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TEA WITH MOTHER

SARAH PALIN AND THE DISCOURSE OF MOTHERHOOD AS A POLITICAL IDEAL

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Seldom has someone emerged so unexpectedly and sensationally on to the American political scene as Sarah Palin. With Palin came what had rarely, if ever, been seen before on a presidential trail: hockey moms, Caribou-hunting, pitbulls in lipstick parcelled as political weaponry. And let's not forget those five children, including Track 19, set to deploy to Iraq, Bristol, and her unplanned pregnancy at 17, and Trig, a six-month-old infant with Down's syndrome. Never before had motherhood been so finely balanced with US presidential politics. Biological vigour translated into political energy, motherhood transformed into an intoxicating political ideal. This article focuses on Sarah Palin and how her brand of "rugged Alaskan motherhood" (PunditMom 2008) became central to her media image, as well as what this representation has to tell us about the relationship between mothering as a political ideal, US politics, and the media.

Très peu d'individus ont fait une apparition aussi inattendue et spectaculaire que celle de Sarah Palin sur la scène politique américaine. Avec elle ont surgi des traits inédits dans une campagne présidentielle : ceux de la *hockey mom*, de la chasse au caribou, de la femme pugnace mais fardée utilisés comme des arguments partisans. Cela sans oublier les enfants Palin mis à contribution : Track, 19 ans, attendant son affectation militaire en Irak, Bristol, fille-mère à 17 ans, et Trig, un bébé trisomique de six mois. Une image si orientée de la maternité n'avait jamais auparavant été impliquée dans une campagne politique aux États-Unis. La vigueur génétique s'y est vue transformée en énergie politique, et la maternité en un idéal politique intoxicant. Cet article se concentre sur la façon dont l'image d'une « rugged Alaskan motherhood » (PunditMon 2008) est devenue si cruciale dans la personnalité médiatique de Sarah Palin, et sur ce qu'une telle image peut nous apprendre quant aux relations entre la maternité comme idéal, la politique américaine, et les médias.

Rarely has anyone emerged so unexpectedly and sensationally on to the American political scene as Sarah Palin. It is August 2008, and the Republican nominee John McCain, the moderate senator from Arizona, took his most audacious campaign gamble when he named the 44-year-old mother-of-five governor of Alaska as his running mate. Everything about her *looked* different. “She’s not—she’s not from these parts and she’s not from Washington, but when you get to know her, you’re going to be as impressed as I am,” McCain told Republicans assembled in Dayton, Ohio, shortly before Palin strode onto the political platform with husband Todd, a native Yup’ik who worked for BP, and four of her five children with uncommon names including Bristol, unmarried and pregnant at 17, and Trig Paxson Van, a six-month-old infant with Down’s syndrome.

As a Christian, social conservative, anti-abortionist, and patriot preparing to see her eldest son deployed to Iraq (on September 11, 2008, no less), this “middle youth” mother from America’s last frontier seemed a shrewd (if unexpected) choice to shore up the vote among the party’s staunchly right-wing evangelical base. Still, it was the more subtle tangled ways in which Sarah Palin politicised mothering and her role as a mother that ignited passions across the political spectrum—and had feminists like me (McCabe, “States of Confusion”; “In the Feminine Ideal”) tied in theoretical knots. Palin translated the postfeminist “have it all” culture into potent, if uneasy, political currency, making history as the first woman on the Republican ticket and only the second in US presidential history to become a vice-

Fig. 1



presidential nominee. What interests me however, and the subject of this article, is how the discourse of motherhood, turned into a political ideal, was made useful—qualified and disqualified—and linked to an intensification of the feminine body. Palin’s well crafted image was imbued, through and through, with tactical function and political calculation. It is discourse of the Mother and mothering, imagined *in* and *through* her image, which transmits and *produces* a formidable power; it reinforces a moral, social, and economic order, but it also reveals fragilities and the limits of that power, particularly centred on sex, sexuality, and the biological female body.

With Palin came what had rarely if ever been seen before in politics, let alone a presidential trail. Hockey moms, mama grizzlies in killer heels, and pitbulls in lipstick parcelled as political weaponry. Such a staged spectacle of female agency and power led Lacanian psychoanalyst and writer Jacques-Alain Miller to conclude, “Sarah Palin puts forward no lack: she fears nothing, churns out children all [the] while holding a shotgun ... [and] presents herself as an unstoppable force.” This apparent defiance of easy definition and absolute refusal to sacrifice neither career nor children saw the disorienting collapse of what Nina Power calls the “old female dichotomies—mother/politician, attractive/successful, passive/go-getting.” Everything about Palin appeared limitless and omnipotent, argues Power: “Both fiercely maternal and politically aggressive, ... [and

turning] maternity into a war weapon,” the vice-presidential nominee “is pretending to be all women at once, and yet perfectly mundane.”

