are hard to come by and, instead of being stumped, shows resolve to continue searching for answers by advancing a transcendent story:

The problem with the language goes right to the core of the question of what it all means. Is there one unifying idea that is at the heart of the politics of meaning? “I don’t think there is one core thing,” Mrs. Clinton says. “I think this has to be thought through on a variety of planes. I don’t think there is one unifying theory.” (Kelly, 1993)

These two sets of stories, the literal-cum-symbolic stories by Hillary haters and the social constructionist-cum-transcendent stories by her and some of her admirers, are at odds. This is not to say that all her supporters are social constructionist or transcendent storytellers; unfortunately, negative storytelling of Clinton show little logical complexity. Therefore, one argument pursued here is that although she and her supporters may engage in more sophisticated storytelling processes about her person, her goals, her experience, and her ideas, as outlined above, the bulk of the criticism levied against her is told in literal and symbolic stories. This discussion is prologue to the multiplicity of stories told during the 2008 presidential campaign.

## The Arc of the Story: Clinton's 2008 Democratic Party Nomination Candidacy

As a front-runner in fund-raising, Clinton was considered soon after, if not before, her presidential announcement to be the candidate to beat: The Democratic Party nomination was hers to lose. This possibility created an unexpected set of stories about her electability by media pundits and Hillary haters. Chief among these was Rush Limbaugh, who exhorted his listeners to vote for her so as to create havoc during the primaries and split the Democratic Party vote. Although the party seemed divided, there is little evidence that indeed many registered Republicans changed their party affiliation and voted Democratic with this purpose in mind. Yet this did not stop Limbaugh from claiming that the strategy was working. In echoes of symbolic stories, Clinton was chastised by her detractors for campaigning during the Christmas holidays: Nothing is sacred for someone with designs for power and ambition. It was somewhat surprising to Clinton's campaign staff to see then-Senator Obama do well in the Iowa primary on January 3. Limbaugh claimed his strategy was working, Obama's supporters were enlivened by his youthful enthusiasm, and Clinton's loyal supporters cried foul to the media's customary sexist treatment of their candidate. For example, in a socially constructed story, Morgan (2008) ardently deplores the media's double standard and expresses the reasons for supporting her:

Me? I support Hillary Rodham because she's the best qualified of *all* candidates running in *both* parties. I support her because her progressive politics are as strong as her proven ability to withstand what will be a massive right-wing assault in the general election. I support her because she knows *how* to get us out of Iraq. I support her because she's refreshingly thoughtful, and I'm bloodied from eight years of a jolly "uniter" with ejaculatory politics. I needn't agree with her on every point. I agree with the 97 percent of her positions that are identical with Obama's—and the few where hers are both more practical and to the left of his (like health care). I support her because she's already smashed the first-lady stereotype and made history as a fine senator, because I believe she will continue to make history not only as the first US woman president, but as a *great* US president. As for the "woman thing"? Me, I'm voting for Hillary not because she's a woman—but because *I* am. (Morgan, 2008)

Other celebrity supporters, albeit some equally controversial, expanded the socially constructed story by decrying the double standard by asking:

So why is the sex barrier not taken as seriously as the racial one? The reasons are as pervasive as the air we breathe: because sexism is still confused with nature as racism once was; because anything that affects males is seen as more serious than anything that affects "only" the female half of the human race; because children are still raised mostly by women (to put it mildly) so men especially tend to

feel they are regressing to childhood when dealing with a powerful woman; because racism stereotyped black men as more “masculine” for so long that some white men find their presence to be masculinity-affirming (as long as there aren’t too many of them); and because there is still no “right” way to be a woman in public power without being considered a you-know-what. (Steinem, 2008)

There is no need to establish whether there is sexism in media reporting, as this controversy has been well documented: the underreported support by women of all stripes (Stansell, 2008), the semiotic power of her pantsuits and cleavage (Mandzuik, 2008), the media’s highlighting Clinton’s gender or sex and erasing Obama’s race (Samek, 2008) represent some recent academic discussions of the enduring sexism in Clinton storytelling. Sexism came not only from Republicans but also from Hillary haters of a variety of political views. In an op-ed piece titled “Can Hillary Cry Her Way Back Into the White House?” *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, who at times favors progressive ideas but has been a Hillary hater from her time as first lady, wrote,

What was moving her so deeply was her recognition that the country was failing to grasp how much it needs her. In a weirdly narcissistic way, she was crying for us. But it was grimly typical of her that what finally made her break down was the prospect of losing. (Dowd, 2008a)

Dowd was zeroing in on the political windfall Clinton apparently drew from tearing up prior to the New Hampshire primary, which many voters claimed had humanized her in their eyes. Sexism, at least as far as this hybrid literal–symbolic story goes, worked in her favor. For long one of her most vocal critics, Dowd invokes a watertight logic reminiscent of earlier stories for Clinton’s actions: a hunger for power. This power need is so calculated that this display of emotion, normally something women have no control over, must have been planned to get her back in the game. When in trouble, girls cry. Although she is despised for being cold and calculated, whenever she breaks down crying, it must be more of the same cold and calculated moves performed in the unending search for power and notoriety. Had she been able to keep her cool, it would be yet another example of her inability to relate to common people. Either way, she loses.

