

HILLARY-HATING AND THE POLITICS OF UGLY MEMES

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ABSTRACT

AS A POLITICIAN WHO BECAME FAMOUS FOR BEING ANOTHER POLITICIAN'S WIFE, HILLARY CLINTON HAS LONG BEEN A LIGHTNING ROD FOR AMERICAN FEARS (AND HOPES) ABOUT THE STATE OF GENDER. ALTHOUGH MOST COMMENTATORS AGREE THAT SHE HAS BEEN HATED UBIQUITOUSLY SINCE 1992, SCHOLARSHIP ON HILLARY-HATING ALMOST ALWAYS CONSIDERS IT A MALE IMPULSE. THIS PAPER ASKS WHY RIGHT-WING AMERICAN FEMINISTS HATE HILLARY CLINTON. THE AUTHOR STUDIED "WOMEN FOR TRUMP" FACEBOOK PAGES, FOCUSING ON MEMES THAT PRESENT THE PRO-CHOICE CLINTON AS A MONSTROUS (ANTI-)MOTHER. HATRED OF CLINTON IS NOT PRODUCED BY 'REASONABLE' PUBLIC DEBATE, THIS PAPER ARGUES; MORE IMPORTANT ARE THE POTENT AFFECTIVE CHARGES CLINTON'S IMAGE CARRIES. A 'MEMETIC' ANALYSIS IS USED TO LOOK AT THE AFFECTIVE OBJECT-NESS OF CLINTON'S IMAGE: WHERE IT TRAVELS, WITH WHAT IMPETUS, AND WHAT RESPONSES IT PROVOKES. AFFECT PLAYS A CRUCIAL ROLE IN BOTH SHARING MEMES ONLINE AND THE WORKINGS OF MISOGYNY AND RACISM IN RIGHT-WING WOMEN'S PURSUIT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM.

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Introduction

Googling images of “Hillary” is a disturbing experience. I discovered this as a child, after misspelling the popstar Hilary Duff’s name (two ‘l’s instead of one) and, thinking she was the only famous “Hillary,” dropping her surname. If you search now for images older than eight or ten years, you will get an idea of the grotesque collage I saw: exaggerated goitres, deeply wrinkled scowls, and clownish grins, sometimes with fangs dripping blood; bulging eyes, often reddened to look demonic or alien-green; and more complicated photoshop projects such as the devil-horned woman riding a donkey with weird sexual accoutrements, or tied to a stake above a burning fire. A few years after I saw these, in 2008, Hillary Clinton appeared on the radio and television again and entered my maturing political awareness. *An American presidential candidate?* The thought of Clinton put a bad taste in my mouth, and her campaign seemed a little ludicrous.

That experience testifies to something of the scale and power of *Hillary-hating*, a public feeling of great consequence, and one that various media (including user-generated) have circulated and cultivated. Almost every study on Clinton says something to this effect: as a politician who became famous as a political wife, she has long been a lightning rod for common fears (and hopes) about the state of gender. So often in one fevered spotlight or another, Clinton has also been a focus for many studies of women in political media, beginning with her husband’s first presidential campaign in 1992 (Brown, 1997; Gardetto, 1997; Ritchie, 2013; Templin, 1999; Thomas, 1997). Naturally, work of this sort abounds post-2016 (Bordo, 2017; Weinhold & Bodkin, 2017; Wilz, 2016). As well as studying sexist news framing of Clinton, critics have looked at the misogyny directed at her from male liberals, namely supporters of Barack Obama in 2008 (Ritchie, 2013) and Bernie Sanders in 2016 (Albrecht, 2017; Bordo, 2017). Over the decades, others have studied Hillary-hating as a right-wing masculinist practice (Faludi, 1992, 1999, 2016; Ritchie, 2013; Templin, 1999; Thomas, 1997).