Never before had motherhood been so finely paraded as political accomplishment. Biological vigour translated into constitutional ambition, and mothering transformed into an intoxicating political ideal. As she cradled Trig in her arms, a “living [testament] to herself as the model pro-life mother” (Raban), she wowed the party faithful and secured her political celebrity almost overnight. Palin was everywhere. Her ubiquitous image was featured in magazines and newspapers the length and breadth of America and beyond: “A Mother’s Painful Choice” ran the poignant OK! headline, but the glossy media image of her cradling Trig told another, more compelling story of maternal pride, domestic bliss, and pro-life principles. We may *know* that the political image is highly choreographed (in which both the media and politicians are inextricably entangled), however on seeing Palin holding her handicapped baby son on stage at the GOP national convention, few could have failed not to be affected by the sight as a groundbreaking moment for women—or as Nancy Gibb saw it, “you felt the shattered glass raining gently down.”



Fig. 2

Nowhere is the paradox presented by Palin more self evident than in how her image represents so seductively the personal *is* political. Michel Foucault alerts us to how dominant norms (institutions, culture) are perpetually being resisted and reconstituted by knowledge that has developed and gained momentum from elsewhere “in the power network” (95). Almost immediately, in introducing “the right

partner,” McCain identified Palin (unnamed and un-gendered at this point) as someone able to challenge power and willing to dispute privilege, before saying “proudly” that in the week “we celebrate the anniversary of female suffrage” his running mate is “a devoted wife and mother of five.” Her legitimacy to rule is vouched for by reference to the commonweal (matrimonial allegiance, parental obligations), and her role as presidential helpmate is authenticated by these traditional forms of alliance that Palin seemed obliged to endlessly pronounce about herself. But at the same time, the mother is also playing the role of adversary to power. It did in fact seem, at first glance at least, that her candidacy represented the triumph of the personal *over* the political.

Palin wasted no time in acknowledging this historic moment for women. As an ordinary working mother, she was the legacy of feminism in America—a country that emphasized equal voting rights and individual women empowering themselves (rather than through collective activism). Standing on the political stage in 2008, Palin made sense of that neoliberal feminist ideal, namely: women *had* made unprecedented gains.

To serve as vice president beside such a man would be the privilege of a lifetime. And it’s fitting that this trust has been given to me 88 years almost to the day after the women of America first gained the right to vote. ... I think—I think as well today of two other women

who came before me in national elections. I can't begin this great effort without honoring the achievements of Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 ... and of course Senator Hillary Clinton, who showed such determination and grace in her presidential campaign ... It was rightly noted in Denver this week that 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. (Palin, "Transcript McCain")

No doubt these words were designed to win over the disaffected Hillary Rodham Clinton supporters, as if biology was all that mattered. Initially, Palin did what was expected of her, and opinion polls suggested that her candidacy appealed to a large section of female (mostly white) voters the Obama camp had either disregarded or simply assumed would shift allegiance once Clinton dropped out of the Democrat race (Goldenberg, "McCain Forced into Supporting Role" 20). Palin also rejuvenated McCain's sliding political fortunes, with one wavering Republican female voter saying: "She has brought youth, the female factor, the younger generation, she has brought, most importantly to me, a lot of women who were sitting on the fence" (qtd. in Goldenberg, "McCain Forced into Supporting Role" 20). Her candidacy was about visibility, of making representation on behalf of

women and bringing that constituency into the political conversation.

Feminism had arrived in the American heartland. Even so, this pro-woman tableau painted by Palin was rife with deep ambivalence and profound contradiction. Clinton may have put 18 million cracks into the glass ceiling, but did the last push really mean shattering that which protected *Roe vs. Wade* as well? Furthermore, what did it say about women in power when the first to potentially occupy the vice presidency in the history of the United States was a self-declared "average hockey mom" who "never really set out to be involved in public affairs, much less to run for this office" (Palin, "Transcript McCain")? Palin is saturated in the political meanings of her personal life. She makes visible the "Feminists for Life" mantra with her resolute refusal to choose between women and children. She mangles the vocabularies of social conservatism (anti-abortion, abstinence education) with feminism (equal rights, balancing parenting with an ambitious career). She combines aspects of "power feminism" (Wolf), where women are in control of their destiny, with what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese terms "family feminist," which involves women able to set their own agendas based on personal concerns rather than elitist ideology and communal logic. Palin is an example of the postfeminist "have it all" rationale defined by self-determinism and enterprise (linked to free market economics), a legacy of the Reagan era; she is someone who

grew up “feeling” empowered and internalizing the message of women’s progress (“Standing on the shoulders of women who had won hard-fought battles for things like equal pay and equal access” [Palin, “Transcript McCain” 28]), but disconnected from the political philosophies which had created those opportunities in the first place. “I didn’t subscribe to all the radical mantras of that early feminist era,” Palin has said (“Transcript McCain” 28), a movement she regards as irrelevant at best and suspiciously socialist at worst. Feminism is about self-reliance and personal responsibility rather than collective agendas and legal edicts, “a matter not of ideology but of simple fairness” (Palin, “Transcript McCain” 28).