Clinton and her supporters tried in interviews to return the discussion back to the different treatment she had been getting from the media based on her gender. Her supporters, old and new as well, also saw it as a manifestation of her true character: one woman whose struggles to pursue her calling bear down on her like on any normal human being. Some pundits, despite their lack of support for Clinton, conceded that sexism was not just limited to the media; women voters were just as culpable:

I don’t for a moment begrudge Hillary her victory on Tuesday. But if victory came for the reasons we’ve been led to believe—because women voters ultimately

saw in her, exhausted and near defeat, a countenance that mirrored their own—then I hate what that victory says about the state of their lives and the nature of the emotions they carry forward into this race. I hate the thought that women feel beaten down, backed into a corner, overwhelmed and near to breaking point, as Hillary appeared to be in the debate Saturday night. And I hate even more that they've got to see a strong, smart and savvy woman cut down to size before they can embrace her as one of their own. (Warner, 2008a)

Clinton's efforts to expose the racism either fell on deaf ears despite the fact that a few days earlier hecklers in Salem, New Hampshire, yelled at her, "Iron my shirt!" while she was at the podium, or were seen as attempts to wanting to have her cake and eat it too. The tearing up incident, although it granted her a brief electoral success, punctuated the story in different ways: critics like Dowd saw it as more of the same, pointed to it as further evidence of her machinations. "At her victory party, Hillary was like the heroine of a Lifetime movie, a woman in peril who manages to triumph. Saying that her heart was full, she sounded the feminist anthem: 'I found my own voice'" (Dowd, 2008a). Those who do not understand the label *feminist* in similar ways as Clinton and others who apply it to themselves use it might see Dowd's symbolic storytelling as "proof" that Clinton is evil. Clinton and her supporters might agree with the label but see nothing problematic; rather, they would celebrate it as being part in a social constructionist story about the candidate.

As Clinton and Obama took turns winning the following primaries after Super Tuesday, the arc of the story changed another degree: Both her opponents and Obama's supporters took to calling for her to quit "for the good of the party." Yet not all were in the spirit of "kiss and make up"; some transcended by calling out both sexism and racism as the real culprits:

The sexist attacks on Clinton are outrageous and deplorable, but there's reason to be concerned about her becoming the vehicle for a feminist reawakening. For one thing, feminist sympathy for her has begotten an "oppression sweepstakes" in which a number of her prominent supporters, dismayed at her upstaging by Obama, have declared a contest between racial and gender bias and named sexism the greater scourge. This maneuver is not only unhelpful for coalition-building but obstructs understanding of how sexism and racism have played out in this election in different (and interrelated) ways. (Reed, 2008)

As campaign ads, debates, interviews, news reports, opinion pieces, and rallies became more acrimonious and contentious and the candidate field dwindled to Obama and Clinton, some Democrats worried about Limbaugh's predictions becoming true, especially after John McCain became the presumptive nominee in early May 2008.

Former vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro dared to speak the unspeakable: At the heart of the Democrats' rift was the idea that support for Clinton meant opposition to Obama in the eyes of his supporters.

Here we are at the end of the primary season, and the effects of racism and sexism on the campaign have resulted in a split within the Democratic Party that will not be easy to heal before election day. Perhaps it's because neither the Barack Obama campaign nor the media seem to understand what is at the heart of the anger on the part of women who feel that Hillary Clinton was treated unfairly because she is a woman or what is fueling the concern of Reagan Democrats for whom sexism isn't an issue, but reverse racism is. (Ferraro, 2008)

Criticism against Ferraro came from all directions, which cemented the literal aspects both for hers and for her critics' stories. Other Clinton supporters, resigned to her eventual loss, turned toward a transcendent story that placed responsibility for the campaign's failure squarely on the literal and symbolic storytelling by Hillary haters and pundits alike:

I will not miss the deafening, depressing silence of Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean or other leading Democrats, who to my knowledge (with the exception of Sen. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland) haven't uttered a word of public outrage at the unrelenting, sex-based hate that has been hurled at a former first lady and two-term senator from New York. Among those holding their tongues are hundreds of Democrats for whom Clinton has campaigned and raised millions of dollars. Don Imus endured more public ire from the political class when he insulted the Rutgers University women's basketball team. Would the silence prevail if Obama's likeness were put on a tap-dancing doll that was sold at airports? Would the media figures who dole out precious face time to these politicians be such pals if they'd compared Obama with a character in a blaxploitation film? And how would crude references to Obama's sex organs play? There are many reasons why Clinton is losing the nomination contest, some having to do with her strategic mistakes, others with the groundswell for "change." But for all Clinton's political blemishes, the darker stain that has been exposed is the hatred of women that is accepted as a part of our culture. (Cocco, 2008)

Despite her unabated dislike for Clinton, Dowd was not among those who urged her to throw in the towel; instead, she acknowledged Clinton's contributions, if only backhandedly by privileging the story that Obama could only benefit from sparring with such an accomplished and tenacious partner:

But the ultimate favor Hillary can do for the Illinois freshman is to fight him full-out until the finale and then gracefully release him so he can find happiness

with another. Hillary's work is done only when she is done, because the best way for Obama to prove he's ready to stare down Ahmadinejad is by putting away someone even tougher. (Dowd, 2008b)

Acknowledging that the plan did not include losing Super Tuesday, Clinton's campaign fractured and sputtered, eventually requiring her to loan her own money to it to continue viably. Admitting that a claim to have been under fire while on a trip to Bosnia-Herzegovina never took place brought even more calamities to the overall campaign storytelling efforts. She used this symbolic story to insinuate that she was qualified to be commander in chief for having lived through such experiences, and being forced to acknowledge the literal story that provided damaging facts, her invoking patriotism and valor through a lie further undermined her already challenged credibility.

In trying to appeal symbolically to the political middle, the story became further bifurcated, as Obama's supporters casually dismissed her and the myth that her own supporters had pledged not to vote for him but for McCain instead. There is little evidence yet that this happened. But it created the perfect political storm: the story of Sarah Palin, which will be discussed shortly.

As the primaries going her way became fewer, supporters' storytelling took a transcendent turn. They were less concerned with her winning or losing; they focused instead on her staying in the race through the end and the impact that her determination would have on future generations. Even those who were not supporters but who noticed the sexism in the media's treatment of Clinton poignantly accepted the pivotal role of her imminent loss:

I have regularly criticized Clinton over the course of her campaign (and long before it, starting with her vote to authorize the war), but there is no question that she has forever altered the way women running for president will be viewed from here on out . . . . But the greatest triumph of Clinton's campaign—a complete triumph—is the example she has set for the next generation. And not just for young women; her dedication, perseverance, and indefatigable drive make her a role model for young men as well . . . . Once the disappointment fades and the cuts and bruises heal, the lasting impression will be one of glory, accomplishment, and profound impact. Hers will have been a game-changing defeat. (Huffington, 2008)

The arc of the story uses symbolic forms to move closer toward transcendence with Clinton's concession speech to Obama in early June. She sought transcendence in several ways, first by acknowledging that the concession was not "exactly the party I'd planned, but I sure like the company" and other forms of recognition for her campaign workers and volunteers: We are all in it together. Second, her transcendent story recognizes supporters by name or by their conversation with her and as such brings the symbolic story to the fore with the reasons for her campaign:

We fought for all those who've lost jobs and health care, who can't afford gas or groceries or college, who have felt invisible to their president these last seven years. I entered this race because I have an old-fashioned conviction that public service is about helping people solve their problems and live their dreams. I've had every opportunity and blessing in my own life, and I want the same for all Americans. And until that day comes, you'll always find me on the front lines of democracy, fighting for the future. (Clinton, 2008b)

Third, she uses a literal story to justify her support for Barack Obama, despite the fact that, until recently, she criticized his lack of experience. To accomplish this, she requires a set of facts that unequivocally establish his credibility. Rather than contradicting herself, this literal story alludes that she stands corrected and, through a transcendent story, reminds listeners of the vision they both hold dear:

I have served in the Senate with him for four years. I have been in this campaign with him for 16 months. I have stood on the stage and gone toe-to-toe with him in 22 debates. I've had a front-row seat to his candidacy, and I have seen his strength and determination, his grace and his grit.

In his own life, Barack Obama has lived the American dream, as a community organizer, in the State Senate, as a United States senator. He has dedicated himself to ensuring the dream is realized. And in this campaign, he has inspired so many to become involved in the democratic process and invested in our common future.