Women’s Hillary-hating, however, has largely eluded critical attention. This paper is based on analysis of the six largest “Women for Trump” (hereafter WFT) Facebook groups, which, altogether, have more than 520,000 subscribers. I looked at WFT Facebook posts and comments during the four weeks straddling the 2016 election (Oct 25 to Nov 22), and also took a cursory look at posts from up to eight months prior. These groups are all open to any Facebook users, so all content I quote in this paper is freely accessible at the time of writing. The conclusions I draw here do not necessarily apply to every member of this 520,000 strong group, but rather represent the group’s dominant concerns, as the posts I studied all had a high degree of positive engagement (hundreds or thousands of comments). Posts and comments were archived and coded according to dominant themes, including Hillary-hating and anti-abortion or “pro-life.”

WFT frequently describes themselves as feminists, and although they hate Hillary Clinton with every bit as much venom as many men, their Hillary-hating is not reducible to the sort of sexism often described in the studies cited above – a sexism rooted in basic fear of female power. WFT frequently say that they want a female president, but that Clinton is the *wrong sort of woman for the job*. Their explanations of her wrongness are saturated with feeling – despair, disgust, even paranoia. This paper argues that Hillary-hating is not driven by the sort of rational engagement with issues citizens tend to believe they perform. Rather, Hillary-hating freewheels around the intimate public (Berlant, 1997) of American politics as an indomitable *emotional rejection* of her.

This paper maps the history of Hillary-hating by showing how Clinton’s wrongness has congealed into images of her that I call “ugly,” a term I use broadly to mean everything from plain or unbeautiful to grotesque, monstrous, dirty, and, as in a Judeo-Christian war, evil – i.e., the enemy. Considering Clinton as the monstrous enemy of beauty allows us to understand how and why women participate in Hillary-hating. As I have argued elsewhere (Blackett, 2017), WFT are motivated to support Trump because they feel thwarted in their efforts to build good (and beautiful) lives by Barack Obama, along with all the others who comprise the so-called liberal ‘establishment’. This feeling is produced by what Arlie Russel Hochschild (2016) calls a “feels-as-if story”, a story people *feel to be true* that explains the political world. According to WFT’s feels-as-if story, Clinton is the epitome of the oppressive liberal ‘establishment’, which WFT feel does not value them, and instead values racial/sexual minorities and migrants – a priority proven by affirmative action policies that seem, to WFT, to breach their sacred rights as citizens of the free world. Trump’s promise to “make America great again” means, to them, that the rights they feel they have lost will be restored, their access to the American Dream assured.

Part and parcel of longing for the Dream is working to preserve the heteronormative family, the white-coded unit that promises women social validation as mothers or mothers-to-be. This paper argues that WFT's Hillary-hating works to defend that familial ideal from threats they perceive Clinton to pose. This defence is motivated by WFT's fantasy of better living, and it relies heavily on ugly depictions of Clinton that work to repel the viewer on an affective register, without meaningful recourse to conventional political reasoning. WFT's Hillary-hating serves oppressive ideologies, but does not itself function according to ideology (i.e. it is not propelled by anti-feminism or anti-socialism). Hillary-hating should be understood as a function and product of the affective politics of ugliness.

Media Affect and the Meme

When I tried to understand my own Hillary-hating, I came up against a theoretical problem. Media critics tend to adopt a logic of *representation*, which dictates that bits of discourse – images, words – have ideas hidden beneath the surface, and in those ideas lies the power of media to produce effects. We can explain the gendered problems in a text, for instance, by showing that it *contains* sexist ideas that get released by reading and thus contribute to sexism in general. Take the images I saw and examine them for ideological content, and you will probably make links to old pillars of European patriarchy: the tendency for mythologies across time to cast powerful women as monstrous; the loathing of aging female bodies; the 'double bind' on women leaders, fated to be either femininely incompetent or competent but, for that reason, pathologically unfeminine (Jamieson, 1995). These lines of inquiry are useful because they tell us that monstrous depictions of powerful women have a patriarchal history – that they are consistent with, and may have some responsibility for creating, systems of inequality. You would likely miss the real *sticking point* though, the place where Hillary-hating images acquire power in the present. Those images provoked a response *in my body*. The logic of representation doesn't help to explain how a text can bring politics to life in the everyday worlds of readers, as happened for me, revolted by Hillary Clinton after encountering her image. I was raised by a feminist and amongst enthusiastic respect for Helen Clark, whose nine years as New Zealand's Prime Minister spanned most of my youth and whom I regularly defended against the kids who mocked her for being masculine; in ideological terms, I was resistant to misogynistic ideas about powerful women. Thus 'ideas' don't explain the potency of the Hillary-hating images at all.