Her representation, “living comfortably with paradox” (Siegel 141), in many ways enters into dialogue with contemporary feminism and its politics of ambiguity—only to stoke the flames of disagreement over how exactly to define our terms and push us to the limits of language when we talk about women and power. Here then lies one of the most complex, if unnerving ironies of Palin. She may rhetorically imitate feminism, but distorts, resists, even reverses its logic, as she translates it into a populist conversation about equality and a refusal to compromise. Social problems are no longer communal requiring collective action, but personal ones demanding individual solutions. It is an (ironically) apolitical postfeminist brand, described by Deborah L. Siegel

as “about propelling oneself forward in stiletto heels” (124).

But in this feminist paradox a crucial point has gone awry. Never mind how Palin raids feminism for its rhetoric and semiotics of empowerment, her image operates inside meticulous codes—of marriage sanctified by church and State, of motherhood integral to the bourgeois order, and of family extolled by popular media and political rhetoric. It is a lesson in unseen power whereby biological fecundity translates into political leverage. Power comes not from partisan politics (as such), but from “that [which] we no longer perceive ... as the effect of power that constrains us” (Foucault 60). No wonder we cannot help but become entranced and exasperated by her in equal measure. “She is a fresh voice” with a “new vocabulary” declared veteran Republican Pat Buchanan (“A Post-Mortem of the Debate Post-Mortem”), but she is speaking *in* and *through* a representation (the fertile mother, the faithful wife, the [re]productive female body) beset by intricate rules and intrinsic to the mechanisms of social power and control. So imbibed are we in this vital image of the feminine represented by Palin that to critique this script is almost impossible. Disclosing what should not be said, to denounce that ideal of American motherhood which discourse (institutions, culture, politics, society, the media) works so hard to promote and, as Foucault put it, “enforce[s] the norm” (3; emphasis mine), cannot be done.

Family, faith, and flag define her political celebrity. Palin has always made considerable capital of her role as a mother. She has, in fact, politicised motherhood as never before, not only translating mothering into a political creed, but also using it to legitimatise her identity and affirm herself. “On April 20, 1989,” Palin declares in her bestselling political memoir, *Going Rogue: An American Life*, “my life truly began. I became a mom. ... The world went away, and in a crystallizing instant, I knew my purpose” (51, 53). Her credo is clear: In *becoming* a mother her subjectivity *is* defined and qualified. It is the way in which she conceives of power—the feminine body, the socio-political body, “by virtue of a biologicomoral responsibility” (Foucault 104). Akin to an evangelical conversion, “her” tone also authenticates what Stephanie Coontz describes as “a sentimental, almost sacred, domestic sphere whose long-term commitments and nurturing balanced the pursuit of self interest in the public arena” (43).

Presented as a “mom’s-eye view of high-stakes national politics” (or, so the book jacket tells us), Palin’s memoir begins by telling us of a visit to the Right to Life (RTL) booth at the 2008 Alaska State Fair “where a poster caught [her] eye, taking [her] breath away” (*Going Rogue* 2). “[Swathed] in pink, pretend angel wings fastened to her soft shoulders” as described by Palin, “*the pro-life poster child at the State Fair*” (*Going Rogue* 2; emphasis in the original turns out to be her youngest daughter Piper. ““That’s you,

baby,” I whispered to Piper, as I have every year since she smiled for the picture as an infant. She popped another cloud of cotton candy in her mouth and looked nonchalant” (*Going Rouge* 2). This moment of almost breathless, intimate sentimentality inspires her political ambition. “It reminded me of the preciousness of life,” recalls Palin. “It also reminded me of how impatient I am with politics” (*Going Rogue* 2). Her encounter with “the gracious ladies who put up with the jeers of those who always protested the display” typified for her “the difference between principles and politics” (*Going Rogue* 3). In this briefest of sketches—bucolic small-town American life (“I breathed in an autumn bouquet that combined everything small-town America with rugged splashes of the Last Frontier” [*Going Rogue* 1]), independent ladies (*not* women) and principled-centred grassroots activism, privately-held faith-based ethics versus East Coast elite government, and politics-as-usual—the Palin folklore about family, motherhood, and patriotism is founded. Not for the first time in that mythology do her children remind Palin of her articles of faith, of who she is, in fact. It is, of course, at this precise moment of political epiphany that her BlackBerry vibrates. “Just this one last call, baby,” she tells Piper. It’s John McCain, “asking if I wanted to help him change history” (*Going Rogue* 6).