Now, when I started this race, I intended to win back the White House and make sure we have a president who puts our country back on the path to peace, prosperity and progress. And that's exactly what we're going to do, by ensuring that Barack Obama walks through the doors of the Oval Office on January 20, 2009. (Clinton, 2008b)

Finally, as she prepares the crowd to accept her endorsement of Obama, she recounts the achievements of her husband and the retrograde policies of the Bush administration without naming names in threads of a skillful symbolic story along the lines of "good guys versus bad guys." Other threads of this symbolic story are woven to quell exhaustion and to transform it into perseverance:

Some will say we can't do it, that it's too hard, we're just not up to the task. But for as long as America has existed, it has been the American way to reject can't-do claims and to choose instead to stretch the boundaries of the possible through hard work, determination, and a pioneering spirit. (Clinton, 2008a, August 26)

She finds an appropriate place to return to the challenges she encountered as a woman, not to implore pity but to assert that, if Barack Obama could win the Democratic Party nomination this time, surely a woman can too.



It must be reiterated that, to be transcendent, this form of storytelling acknowledges the existence of other stories and includes them to recognize the storyteller's creative, attentive, and participative multiplicity. This story's commentary on other stories alone does not make it transcendent; its reflecting on the advantages and disadvantages of other forms does. By contrast, literal, symbolic, and even social constructionist do not. According to Dowd (2008c), "She didn't lose because she was a woman. She didn't lose because America isn't ready for a woman as president. She lost because of her own—and her husband's and Mark Penn's—fatal missteps." Advancing and accepting a single explanation for the happenings in question places a storyteller squarely in the literal and symbolic forms, which might suffice as adequate explanations at times; others require transcendence, such as what she achieves by weaving literal, symbolic, and social constructionist forms:

When I was asked what it means to be a woman running for president, I always gave the same answer, that I was proud to be running as a woman, but I was running because I thought I'd be the best president. But . . . I am a woman and, like millions of women, I know there are still barriers and biases out there, often unconscious, and I want to build an America that respects and embraces the potential of every last one of us. (Clinton, 2008b)

Further arcing toward transcendence, her speech to nominate Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention maintained this sophisticated form of storytelling. It was important for the two front-runners to "bury the hatchet" and present a unified front to forestall the myth that her supporters were so disappointed that she had lost to Obama that they vowed to vote for McCain. Whatever differences and animosity might have divided them in the past, it was now time to move toward unity. Suspending the roll call for delegates and jumping ahead to nominate Obama highlighted the vital role she would play in creating that much needed unified front.

You know, I'm—I'm here tonight as a proud mother, as a proud Democrat . . . as a proud senator from New York . . . a proud American . . . and a proud supporter of Barack Obama. My friends, it is time to take back the country we love. And whether you voted for me or you voted for Barack, the time is now to unite as a single party with a single purpose. (Clinton, 2008a)

Support for Obama was a theme that needed repetition but not in a way that would present her as subservient to him. Her supporters deserved recognition, and some even needed to be placated and humored: "To my supporters, to my champions, to my sisterhood of the traveling pantsuits . . . from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Thank you, because you never gave in and you never gave up. And together we made history." (Clinton, 2008a, August 26) She also needed to tell a story of common goals, lofty purposes, and just causes, not just between her and Obama but between her supporters



and his. Reflexivity in her transcendent storytelling emerged in the cadences that tried to authenticate the listeners' convictions with both hers and Obama's.

Most of all, I ran to stand up for all those who have been invisible to their government for eight long years. Those are the reasons I ran for president, and those are the reasons I support Barack Obama for president. I want you—I want you to ask yourselves: Were you in this campaign just for me, or were you in it for that young Marine and others like him? Were you in it for that mom struggling with cancer while raising her kids? Were you in it for that young boy and his mom surviving on the minimum wage? Were you in it for all the people in this country who feel invisible? (Clinton, 2008a, August 26)

The multiple roles she has played up to now qualify her to speak in support of Obama as former first lady and health care advocate, to denounce John McCain's ideas and policies as fellow senator, and, as a Democrat, to equate McCain with Bush. Creating unity among Democrats, she ties the site of Republican National Convention—Minnesota's Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul—as symbolic of the similarities between the two men. They were one and the same, both foes to the common goals. Yet aware of the risks for Obama's national candidacy of telling too symbolic a story of blame and ridicule about both men, she praises McCain's service to the country. Once established that resentment and scapegoating serve little purpose, she turns to praise participants at the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 as precursor to the Nineteenth Amendment that granted women the right to vote. Their legacy is invoked as a main thread in a transcendent story that invokes the common struggles between her gender and Obama's race to maintain unity:

My mother was born before women could vote. My daughter got to vote for her mother for president. This is the story of America, of women and men who defy the odds and never give up. So how do we give this country back to them? By following the example of a brave New Yorker, a woman who risked her lives to bring slaves to freedom along the Underground Railroad. On that path to freedom, Harriet Tubman had one piece of advice: "If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going." (Clinton, 2008a)

As transcendent storytelling also functions in polysemy, she conflates exultation for the tenacity and dedication of first responders, blue-collar workers, and small business owners with her own to stay in the race and indeed with all Americans as they embark on the journey toward a better future. "In America, you always keep going. We're Americans. We're not big on quitting." With this, she evokes two stories: one about herself as to why she did not quit the race earlier and another about Americans that will

unite them for the common good. Only by delivering the nomination speech for Barack Obama could Clinton transcend their previous feud.

## **Storytelling Possibilities in Sarah Palin's Vice Presidential Candidacy**

A mere 3 days later, the story of women in politics in 2008 became much richer and textured with the announcement of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as John McCain's running mate on the Republican ticket. Unlike Clinton, who had almost 40 years of controversial storytelling behind her, Palin became an overnight sensation and equally as controversial, but for many different reasons. The storytelling possibilities about Palin did not suffer because of her position as an unknown. This heretofore anonymity afforded the first story as literal: She was an outsider, not a "business-as-usual" politician unafraid to take on the big players to end corruption. From her early days in the Wasilla City Council to her 2 years as Alaska's governor, integrity guided all her decisions, resulting in beneficial outcomes to the people of Alaska. The sight of a no-nonsense person in public service gave literal force to the story of Palin's qualifications.

Woven with the literal story were also threads that came from her avowed identity as a "hockey mom," which functioned as the genesis for a symbolic story about her normalcy, accessibility, and likeability. Her attributes amounted to a one-stop shop for the Republican ticket: five children, the youngest with Down syndrome; oldest son in the military; former high school state champion ("Sarah Barracuda") beauty contestant and journalist; union member and small business owner husband; NRA member and avid hunter with a taste for moose burgers (Boyle, Aug. 29, 2008, Cooper & Bumiller, Aug. 30, 2008, *The Guardian*, Aug. 30, 2008). What was there not to like?

Her dietary predilection was known, albeit not widely, as early as 2006. "She's also a moose-burger-eating, snow-mobile-riding maverick who's not afraid to take on fellow Republicans she disagrees with," wrote Arnold (2006) on the occasion of her being elected governor. In Alaska, rare is the office potluck lacking moose stew and, at parties, "moose salami on a cracker might be passed around with the other appetizers" (Severson, 2008). But since moose meat cannot be sold, the only way to get it is by hunting it. Fortunately for moose meat aficionados, the herds have expanded since 1993, when the state began allowing wolves to be shot from the air, a policy Palin supported. The symbolic potency of this story proposed inviting possibilities in the literal story: Moose burgers stood not just for a gastronomic quirk but also for the policies a future Vice President Palin might usher once in office and the rapidly growing number of Palin's both supporters and opponents interpreted this story in the same way.

Yet the prologue was set for this coupled storytelling format, although at a much more rapid pace than storytelling about Clinton. Any one of her actions, statements, or interviews would have similar structure, but different coherence within each different storytelling community. Although the Republican communiqués extolled her outsider position and her efforts to fight corruption, akin to McCain's presumed "maverick" status in the U.S. Senate, critics saw her pick as a not so thinly veiled attempt to garner

disaffected Clinton voters, perhaps the same voters who allegedly said they would never vote for Obama because of his complicity in the media's sexist treatment of Clinton. Others recoiled at that thought:

John McCain's choice of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as running mate shows how desperate he is to distract attention from the fact that he is a cranky old man with nothing to offer but more of the same. Palin is a blatant pander for the women's vote. (Pollitt, 2008)

She was more than "likeable enough" which is what Obama had said to Clinton about her electability. Men, of course, but also women of all walks of like "liked" Palin, but would they vote for her in November? Would they vote for her once they found out about her policies?