Representation matters here in the sense that ugly images of women tend to repel and beautiful images of women charm, and these affects provoke actions that are often consistent with and contribute to the oppression of women. Those affective movements – being repulsed or being charmed – (re)create power relations in real space and time. In her theory of affective economies, Sara Ahmed (2004) explains how, as emotions circulate through political space, sticking to some bodies and sliding over others, we are incited to "turn toward" some things as good political objects and away from others as political ills or bad objects. WFT's Facebook groups are spaces of heady affective economics, where movements of feeling are both effected for and reflective of members' political orientations in the wider context. Turning away from political bodies enacts a power relationship that happens spatially, a movement best captured by the term 'marginalisation'. Some bodies are moved to the edge of things – figuratively, sometimes literally,¹ pushed to the margins of nations – as the (normative) majority turns away from them. Thus affective economies function according to racialised and gendered hierarchies that, as in Lauren Berlant's (1997) conception, permeate the intimate public of American politics.

My feelings about the images I saw turned me away from Hillary Clinton and, had I been an American voter, could well have influenced my choice later. My turning is a political act; my repulsion, a political feeling. This politics is not *contained* in the image but created where the viewer and the image meet. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) said that:

what is important in a text is not what it means, but what it does and incites to do. What it does: the charge of affect it contains and transmits. What it incites to do: the metamorphoses of this potential energy into other things – other texts but also paintings, photographs, film sequences, *political actions* [...] (p. 9-10, my emphasis)

What do ugly pictures of Hillary Clinton do and incite viewers to do? How do they move through space with guttural viscosity that sticks to bodies and provokes action? As Vivian Sobchak (2004) points out in *Carnal Thoughts*, the bodies of audiences are absent from most visual media studies. Bodies tend to feature as the (usually female) *objects* of text. Media viewers are fleshy, too – desiring beings who act accordingly, not vessels waiting to be filled with ideological stuff.

This paper's attention to the affects of images is focused by a theoretical tool handed to me by the Internet in that first encounter with Hillary-hating. Memetics is a pseudo-scientific cultural studies framework introduced by Richard Dawkins (1976). Although his work is obviously pre-internet, 'meme' has become the popular name for "units of pop culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" (Shifman, 2013, p. 367). Affect is key to this process because people are more likely to share memes that make them feel something strongly (Guadagno et al, 2013). Dawkins' original (offline) meme is to culture what the gene is to nature: a code-like bit, such as a fashion trend or a manner of speech, which is invested in its own survival and moves between bodies, 'living' in and off humans. A 'fit' meme, one that spreads easily, becomes more than the sum of individual acts or utterances. Thinking of Hillary-hating as a meme allows me to consider all its iterations – the jokes, everyday talk, political cartoons, tabloid images, news framings, Internet chat, and image-sharing of the last quarter century – as parts of a nebulous whole, a network of affective agencies, that resulted in the destruction of Clinton's would-be presidency.

Davi Johnson (2007) theorised a version of memetics for studies of political rhetoric in a bid to loosen that subject's dependence on the logic of representation. Instead of questing beneath the surfaces of discourse for concealed meanings, memetics looks at the surface itself, the 'object-ness' of discourse: the places it travels, the things it carries, and the responses it provokes along the way, so that "meaning is thus just one possible effect of memetic activity, not its animating force" (Johnson, 2007, p. 38). Johnson offers the word "discrimination" to demonstrate memetics' usefulness for thinking about politics. In purportedly post-race America, it is common for the average white person to oppose racial discrimination *and* to oppose affirmative action, because he thinks people of colour get too much public assistance, and racial inequality is a consequence of the laxities of 'welfare queens' and related stereotypes. This person does not secretly know he is racist and oppose 'discrimination' only to please a liberal audience (were this true, he would also say he supports affirmative action). He knows (*feels*) that 'discriminating' is bad (also 'racism'), because it is something uncaring people do, and he considers himself to be fair and kind. A memetic analysis would not dismiss this as fallacious thinking. Instead, it would point to the troubling conspiracy of negative affective charges carried by both 'discrimination' *and* 'affirmative action' (also, an umbrella term often associated with the latter, 'political correctness'). In Trumpian rhetoric, this affective contradiction grants permission for white people to bemoan things such as the criminality of Latinx immigrants *and* to promote 'equality', without experiencing any sense of contradiction. This logically incongruous affective dynamic explains the persistent ubiquity and earnestness of the disclaimer 'I am not a racist, but...'