Or, so the story goes.

Personal narratives have long played a crucial role in announcing political

ambition. There is no doubt that a good deal of Palin's appeal relies on her biography and its packaging. She looks like exactly what she says she is: not the usual politico, but a small-town hockey mom, who became involved in politics by running for city council via the parent-teacher association (PTA). Raising babies, nurturing a young frontier town—Palin initially campaigned “door-to-door asking for people's votes, pulling the kids through the snow on a sled” (*Going Rogue* 64). In 2008 she told Republicans the following:

[Todd and I were] busy raising our kids. I was serving as the team mom and coaching some basketball on the side. I got involved in the PTA and then was elected to the city council, and then elected mayor of my hometown, where my agenda was to stop wasteful spending, and cut property taxes, and put the people first. (Palin, “Transcript McCain”)

True or not, it does not matter. It is how her political brand, run from the kitchen table surrounded by toddlers, taps into an older “domestic” or “sentimental” doctrine of the “feminine” rooted in American frontier mythologies (Riley 3). The sentimentalization of family life proposed after the American Civil War (1861-65) saw, claims Coontz, “the triumph of the nuclear family ideal and the spread of private morality ... [in which] family relations became less a preparation ground or supporting structure for civic responsibility than

a *substitute* for such responsibility” (97, 98). Palin's conservative strand of feminism can thus be traced at least as far back as the “turn toward home” of the mid-nineteenth century (Coontz 96-106). Glenda Riley describes this accordingly: “As defenders of home and hearth, women would protect traditional values, but they should not interfere in any essential way with the developments that were catapulting America toward prosperity and power” (3).

Fast-forward a century and a half and Palin re-imagines this socially conservative, free-market message in the age of austerity. Our latter day frontier's mom may buy her couture from a consignment store in Anchorage and keep the “home's freezer stocked with the wild seafood we caught ourselves” (Palin, *Going Rogue* 133), but the idea of woman as an evangelical moral saviour of American capitalism and its values holds as strong as it did when first identified in the late-nineteenth century by the likes of Catharine Beecher.

Core to the Palin message is fiscal policy.

In Juneau, the one thing that's required during the session is passing a budget, and that one task is the subject of endless hours of discussion, deliberation, bartering, and whining. Again I was thankful for my training grounds as a mom [sic]. (Palin, *Going Rogue* 148)

The economy is an uncomplicated macrocosm of the family accounts. As

Jonathan Rabin put it, “What is good for the family is good for the nation, and vice versa; and the idea that the family should spend its way out of recession is an affront to common sense, conservative or otherwise.” Palin trades heavily on her experience as a busy working mom trying to make the family budget stretch as far as it can. It is an aspect of her “ordinary celebrity” (Ouellette 189) that reinvents the way in which postfeminist popular culture extols female independence and women’s powers expressed through consumption practices. In step with the financial downturn and age of asceticism, there is a revision in thinking, whereby female empowerment is about taking control of the economic well being of the family. Thrift and prudence are central to the Palin image of self-reliance and enterprise. “My family is frugal,” she writes. “We clip coupons. We shop at Costco. We buy diapers in bulk and generic peanut butter. We don’t have full-time nannies or housekeepers or drivers” (*Going Rogue* 315). These remarks were made in response to a headline story that the Republican National Committee (RNC) had spent \$150,000 “to clothe and accessorize the vice presidential candidate and her family” (Cummings). Palin was quick to set the records straight in order “to defend my ethics and my family,” as she put it (*Going Rogue* 317). It is through these subtle relays between familial alliances and the social body, that one arguably sees Palin at her boldest. Late in 2009, covering her three-week book tour of 14 states in the American heartland, Paul Harris reports on

how the “devoted” and “enthusiastic” crowds (almost all white) saw Palin as “St. Sarah of American Capitalism” (2009 32) with her message of fiscal conservatism. It is a discourse on family, modern capitalism, and the social order that “holds up well, owning no doubt to how easy it is to uphold. A solemn historical and political guarantee protects it” (Foucault 5). Palin has neither formulated anything new to say about the financial crisis nor invented any new fiscal solutions; it is about practical commonsense and hard graft. It is about liberating women through entrepreneurship. Her “intimate” staged performances may sit uncomfortably within the conventional political structure, but how her political celebrity deploys systems of alliance (parental and matrimonial) firmly linked to the economy “engenders a continual extension of areas and forms of control” (Foucault 106). In a word, how the Palin (maternal) body produces and consumes makes visible a socio-economic body, which has, in turn, the function of nurturing and perpetuating.

