

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

**Jillian Jimenez, Ph.D.**

The political narrative is normally the most ordinary and least compelling of storylines. Most of the time there is no through line for Presidential primaries and even general elections are devoid of drama for all but the most committed political observers. Candidates sound more or less the same and the homogeneity of ideology is compounded by the homogeneity of demographics in the candidate field. The powerful sense of *déjà vu* that accompanies the political season (same arguments, same people) reduces interest in what is arguably the most important public decision Americans will make. If anything, the last eight years drives home the critical nature of the Presidential election – wars, soaring federal deficits, loss of support from other countries, war related deaths and casualties, programs denied, tax cuts for the wealthy, civil liberty issues – all are the legacy of the last 8 years of the Bush presidency. How could the stakes be any higher? Low voter turnout has been a sign that few share in the sense of moment embedded in Presidential elections.

This primary season a new, more dramatic and compelling narrative has been launched, galvanizing the interest of voters and the political classes alike: Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton are both viable candidates for the Presidency, and it is completely within the bounds of rational projection that one of them will become President in 2009. Examining the meaning of these candidates and their successes thus far reveals several braided narratives. Both candidates resonate with our history of oppression and discrimination and elicit our most closely held prejudices and hopes. They ask us to revise our narratives about political power and who can hold it in the United States. The job of President of the United States is not a token promotion or a prize born of special pleading. It is arguably the most powerful position in the world, made more powerful by the spread of nuclear arms,

the conflagration in the Middle East and the rising inequality and health care costs that burden an increasing number of Americans.

It is truly remarkable that an African-American man and a woman are contesting for this role, and even more remarkable that one of them is likely to take it on. Something has decidedly changed in our narrative about who we are as Americans. Barak Obama's political rise constitutes the most spectacular apotheosis in American politics, solely because of our long history of deep racism and oppression of African-Americans. Fifty years ago some Americans would not have wanted to sit next to Obama on a public bus, much less voted for him to be President. For those of us who remember the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Obama seems to represent a climax of long buried hopes that things can be different in this country and that the social construction of race and its ugly consequence, racism, can begin to fade from national life. Of course this has not yet happened; there is plenty of racial animus left and we are likely to see more of it as his campaign continues. But the fact of a high turnout of white voters supporting Obama is something many of us thought we would not see in our lifetime. Obama is the postmodern candidate, eschewing a race-based campaign, bridging political ideologies by reaching out to Republicans and Independents, seemingly forgetting the bitterness of our racial past. He refuses to embrace the political necessity of the Iraq project, as postmodernists might call our military engagement there. Yet he knows more than he puts in his campaign speeches, as indicated by his post-caucus speech in Iowa, when he obliquely acknowledged the importance to his candidacy of the Civil Rights struggle, alluding to Montgomery and Selma, Alabama. Obama is currently sending a coded message: if we don't mention the racial divide that has kept people like me out of political



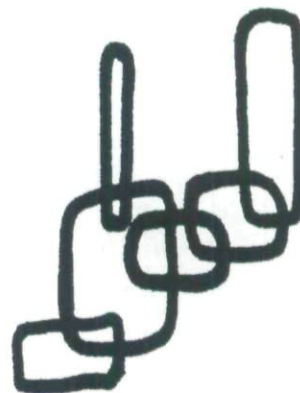
power, we can carry on as though it does not exist. Is this an agreement Americans are ready to accept? Does it promote social justice or drive bigotry underground to surface another day? The fact that Obama's own frequently mentioned biography includes a white mother and a father from Kenya perhaps protects him from the deepest discrimination reserved for those African-Americans who claim long roots in this country and whose ancestors lived through slavery and Jim Crow. Yet Obama is a recognizable African American man; his biography does not protect him the racism this fact can elicit.

Hillary Rodham Clinton's success as a Presidential candidate would be the most notable story of the campaign if it were not for the success of Barak Obama. In seriously considering a woman for President, the United States is behind other democracies that have elected women to positions of great power. The interesting question about her campaign is how much does she need to eschew traditionally feminine qualities to be successful in electoral politics? Since the nineteenth century the gender roles for white middle class women have been built on the qualities of piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness; historians call this the "cult of true womanhood." Women were thought to be too emotional and delicate to vote until 1920, much less run for political office. Even after the woman's movement dismantled many of the expectations of femininity, hard edged, intellectual women continued to have difficulty in public life. The so-called double standard for women (assertive man is a leader; assertive woman is not welcome), meant that Hillary evoked negative feelings among people who felt she violated the socially constructed gender role she was born to fill. As political commentators have endlessly pointed out, Clinton's wincing "that hurts my feelings" at one of the debates and her eyes "welling up with tears" the night before the election were signs that an actual old fashioned woman lives under her organized, intellectual exterior and possesses the feminine delicacies, if not weaknesses that she is supposed to have. It was only after these "humanizing" (read feminizing) episodes that Hillary confounded

expectations and won the day in New Hampshire. Confirming her femininity (do male candidates have to cry or do they disqualify themselves if they do, ala Edmund Muskie in 1972?), Hillary finally won the hearts of other women. It is a very odd thing that one's deepest ideological commitments and policy ideas can be trumped by a welling eye, but that is the game that Clinton has signed on for and seems willing to play. Like Obama's allusion to Montgomery and Selma, her tears and hurt feelings a coded message to followers: "I am a real woman." Shading Hillary's message even more, questions have been raised about the influence Bill Clinton will have on her Presidency—will he be the man she cannot be and do we trust her more because of her husband?

In any other year the main progressive narrative about this primary season would be the candidacy of John Edwards, a Democrat who does not claim the center as Bill Clinton did, but one who speaks of poverty and inequality. His quest was overwhelmed by the excitement many Americans feel at the new narratives we are writing: we can elect a Black man or a woman to the Presidency; yes we are a nation who has put our ugly racist, sexist past behind us. We will see.

The editor welcomes comments about this issue: [jjimenez7@csulb.edu](mailto:jjimenez7@csulb.edu).



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