The following three sections, arranged in a loosely chronological shape, layer past studies of Clinton in the media and public opinion on top of my central question: how do right-wing women participate in Hillary-hating? My study of Hillary-hating's history was from the outset a study of a monstrous image, where Clinton's wrongness seems to inhere in her body – how it is depicted and described – so that her wrongness, as both First Lady and presidential candidate, need not be justified according to the normal rules of political reasonableness. A WFT member who hates Hillary Clinton is not necessarily sexist (*but...*). She sees a witch-green image of Clinton's face peering out of the darkness, or holding up bloodied hands to the camera and confessing to murder (examples to come), and she recoils. She does not think, *I agree with that sexist ideology*. Paying attention to the affective surfaces of images, their provocations more than their ideological or symbolic content, allows us to appreciate not what these images of Clinton *mean* but what they *do* in shaping political realities.

The Castrating First Lady

With Stephen Ducat's (2004) book chapter "Vaginas with Teeth and Castrating First Ladies: Fantasies of Feminine Danger from Eve to Hillary Clinton", we pick up a thread that links many iterations of the Hillary-hating meme: the woman is prevented from attaining power because of a fear that if she gets it, men lose it – that female power can only be had via a male disempowerment that Ducat, following Freud, frames as castration. I want to start my retrospective on Hillary-hating with the castration threat for three reasons. Firstly, as an account of a widespread psychic phenomenon, the psychoanalytic theory of castration anxiety allows me to conceptualise in some detail the emotional relationship between images and viewer psyches. Castration anxiety is important here less as something symbolically represented in the images I analyse (although it is represented in them), and more as the likely provocation or *punctum* (Barthes, 1981) of the images. Secondly, telling the history of Hillary-hating necessitates beginning with the many studies that frame it as a male feeling. And finally, even though it is a male feeling, castration

anxiety turns out to be similar to the feminine Hillary-hating I'll describe soon. Both male and female Hillary-hating, for fear that Clinton threatens a great disturbance in the social order, coagulates into images that figure the threat she poses as thoroughly, corporally, *intimate*.

Castration anxiety is the fear of emasculation. First theorised by Freud, this fear has its origins in childhood when a boy first fears his penis will be damaged or removed. "Usually it is from women that the threat emanates," Freud writes (1961 [1924], p. 174), partly because the prohibition of masturbation (which threatens the life of the penis) is usually done by mothers, and partly because the boy sees in the body of a girl or woman that castration seems to be real. The phallus comes to signify power and has a referential relation to the penis, the original thing boys have that girls don't. In a phallic economy where possession = power, girls/women are powerless; to get power, women must steal it from – castrate – men. The castration threat is thus literal and symbolic, and, for Freud and for Ducat, the root of men's lived experience of sexual difference.

One mythological castrator is the *vagina dentata* (vaginal teeth), which has appeared in various forms throughout the history of both classical myth and the horror genre, and links the fear of phallic vulnerability to monstrous female bodies. Ducat describes a *Spy* magazine story that compared First Lady Clinton to Lorena Bobbitt, who famously avenged herself on her abusive husband by cutting his penis off. This comparison responds to the ubiquitous question, *what is Hillary hiding?* The answer: (symbolic) vaginal teeth, meaning that she wants to – and if unchecked, she will – cut off your (or some universal Man's) phallus. *Spy's* comparison conflates Clinton's desire for power with Bobbitt's desire for revenge in a potent figure of generalised female monstrosity.