Palin reanimates the spectre of nineteenth-century womanhood as “guardian of morality and virtue” (Riley 3) in her run for public office—with anti-abortion, pro-guns, creationism, and anti-gay marriage stances defining the new “moral prowess” (Riley 5). Mid-nineteenth-century women’s activism championed equal voting rights and economic freedoms, but temperance and religious faith were also central to the ideas of Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-

1902). The campaigning of these early feminists reveals that it was not about refuting the nuclear family, but shifting power within it. Being a wife and mother equipped women with a superior sense of morality and this echo is heard in Palin. In describing how she navigated the squabbles and machinations of the Republican primary, she wrote, “It wasn’t the last time I’d find that there’s no better training ground for politics than motherhood” (*Going Rogue* 115).

Such philosophy is further witnessed in how Palin weaves seamlessly the duty of family with the obligations of high political office, as if her responsibility to one defines her relation to the other:

Just before I left the hotel room to hit the convention stage, on the evening of September 3, I noticed that Trig needed changing. I also noticed that we had run out of diapers. After a frantic, hotel-wide search, someone found a stack, and the last thing I did before heading down to give the biggest speech of my life [accepting the vice-president nomination] was to change the baby.

It’s the kind of thing that keeps you grounded.

(Palin, *Going Rogue* 24)

Such an autobiography of individual ambition combined with domestic routine and parental responsibility not only filters the moral dilemma of a highly competitive, self-serving run for high office, but also represents a technique

of modern power relations. No longer are private and public spheres separate, with rigid divisions of gendered labour, but rather, they are deeply entangled, where power is exercised through “a plurality of resistances” (Foucault 96) in the interplay of alliances between the two—private/public; domestic/office; mother/public official.

Making motherhood an explicit part of her appeal, however, inspired less solidarity than genuine confusion, impassioned dispute, and partisan snipping. It was a debate conducted less between the sexes, than one that divided women. Websites like Mommy Tracked (“managing the chaos of modern motherhood,” reads its tagline) and MOMocrats, tried desperately to draw lessons from this historic moment. Almost immediately the debate turned away from foreign and domestic policy and into a referendum on working mothers. On the one hand there was a palpable sense of relief that at long last here was a new type of woman in politics, neither the “coiffed demure stay-at-home wi[fe]” (read: Laura Bush), nor the “angry, conflicted wom[a]n” (read: Hillary Rodham Clinton) (MommyTracked). “Sarah Palin’s uncontrollable brood, her zest for work, and her feisty tone resonate with working moms who rely on moxie to get through each and every rockin’ roller coaster day of working motherhood” (read: you and me) (MommyTracked). Stories of her balancing family, work, and the campaign trial became central to any conversation about Palin. Here

finally was “a working mom like us who juggles the messy chaos of ‘having it all’” (MommyTracked).

There was, however, a nagging suspicion that Palin made motherhood *look* far too easy. She apparently returned to work the day after giving birth to her daughter, Piper (“I took her by work when I checked in on City Hall,” [Palin, *Going Rogue* 76]). She signed legislation into law at the kitchen table with a child in her lap. She worked 24/7 while somehow juggling childcare and with a husband often away from home (Todd Palin worked for BP in the North Slope oil fields). With Trig in a sling she sat through meetings, even breastfeeding unseen during conference calls. MommyTracked sensed Republican subterfuge at work:

I can almost hear the new Republican retort to the building blocks of working motherhood: more plentiful, afford quality childcare; healthcare reimbursement for birth control; more generous FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act] regulations; and incentives for companies to offer extended leaves, part-time positions, and flexible work schedules. What is the big deal, ladies? If Sarah Palin can go without those frills, then can’t all of you? (MommyTracked)

Palin *lives* the Republican message: A woman can make whatever life choices she wants because she has civil and legal equality under the law and is in no need of preferential treatment. It is

a flat refusal to see women as “victims” needing systematic protection. The flipside of not wanting to recognise women as victims, however, is a failure to understand structural causes of disadvantage as well as the collective nature of discrimination. Motherhood functions as the norm. Nothing more is required of it than to define its social value. In short, motherhood constitutes a discourse that is morally useful, socially (re)productive, and politically conservative.

Still, even Palin seems more than aware of the limits between the qualified and disqualified maternal body in politics. As reported on more than one occasion, she went “to extraordinary lengths to ensure [the arrival of Trig] would not compromise her work” (Kantor, Zernike and Einhorn 2008). Few people knew that she was expecting her fifth child until the third trimester. There is always the political to consider, as Palin told *People* magazine, “I didn’t want Alaskans to fear I would not be able to fulfill my duties” (qtd, In Kantor, Zernike and Einhorn 2008). Unfair sexism or fair game—there is no getting away from the spectacle of the maternal body distracting the political. The heavily pregnant body is saturated with sexuality, which Palin hid “with winter clothes and a few cleverly draped scarves” (Palin, *Going Rogue* 191). “[No] one saw my girth or suspected I was pregnant,” she recalls (*Going Rogue* 191). When she finally decided to announce the pregnancy to the Anchorage press, there was an uneasy slippage between the female body and social one.