She wants to use the magnificent freedom the women's movement has won for her at tremendous cost and struggle—the movement that won her the right to run those marathons and run Alaska—to take away the freedom of every other woman in the country. Her selection does not tell us McCain is a "maverick" who is just stringing the Christian right along, wink-wink. It tells us that he has thrown in his lot with James Dobson, the Family Research Council, the Catholic hierarchy and others for whom criminalizing abortion is the number-one issue . . . McCain is gambling that women will vote their gender, and not their interests. I expect pro-choice women will see through this gambit pretty fast. If not, we really are as dumb as he thinks we are. (Pollitt, 2008)

Here the story takes symbolism from the women's movement and highlights the idea that when today's women reject the feminist label, they do so from a position of privilege granted to them by their foremothers who fought the battles so all women could have choices, be they professional or reproductive. So when news broke 3 days after the announcement of the Palin as VP pick about her oldest daughter Bristol's unmarried pregnancy, storytelling on both ends of the political spectrum echoed the moose burgers and maverick plots. Her supporters praised her for supporting her daughter's decision to have the baby:

"She's real, and she's been there," said Rachel Paulding, 25, of Hatcher's Pass, Alaska, near Anchorage. "She has got five kids, and some of them are bound to have problems. That is just normal life." And in Minnesota, Kris Bowen, an alternate delegate from Indiana, said she now felt more connected to Ms. Palin. "Now she's a typical American family," said Ms. Bowen, the mother of two boys ages 10 and 12. (Davey, 2008)

The intensity of this story carried such impact that the Republican National Convention relied extensively on a symbolic tone. Candidate Palin became even more beleaguered

by rumors that her youngest child, Trig, was actually Bristol's baby, and to squash those earlier rumors and the new ones about Bristol's possible pregnancy, she and her husband presented a literal-cum-symbolic story:

We have been blessed with five wonderful children who we love with all our heart and mean everything to us. Our beautiful daughter Bristol came to us with news that as parents we knew would make her grow up faster than we had ever planned. We're proud of Bristol's decision to have her baby and even prouder to become grandparents. As Bristol faces the responsibilities of adulthood, she knows she has our unconditional love and support. Bristol and the young man she will marry are going to realize very quickly the difficulties of raising a child, which is why they will have the love and support of our entire family. We ask the media to respect our daughter and Levi's privacy as has always been the tradition of children of candidates. (Palin, 2008)

Consistent with her no-nonsense image, the statement released by the media speaks literally about the facts yet embeds symbolic highlights: Blessings, beauty, pride, responsibility, marriage, love, and privacy constitute sacred values that humane and moral beings could not only relate to but also respect and even admire. Soon after, Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama issued a response urging for the respect of the family's privacy, enfolding remarks in the same symbolic valence. Obama's remarks were consistent with the unspoken, self-imposed moratorium the networks employed until the Palins released their statement, and even after that, they focused on other, equally controversial but less morally charged aspects of her candidacy and policies (Guthrie, 2008).

On the other hand, opponents criticized Palin for the irony in her supporting abstinence-only sex education at the same time that her own daughter became pregnant without being married. Rejecting the notion that Palin's membership in the group Feminists for Life affirmed her feminist credentials, some scholars instead offered the term *maternalist* as a better fitting alternative. A "maternalist," according to Sonya Michel (2008), is

a woman who accepts the gendered division of labor but uses her assignment to home and family to claim the right to public participation. Maternalism has long served women as an effective political ploy, and the Republicans are holding out hope that it will work now.

Other maternalists Michel lists are Phyllis Schlafly and Cindy Sheehan, along with the group Mothers Against Drunk Driving, all of whom embrace their gender roles. In this symbolically charged story, three of Palin's children provide texture and complexity: The soldier, the special needs child, the unwed pregnant teenager figure among her maternal motivations for seeking public office. The polysemic qualities of this story function on a variety of levels as she reaffirms her marriage and motherhood,

demonstrates she can be both a good mother and a public figure, and uses her extensive experience at home as a stand-in for professional qualifications. Unlike Clinton, Palin tries to appeal to women who never before have wanted to have it all and to calm criticism that McCain picked her to attract disaffected Clinton voters by symbolically storying her life as a hockey mom, only with more “blessings.” As Michel (2008) reminds us, Palin never managed to unequivocally show commitment to women’s issues “and in fact has clearly demonstrated her opposition to abortion rights and equal pay, key tenets of modern feminism. Mrs. Palin may be a woman in politics, but as her refusal to challenge gender conventions shows, she is no feminist.”