Most content collected in 1990s studies of Clinton in news media also depicts her as a castrator. Darlaine Gardetto's (1997) study of *New York Times* 1992 election coverage organised content into three themes, the biggest of which Gardetto called "her strength = his weakness." Those stories implied that Hillary's skills were necessarily detrimental to Bill's; if she has power she must have stolen it from him, as it does not inhere in her body. Political cartoons collected by Charlotte Templin (1999) depict this perversion in the First Couple as a corporeal one: she is larger, stronger, and seemingly more lethal (carrying weapons or, once, becoming a shark) than Bill, who is drawn weedy or boyish or vulnerable in some other way. 'Pussy-whipped' would be a good description of Bill in those cartoons, as Hillary often has whips or chains and him at her mercy.

A telling fixation on teeth comes through in those cartoons: Clinton is depicted as a grinning shark, or her mouth is forcibly closed by a muzzle, zip, gag, or duct tape. The images you'd get if you did a Google search like mine from 2005/6 also foreground Clinton with her mouth either shockingly wide or forced shut. Her teeth and tongue seem to resonate with the fear of *vagina dentata*, the horror of female domination. It isn't surprising that this has consequences for women's voices, too, and Clinton has often been called 'shrill'. (As she said during a debate with Bernie Sanders, "I'm not [...] it's just that when women talk, some people think we're shouting"; qtd. in Bradner, 2015.) This accusation aims to silence women, just as the cartoons Templin describes both depict the threat Clinton poses *and* contain it, by increasing the viewer's dislike of her. This has broad implications: Templin writes that 1990s cartoons used Clinton as "a stick to beat feminism" with, a weapon in the popular "backlash against professional women" (pp. 21, 32). Templin's brutal metaphor suggests that the uglier the image, the greater its (bio)political force.



Figure 1

Phallic Hillary #2
(Spy, November 1995).



Figure 2

Phallic Hillary #2
(Spy, October 1996)

Another iteration of the castrating First Lady frames Clinton's power as less monstrous, for instead, her power is fetishized in the figure of a dominatrix or "phallic woman" (as Freud would have called the dominatrix – Fig. 1 – and as shown literally in Fig. 2). Endowed with a 'big secret', the phallic woman assuages castration anxiety provoked by the ominous 'lack' women embody, but she also presents a threat that women might be all-powerful after all. Typically the phallic woman is fetishized because she is feared *and* desired, and so must be restricted to sexual fantasy. For Freud, the phallic woman refers to a boy's infantile fantasy that his mother has a phallus, a fantasy boys cling to because it soothes castration fear even as it also keeps the fear alive. She is comforting and frightening because we – and boys/men especially – long for the all-powerful natal mother, but must ultimately reject her in order to join the patriarchal world.

This is not straightforward *hating*; there is desire here, too. Clinton as phallic woman animates something like the love-to-hate affect Pansy Duncan (2016) discusses in her analysis of the 'liberal tears' meme. Popular in right-wing internet circles, the liberal tears meme includes YouTube videos and other social media posts with titles such as "liberal tears are delicious," and merchandise such as mugs with "enjoying my hot cup of Liberal Tears thanks to Donald J Trump" printed on them, offering users the satisfaction of political spite with every sip (p. 517). Duncan argues that the "vampiric camp vibrating" through these meme exchanges reveals that the affective economy of the partisan divide is permeated by the intense feeling of a love-hate relationship, that this divide is "unstable and porous, criss-crossed by a wistful, inchoate desire" (p. 519). For Ahmed (2004), hate is not the opposite of love – indifference is – for love and hate both involve a heavy investment in the object of one's feeling. (Everyone knows it is easier to hate a lover than it is to forget them.) The phallic Clinton excites the closely entangled horrors and desires characteristic of phallic feeling about female power by being desirable but only as a smutty fantasy about *the wrong kind of woman* – only as a bad object, one to turn away from, even if haters stage this turning away over and over in order to keep looking.