“Hey guys,” I said with a grin, “I wanted to let you know that the First Family is expanding.”

They all just looked at me. Dead silence

Okay ... let me try something else.

“Remember when I promised to ‘deliver’ for Alaska?”

Nothing ...

Finally, I gave up on the jokes and went direct: “Guys, I’m pregnant. I’m having a baby in two months!”

Three mouths fell open, and three pairs of eyes dropped straight to my stomach. (Palin, *Going Rogue* 192)

True or not, the story highlights (and bearing in mind it is told in a political memoir) a perceived shift in alliances from the public sphere to the private familial space. “Delivering” for Alaska is not only about fishery policies and economic growth, but also about a female body and its fecundity. Silence shrouds it and speaks of the lingering suspicion that the pregnant woman has no place in public political life. Eyes are no longer focused on the politics, but fall silently on the swelling abdomen. No wonder Palin kept “mum” about leaking amniotic fluids during a keynote address at an oil and gas conference in Dallas (Palin, *Going Rogue* 193), but more than willing months later to tell her story of the premature birth and three-days of maternity leave to reporters while installing a travel crib on the campaign bus. The political myth embodied in the maternal ideal has more value than the corporeal reality of bodily discomfort and the difficulties of the flesh.

This intensification on Palin and the (re)productive female body as an object of knowledge and element in power relations exploded further once her candidacy was announced. Forget John McCain. As soon as Palin climbed on stage with her wholesome, hard-working family the media became *all* about Sarah. Figures produced by the Pew Research Center (2008) claim that Palin effectively squeezed out the other stories and dominated US news reports. She featured in 60 per cent of the campaign stories and received far more media attention than McCain. In keeping with Erika Falk’s findings on the media bias toward women in presidential campaigns, much of that coverage focused on feminine traits associated with “mothering, reproduction, and emotion (the private sphere)” (Falk 53). Mother of five and married to her high school sweetheart (who worked on the Alaskan oilfield, commercially fishes, and is the four-time champion of the Iron Dog, a cross-country snow machine race), her fertility and legitimate marriage were endlessly reiterated and recycled whenever Palin got a mention, as if nothing else mattered. Her sexuality took shape, conceived of as a technology of power that was firmly located in familial alliances. This is where she (her body, her fecundity) comes to have value, not only in regulating her sexuality, but also through making it useful as a new tactic of power on the campaign trail.

A central feature of the press coverage focused less on what Palin said (verbal gaffs notwithstanding), but what she

looked like. This constant surveillance and policing of her image—what she wore, how her hair was styled—corroborates Falk’s research. Stories (and always accompanied by pictures) interminably rehearsed how she had entered a local beauty pageant in her small Alaskan town of Wasilla and won it, including Miss Congeniality. The Miss Wasilla Scholarship paid her college tuition, and in the following year she was crowned runner-up in the Miss Alaska contest, plus Miss Congeniality. Political campaigns are to a large degree a high-stakes image game, but even so: the Palin image holds up remarkably well on the front covers that sell images of what Rebecca Walker calls “impossible contrivance[s] of perfect womanhood” (xxxiii). It is where her looks can be dissected in infinitesimal detail, her fashions endlessly discussed and critiqued. In a previous article I observed the following:

Intoxicatingly presented, persuasively offered as saying something important about female accomplishment, her [objectification] is embedded in and through dominant norms defining the feminine self, her body (slender, athletic, attractive, youthful—and not forgetting that trademark smile), her lifestyle choices (wife, “hockey mom”, working mother). Never mind the lurid headlines, or that she cannot help but polarise the US electorate with her political beliefs, she *looked* perfect. (McCabe, “In the Feminine Ideal”).

Such intense focus meant that quite soon Palin became subject to another kind of objectification, translating her, as Kira Cochrane astutely observes, into something of a porn star. Images ranged from “sexy Sarah Palin” Halloween costumes to a blow-up doll and the now famed doctored picture of Palin in a stars-and-strips bikini toting a rifle (which went viral almost instantly after her nomination). This kind of sexism underlined, for Cochrane at least, “the fact that any woman entering public life runs the risk of being reduced to the most basic female stereotype that springs to mind” (17). Developing this line of enquiry further still, the fetishistic and mischievously tampered-with images of Palin also represent what often fails to be entirely controlled in relation to the female body and sex. In the way in which her body became “thoroughly saturated with sexuality” (Foucault 104)—beauty contestant, five pregnancies—her sex became at one level detached from its systems of familial alliance and jurisdiction. Instead it passed into the public sphere, which codified her flesh and pathologised her body as fantasy and erotic desire. Opened up unreservedly to endless and unremitting media scrutiny turned her body-as-image into trivial titillation and taboo. The pornification of Palin, and in particular ‘her’ wearing an American flag bikini brandishing weaponry, reveals how aspects of the Palin image (particularly centered on class and region) escape the alliances which empower her. As Patrick Kinsman wrote: “The Photoshopped Palin image is not about feminism or equality, but

sex objects with weapons—whether it is critique or not.” This ironic image aimed to parody Palin’s “abstinence-only stance and her support of the Iraq war” (Kinsman), but with its purpose no longer given over exclusively to (re)production and familial alliance, her body is deprived of its privilege. It becomes perverse and disqualifies her in the process.