The Palin story underwent more plot twists as allegations surfaced about her attempts to push the limits of her office by banning books in the public library, using her power to exact revenge on her sister’s ex-husband, and changing laws to make victims of rape pay for their own medical examinations. Storytelling surrounding these themes took literal forms, as news media outlets sought to “find the truth” and “get to the bottom.” Yet the more these stories gained traction, the bigger were the crowds that received her, where throngs of adoring males were enraptured by her wit and physical attractiveness, which she coyly exploited by winking and hamming it up for the camera. Their presence at rallies structured a story about the candidate that no self-respecting feminist would accept: that their vote for her depended primarily on her physical attractiveness, whereas her ideas were either unknown or unimportant to them. Her place on the ticket was intended to energize the vote and to balance McCain, to park the “red Camaro” next to the F-150 (Bush, Teinowitz, & Wheaton, 2008).

Even those who tried to remain within the literal form of storytelling, such as journalist Katie Couric, found that effort challenging in the face of Palin’s refusal or inability to abandon symbolic storytelling. For example, when asked about her reading list of newspapers to stay current on world events, she invoked a symbolism worthy of a fourth grader’s fibbing over homework (“All of them!”) as a way to avoid the fact that she could not name a single one. The literalism that Couric attempted to story both for Palin’s sake and for the public starved by Palin of simple facts to assert her competence painfully established the insurmountable challenges that her lack of inexperience would present.

Not all critics attempted to make kindling after Palin’s felling. A story of pity and compassion that carried some transcendent overtones lived shortly. “Poor Sarah,” wrote Judith Warner (2008b) in the *New York Times* after seeing a picture of Palin with Henry Kissinger. Why do conservative women like her? “In her own folded hands, her hopeful, yet sinking posture, her eager-to-please look. Sarah Palin is their—dare I say our?—inner Elle Woods.” According to Warner, Palin’s admirers recognized she was not up to the task but still believed that, with a stiff dose of good old can-do attitude, women can do anything they want in life. Yet “they know she can’t possibly do it all—the kids, the special-needs baby, the big job, the big conversations with foreign leaders. And neither could they.” Poignantly, “Palin’s nomination isn’t just an insult to the women (and men) of America. It’s an act of cruelty toward her as well” (Warner, 2008b).

Such a figure proved an easy target for television network's late-night political humor, the most memorable of whom was a recurring impersonation by Tina Fey on the show *Saturday Night Live*, challenging the McCain–Palin campaign's literal story by exploiting and subverting the campaign's own symbolic storytelling ("I can see Russia from my house!"). Satirists enjoy a position of distinction, as clowns, to level criticism veiled as humor. Fey's socially constructed story reflected on Palin's own symbolic storytelling and interrogated its logical idiosyncrasies, and Palin, a fan of Fey's in the past, seemed amused. Evocative of Palin's symbolic no-nonsense story, she appeared on *SNL*, an event that brought her closer to the only barely discernible transcendent moment of her storytelling. She briefly appeared in the opening segment ("Live from New York, it's Saturday Night!") and later during the Weekend Update quasi-news segment. Through this appearance, Palin gamely storied her performance as transcendent by allowing both to be criticized by Alec Baldwin, who pretended not to distinguish the real Palin from Fey's impersonation in a back-stage skit ("Caribou Barbie"), and, seconds later, to be complimented on her looks ("You are way hotter in person!") by a groupie-like Baldwin. Recall that transcendent storytellers locate themselves reflexively as if in front of several mirrors to examine and critique the multiple roles they enact at any given moment of the communication process, as creators, listeners, and participants, which allows them to manage contradictions in such a way that these do not have to be reconciled. Two such moments can be discerned in the transcendent story. First, Palin does not take offense at being called "Caribou Barbie" precisely because it was not to her face but was done under the pretense of ignorance. Second, Baldwin does not attempt to apologize for insulting her policies but manages to admire her physical endowments. Neither one sells their soul to the devil, the discomfort of the moment is relieved, all is done in the interest of humor and showing what a good sport one is, a rare transcendent story in a cacophonous pattern of symbolic and literal others.

Yet the earlier success she enjoyed began to wane as Obama gained support from all segments of voters, including Clinton's loyal supporters. The Republican ticket attempted to keep symbolic focus on their storytelling, for example, by suspending the campaign on September 24 to attend to the economic crisis; after all, "country first" the GOP campaign slogan, applied to McCain too. Yet neither satisfactory poll numbers nor game-changing storyline came from that decision.