A smutty fantasy for men, perhaps, if we're thinking heteronormatively, but WFT's Hillary-hating is not as different from this masculine feeling as its phallic root suggests. In the third section of this paper, we will see that WFT's feelings about Hillary Clinton no longer carry the obvious traces of desire evident in those Spy covers, but that WFT are just as *invested* in their feeling. Duncan situates bipartisan love-hate in a context where "the imaginative energies of voters on both sides of the aisle seem feverishly fixated, not on their own candidates and campaigns, but on those of their political opponents", so that the creators/sharers of the liberal tears meme perform a "*compulsive return* to the image of the same lachrymose liberal body they insistently condemn" (pp. 517-8, my emphases). A *feverish fixation* – the body is sweaty, obsessed. WFT's Hillary-hating is that energetic, that devoted. Later I will suggest that this is because Clinton seems just as *viscerally* wrong to Hillary-hating women as she does

to men, even though women are exempt from the castration threat. For WFT, her wrongness is even rooted in a sexualised threat akin to the violence of castration – related, though far less extensively theorised.

To that end, it is worth mentioning here that of the few studies on media audience's feelings about Clinton (as opposed to representation and joke-sharing), only one considers Hillary-hating to be an exclusively male feeling, and that was a study of men (Faludi, 1999). In most public commentary from the mid-to-late nineties, it is clear that Clinton's unpopularity crossed many lines, gendered and partisan; it is also clear that, particularly after Bill Clinton's 1996 re-election, Hillary-hating exceeded all reasonable justification. Henry Gates Jr. (1996) writes that:

like horse-racing, Hillary-hating has become one of those national pastimes which unite the élite and the lumpen. Serious accusations have, of course, been levelled against the President's wife, but it's usually what people think of her that determines the credence and the weight they give to the accusations, rather than the reverse. At times, she herself sounds at a loss to explain the level of animosity toward her. "I apparently remind some people of their mother-in-law or their boss, or something," she says. She laughs, but she isn't joking, exactly. (p. 116)

Reasons ("serious accusations") are amassed to support the hating, but the negative response is out of proportion to them, as though the response – the feeling – pre-existed and presupposed the reasons.

By 1996, several PR attempts to re-feminise Clinton had achieved little. Makeovers were designed to counterbalance her unladylike missteps, such as the comment that has long dogged her: "I suppose could have stayed home and made cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was pursue my profession," which was lambasted as insulting to homemakers. (Her next words were rarely quoted: "the work that I have done [...] has been aimed [...] to assure that women can make the choices, whether it's full-time career, full-time motherhood, or some combination"; qtd. in Bordo, 2017, p. 44). Clinton published cookie recipes in women's magazines and tried "softer hairdos, pastel suits, and smaller [...] jewellery" (Campbell, 1998, p. 14).

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (1998) argues these attempts failed because Clinton's masculine rhetorical style gave her away, something that inspired Camille Paglia, also in 1996, to describe Clinton as a "political drag queen" with a "butch substrate" who could never convince voters she had ceased to be Rodham – the bookish, seventies feminist Paglia calls "frigid" – and become Clinton, the loyal first lady, a good wife (p. 26). Paglia's use of "drag" nods toward a kind of performative feedback loop between Clinton and the public that has played like a parade of masks, in which she is an object of suspicion – suspicion that she is hiding some corrupt intention or thing (the up-skirt *Spy* cover is perhaps the most explicit media theorising of what she is hiding) – and she responds by attempting to re-cast herself as more acceptably feminine. Clinton has put faith in the power of appearances to assuage the hating, just as the hating itself is preoccupied with her image. But because images of her wrongness tap into deep psycho-political anxieties, the wrongness sticks, her conventionality-marketing rings false, and the public obsession with her "butch substrate" persists.

Ugly Faces, Unhappy Objects

With every failed attempt to improve her public image, Hillary-hating became less about using her as a 'stick to beat feminism' with and more about out-and-out beating her. The hating was also progressively divorced from the normal methods and manners of political discourse. For twenty dollars at the 1996 Republican convention, you could buy a Hillary

dismemberment doll [...] with arms and legs made to tear off [...] Talk shows are full of speculation about Hillary's purported lesbianism and drug use. Fine conspiratorial reasoning sifts whether she was Vince Foster's mistress or murderer or both. The *Don Imus* show plays a version of the song "the Lady is a Tramp" with new lyrics about the way the lady "fornicates" and "menstruates" and "urinates," concluding, "That's why the First Lady is a Tramp." (Gary Wills qtd. in Campbell, 1998, p. 1)

The desire to dismember Clinton seems, in this description, to be justified by two factors that also characterise WFT's Hillary-hating.