Few however came to her defense: neither Republicans nor Democrats. Columnist Nick Cohen voiced his surprise about how liberal journalists almost unflinchingly and immediately turned her family into “an object of sexual disgust: inbred rednecks who had stumbled out of *Deliverance*” (34). Not even feminists could quite muster enough indignation about the misogyny aimed at Palin. She indeed proves a difficult woman to defend. From the story of how she as governor supported law enforcement agencies charging for rape kits to her pro-life values, Palin’s views stand at an alarming distance from any discernible women’s rights agenda. As Jessica Valenti put it, “Palin is alleging sexism ... while simultaneously relying on sexist notions of women in politics.”

“A race that began as *The West Wing* now looks alarmingly like *Desperate Housewives*,” declared Jonathan Freedland in the *Guardian*. Rarely has a politician provoked such an avalanche of media and followed so swiftly by scandal and Internet rumour. Speculation quickly gathered momentum of a fake pregnancy and

a son that was really her grandson. However, it was not long before another, more prurient media story took its place. In the era of 24-hour cable news and social networking nothing remains secret for long. Only days after Palin was nominated as the Republican vice-presidential choice, news broke that her unwed 17-year-old daughter was five-months pregnant by her high-school boyfriend, Levi Johnson, 18. “Who wants to talk about boring policy when we can talk about teens and sex and pregnancy?” lamented Rebecca Traister (“Palin”). The Republicans immediately turned the unplanned teen pregnancy into a living testament of Palin’s anti-abortion, pro-life stance. But in the heartland of America where puritanical values are the norm and unwed mothers unpopular, the Republican message sallied forth that the young couple were in love, committed to having the baby, and would soon marry. News of the pregnancy registered widely with the public according to the Pew Research Center (2008), which reported that 69 per cent knew about it, therefore making it one of the top campaign stories—and further drowning out the other political messages. It did in fact appear, as Traister rued, that this history-making moment for women had become hijacked by the “*uterine activity*” (“Palin”) of the Palin clan. An image of this Alaskan family as a “hotbed of constant sexual incitement” (Foucault 109) thus emerged. It became an object of intense media obsession and (pleasurable) attraction, a site of “discovered” sexual secrets, whereby this family had to open itself

unreservedly to endless outside scrutiny. In so doing, this process called Palin's mothering into question in the analysis it made of her.

Such headlines have the potential to torpedo any political campaign. If anything, however, the news that Bristol was expecting her first child initially helped her mother's campaign. When the pregnancy was first announced it contributed to a 4 per cent Republican lead in the polls. Palin may not have personally approved the official message (according to her memoir), but nonetheless later wrote: "Todd and I were proud of Bristol's *selfless* decision to have her baby and her determination to deal with difficult circumstances by taking *responsibility* for her actions" (*Going Rogue* 234; emphasis mine). Young motherhood thus emerges as a responsible social decision that is preferable to abortion. It is presented as a wholesome alternative to termination, an ethical choice that speaks of kinship and familial values rather than family breakdown. What did emerge with the Bristol pregnancy, however, was a broader cultural attack on women's rights from both sides of the political spectrum. On the liberal left, the issue was used to highlight the value of a woman's right to choose, but also stressed the need for proper access to birth control and sex education, budgets for which had been drastically reduced because of the Bush administration policy of funding abstinence-only programmes. On the right, the teen pregnancy was exploited to promote

the socially conservative agenda of the strong evangelical base.

No critique of Palin is possible without understanding the culture wars raging in the United States. Throughout the presidential campaign (and beyond), she remained a highly visible public figure with those social conservative Republican values perceptibly inscribed across her maternal body—her handicapped son testimony to her pro-life convictions. She *is*, in fact, her pro-family, pro-life, anti-abortion convictions. So powerful is that maternal image that nothing more needs to be said. Some time ago I wrote about Palin and how her media image almost mesmerizingly represents a "feminine ideal, which is compelling enough to psychically entangle us and from which we are not entirely able to free ourselves" (McCabe, "In the Feminine Ideal"). When we talk of Sarah Palin, we cannot seem to stop talking about her gender—her procreative abilities, her pro-life choices and anti-abortion stance, her balancing motherhood with politics. It is for these reasons that she so seductively embodies, what Rebecca Traister describes as, "a form of feminine power that is utterly digestible" ("Zombie Feminists"). This power is not merely about partisan party politics (and rarely does it translate into something real), but nonetheless remains profoundly political. It is "utterly digestible" because what she represents exacts a keen normalising hold over us, shaped and "inscribed" as it is with the imprint of prevailing

historical and political forms of discursive power that manage and animate our perception and experience of what that might mean.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Between 2008 and the following presidential cycle in 2012 one could not open a newspaper or switch on the television without seeing the many faces of Sarah Palin—politician, celebrity, TV pundit, reality TV star.