As the campaign neared its final days, Palin's image began to tarnish from the inside, giving rise to a story whose symbolism would be too powerful to deflect. Ironically, what proved pivotal not just to increase support for Obama but also to undermine Palin's maverick image by providing the ballast for a symbolic story was sexism. Two weeks before the election, a writer for Politico.com broke the news in a literal story replete with facts and figures totaling \$150,000 for Palin's wardrobe expenditures, compliments of the Republican National Committee (Cummings, 2008). The McCain campaign attempted to restructure the story into a symbolic form, by dismissing the attention paid to these revelations:

“With all of the important issues facing the country right now, it’s remarkable that we’re spending time talking about pantsuits and blouses,” said spokeswoman Tracey Schmitt. “It was always the intent that the clothing go to a charitable purpose after the campaign.” (Cummings, 2008)

Major right-wing news outlets failed to join the story, which bloggers morphed from literal to symbolic: a spending spree by a political neophyte during the economic melt-down echoed the story of Nero playing the lyre while Rome burned.

The factoid bloodletting was unstoppable: 7.2 was the number of years it would take John Edwards to get a weekly \$400 haircut with Palin’s lavish clothing allowance; 4 was the number of median annual salaries for licensed plumbers that the same fashion budget could pay. “Palin received more valuable clothes in one month than the average American household spends on clothes in 80 years. A Democrat put it in even blunter terms: her clothes were the cost of health care for 15 or so people” (Stein, 2008). The California Nurses Association created an interactive internet game (<http://www.cal-nurses.org/media-center/press-releases/2008/october/tens-of-thousands-view-dress-likepalin-web-site.html>) where viewers could learn and suggest other ways to spend the money: 15,000 nurses scrubs. Money spent on makeup—\$22,800—could pay for “224 mammograms, 651 flu shots, or provide a supply of cholesterol lower Lipitor for one person for nearly 14 years” (California Nurses Association, 2008).

Even though the McCain campaign claimed the clothes would be auctioned off and the proceeds donated to charity after the election, there still remained many Democrats and Republicans incensed by the lack of judgment about this decision. Major news outlets provided slide shows of Palin and her entire family’s pricey new clothes as Palin attempted to save face by downplaying the clothing issue while bemoaning the fact that she too encountered sexism from the media:

Much of the media attention Palin has received—on the issue of the clothes, for example—has decidedly not been about public policy issues. She points to that as evidence of a bias against women candidates. “I think Hillary Clinton was held to a different standard in her primary race,” Palin said. “Do you remember the conversations that took place about her, say superficial things that they don’t talk about with men, her wardrobe and her hairstyles, all of that? That’s a bit of that double standard.” (Zuckman, 2008)

Suddenly Palin engaged in finding commonalities with Clinton, which could have been one of the characteristics of transcendent storytelling. However, the grammar of her story lacked sufficient complexity to transcend the challenging moment. The storyline of defending her justified the actions in a literal form. If the average person is expected to dress her or his best for a job interview, a woman interviewing for the job that is a heart beat away from the presidency must look good, regardless of the cost.

I dislike Sarah Palin’s veep bid for many, many reasons. But not for this. Too bad campaign finance rules prevent her from keeping the clothes. A \$150,000



wardrobe would have been a nice consolation prize when she heads back to Alaska on November 5. (Cotler, 2008)

Symbolic elements gave way to social constructionist ones, as Cotler takes it as a given that Palin will lose.

The perfect storm might soon end, but not the storytelling about it as it is a perpetual human process. Both Clinton and Palin endured sexism through storytelling. A difficult process under the best of circumstances, transcendent storytelling challenged them both to reconsider their previous goals. Whatever little Clinton and Palin had in common as women in 2008 had more to do with how their lives were storied than with their life experiences. And it is the latter as women in a society that learns slowly about difference that provides structure and texture to the storytelling process. Clinton's life story has been dedicated to serving a purpose greater than herself, according to one set of stories. For Clinton, storied her goal of becoming president did not resonate with multiple audiences, yet through the use of a specific grammar her story transcended those limits, and she is now free to continue in this next chapter her lifelong pursuit of the "politics of meaning." The presidential run may have been a distraction. She has known it is a lifelong endeavor since *The Speech* in 1969.

Sarah Palin was 5 years old then. Her story trajectory has taken a wider variety of plot routes yet managed to command the nation's attention during its meteoric run for the vice presidency in 2008. Her goals have been modest at best yet at times proud and grandiose. Her story found immediate resonance in a small group of loyal and vocal supporters. However, transcendence, if it ever was a goal, seems to have eluded her so far.

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1. In 1972, Shirley Chisholm, a New York Congresswoman who was the first Black woman elected to Congress, became the first major-party Black candidate for president of the United States and the first woman to run for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, receiving 152 first-ballot votes at the Democratic National Convention that year.
2. Palin is the first Republican and the second woman to run for vice president on a major U.S. party ticket. The first was Democrat Geraldine Ferraro, Walter Mondale's running mate in 1984.

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## Bio

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