First is her criminal sexuality (“lesbianism and drug use”; Foster’s mistress/killer). Second is the heady and multifaceted ugliness the *Don Imus* skit described in this quote uses to make Clinton seem revoltingly *unladylike*, with her leaky body and sexual perversion culminating in the conclusion that she is a “Tramp.” Being ladylike is a prerequisite for any prospective president’s wife, so that a woman called Tramp cannot belong in the White House. Nina Athanassoglou-Kallmyer (2003) writes that “ugliness ha[s] many faces” as a catch-all for the dirty, the bizarre, the monstrous, and the all-out evil (p. 282). Clinton-as-sex-criminal is thus a kind of monster, a gross horror, a freak – a wrongness both visceral and mythic. The unladylike woman enters the halls of American power like death and decay into the living world.

In Susan Faludi’s (2016) retrospective on working-class white men in *Stiffed*, her 1999 book on wounded male pride, she describes how bad feeling gathers on Clinton’s face: “Women weren’t the source of men’s pain,” she writes, but their imagined antagonist “had a feminine face, and very often that face was Hillary’s” (n.p., my emphasis). The men in her study channelled anger at the Clinton presidency into an intense hatred not just of Hillary, but of the “faces” of all the women Bill appointed to high office. She writes that then, as now, Clinton was “not just rationally but *viscerally and instinctively* hated. None of the stated reasons for the animus seem to satisfy” (n.p., my emphasis).

I want to consider ‘face’ for two of its meanings: as the surface of an object, and as the key location of aesthetic quality on the human body. As to the first meaning, Ahmed’s (2010) work on the politics of unhappy objects explains how resentment can gather the way Faludi describes. In pursuit of happiness, Ahmed argues, the unhappy object is something we experience as a block – a hole or wall in the road. We could be happy if only it weren’t for *x*, which we direct our frustrations toward in order to protect our belief that our work will deliver the promised good life. The American Dream promises a happy life, and that promise sustains workers by convincing them that all their work will be worthwhile. Recently, Obama has been perceived, by WFT and others, as giving some people easy access to the Dream (via affirmative action), based on his liking ‘them’ and not ‘us’ (Hochschild, 2017). Both he and ‘they’ become unhappy objects. Ahmed (2010) argues that unhappy objects protect the fantasy that working will be worthwhile by providing an explanation for suffering that is external to the fantasy of progress toward the Dream; an intruder is the problem, a foreign body that can be removed. The amount of bad feeling directed at unhappy objects increases in proportion to the feeling that one is thwarted in one’s pursuit. As economic inequality widens, environmental degradation deepens, and threats of national dissolution seem to loom large, the hate flung at unhappy objects intensifies because bad feeling has to go somewhere. It is easier to blame intruders than it is to blame or even to question the promise that work will, eventually, reward the worker with happiness, because that promise is affectively life-sustaining; it gives purpose to the daily grind.

In Faludi’s (1999) work, men turned to Clintonian women, particularly Hillary, as the faces of their unhappiness. She describes a male feeling: a feeling men have because women are prone to becoming the faces upon which male resentment gathers. It is tempting to say that women hate Clinton because they’ve internalised misogyny as a dominant (read: male) practice, but that ignores the specifics of gendered experience. This seems particularly obvious given that WFT describe themselves as feminists. (They are not averse to female power in general.) It is, however, crucial to specify what ‘feminism’ is to them. One of WFT’s Facebook pages dedicates itself to destroying the “man-cuckholding [sic] feminism sweep[ing] our national stage.”² If feminism denotes some sort of politics done in the interests of women, and the right(-wing) kind of feminism is that which does not “cuckold” men (presumably meaning: victimise men, and, perhaps, expect them to enjoy it as the “cuck” is reputed to enjoy his wife’s adultery), women must benefit from men being free to exercise (phallic) power. Feminism wants powerful women, but, for WFT, the right kinds of powerful women *complement* powerful men – i.e., they do not castrate. The difference between the castrating and the non-castrating woman, or and the wrong and the right kind of feminist, is marked by the affectively compelling distinction WFT make between the beautiful and the ugly.