Laurie Ouellette observes the following:

More than any political figure to date, Palin translates the traditional voter-political relationship into the logic of fandom and branding. She invites her rightwing political constituents to track and consume her appearances and products across print, electronic, and digital media, and she thus directly profits from their participation in convergence culture. (190)

Palin looks comfortable sitting alongside her two daughters chatting with Oprah Winfrey, or touring the American heartlands in a bus with her family, signing copies of her book in places like Grand Rapids, Michigan, as she tests the waters for a presidential run. She even had her own reality TV show, *Sarah Palin's Alaska* (TLC, 2010-11), in which fish, family, and faith figured prominently. We may know that the Tea Party refers to the 1773 events in Boston when colonists defied the British over tea taxation, with their direct action (dumping tea into the harbour) effectively igniting the American Revolution. But, with our postmodern historical amnesia we might somehow be fooled. Tea Party gatherings look more like family picnics than political rallies, and it is where Palin reminds her eager audience “there is no greater

service than mothering” (*Going Rogue* 342). Palin may stand as an outsider, a lone voice on the edges of her political party, but she is always “inside” power. Her interchange of sexuality and familial alliance, charged with parental and conjugal obligations, speaks directly to a moral and socio-economic consciousness. Her performance of mothering and motherhood forms “a political ordering of life” (Foucault 123) while affirming the importance of that self in maintaining it. It is a discourse that transmits and is an effect of power, but it is also limited, making it possible to thwart what she represents as a consequence.

When I started writing this paper following the symposium “Media and Mothers Matters” at the University of Winchester in October 2011 Palin had yet to announce whether or not she was going to run for the presidency. Soon after Palin declared that she would not and another woman was electrifying the radical right of the Republican Party. Michele Bachmann, who announced her run for the White House in June 2011, eclipsed Palin as the new darling of the Tea Party. She was an evangelical, whose husband ran a controversial Christian counselling service. Like Palin, Bachmann also made enormous political capital from her role as mother to a large brood: five biological children and more than 20 foster children. However, Bachmann never embodied the feminine ideal in quite the same way as Palin and she soon dropped out of the race—along with her nonsensical ideas (such as

blaming President Barack Obama for swine flu).

Traditional boundaries between political campaign, media event, and celebrity become blurred with Sarah Palin; or, as she would put it: “You betcha.” Since her surprise nomination in 2008 Palin has consistently confounded pundits and set perceived political wisdom on its head. Yet her particular austerity brand of post feminism does not unite voters and her choice to combine motherhood with a demanding job failed to win the White House. It is a question of the politics of the body, subject to reproductive function, but also an entire machinery that both qualifies and disqualifies the female body dependent on its uses. She may *look* like her socially fiscal conservative agenda, but that does not translate into her *looking* like a leader. Carol Moseley Braun, who ran for president in 2004 but was knocked out in the first round, said it best when she stated: “The script hasn’t been written yet. The visual don’t exist for a woman in leadership” (qtd. In Goldenberg 43). In looking at how Palin politicized mothering and the mother as an ideal in political life, this article has offered insight into why we are still waiting.

Image Notes

Fig.1. Photograph: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images, Sarah Palin and her family at the Republican convention in 2008: Track, Bristol, her then-boyfriend Levi Johnston, Willow, Piper, Todd and Sarah, holding Trig, 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/sep/03/mckinsey-nhs-sarah-palin>

[theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/sep/03/mckinsey-nhs-sarah-palin](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2009/sep/03/mckinsey-nhs-sarah-palin)

Fig.2. Photograph: Shannon Stapleton/Reuters, *Sarah Palin hugs her son Trig, who has Down’s syndrome, after her address to the 2008 Republican National Convention, 2008.* <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2125458/Clare-Short-facing-criticism-use-word-mongol-Radio-4-interview-children-Downs-syndrome.html>

Fig. 3. Photograph: Anonymous user “am0n.” *The Girl and The Gun—Sarah Palin photoshopped.* <http://www.flickr.com/photos/97897149@N00/2818816914>

Fig. 4. USA Weekend, Cover story: *Sarah Palin and Family*, May 6, 2010. <http://www.usaweekend.com/article/20100507/HOME/100507001/>

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