This brings us to the second meaning of ‘face’, the locus of human attractiveness. Clinton becomes an unhappy object on different terms to Barack Obama, because she, as a woman, is vulnerable to being marked with an ugliness that will have great bearing on people’s opinions about her value as a person and a politician. Unable to compare Trump and Clinton’s attractiveness across gender lines (because Trump’s male ugliness is irrelevant to his worth), WFT frequently compare the attractiveness of the candidates’ daughters:

Poor ugly chelsea. Bucky beaver. She is a joke like her parents. Trumps [sic] kids are gorgeous, smart and

talented. YOU CAN'T FAKE GOOD KIDS! (C.E.W.)³

Have you seen Bill and Hillary's baby eeegad, (M.C.)⁴

Trump has a beautiful, intelligent, classy daughter. Clinton.....hmmm, dont [sic] have to say anything more. (S.A.)⁵

[Ivanka Trump] is what a first female president looks and sounds like. (V.G.)⁶

Beauty could qualify a woman for the presidency, just as, because binaries are mutually exclusive, ugliness disqualifies. WFT's fixation on Clinton's ugliness both depicts the threat she poses to the nation – her ugliness proves that she is a threat – and assuages the threat, by intensifying voters' aversion to her, making her look and feel unelectable. Images of Clinton's face are thus politically instrumental, even as we don't necessarily engage with them on the register of thought. As an ugly spectre, a rejected face, Hillary Clinton haunts the American Right.

Hillary-hating eased off, temporarily, in the fallout over the 1998 Clinton/Lewinsky affair. The affair assuaged much of the anxiety about Hillary, partly because it was unseated by anxiety about Bill, and partly because, wounded as she was, the events feminised her better than any makeover. As Ducat puts it, "it seemed as if the phallus was finally taking up residence with its rightful owner" (p. 148). But the hating returned when Hillary joined the 2008 presidential race. Offspring of the images I had seen in 2006, the memes Jessica Ritchie (2013) collects from 2008 depict Clinton as human/machine or human/animal hybrids: a Terminator-like cyborg, a witchy alien, a grotesquely muscled fem-Rambo with electric eyes and an AK47. These memes suggest a panic more pronounced than the dumb blonde jokes of the nineties – more pronounced in proportion to the power Clinton claimed. They depict a fear of blurred boundaries between humans and nonhumans, kin to the fear of boundaries dissolving between men and women, the state and the home, public and private, the President and the First Lady.

Athanassolou-Kallmyer (2003) explains that the ugly is always what threatens to contradict, undermine, destroy, or ridicule whatever is thought of as good and normal. As an upsetting force, the ugly is exiled, repressed, or held liminal to the good and normal in order for the good to retain its superiority. When the good is the category 'human' – which tends to carry all the Eurocentric, masculine, rationalist baggage of humanism – the ugly is the border-dweller on the edge of 'human' that both constitutes it as different from the feminine, emotional, racialized 'Others' supposedly closer to nature, and threatens to dissolve the human into those border regions. Depicting Clinton as a witch is a clear example of this. Throughout the history of Western mythology and popular culture, witches have almost always been introduced as an ugly face: the long nose, the greenish pallor, and the requisite mole, or else any beauty they have will be a ruse. Their ugliness heralds the dangers real-world witches were thought to pose. Figured as a crusade against evil, witch-hunting has always been about defending normative boundaries that girls and women threaten by being (perceived as) willful vis-à-vis good, typically Christian, society. This boundary work can be done by women, even feminists, because it is meant to protect the category 'woman' from contamination by those who upset its ideal status as natural complement to 'man'.

Hillary Clinton is Pro-Death

Clinton left the stage again after the 2008 primaries, endorsed Barack Obama, accepted the post of Secretary of State quietly enough, and time passed. 2012 was quite a feminist election season for many in US politics: the year feminists named a GOP "war against women" after a Senator Todd 'legitimate rape' Akin revealed the depth of his party's disrespect for women's rights, and Mitt Romney said he selected staff from "binders full" of women. Memes were shown to be good for feminist satire, too, as "binders full of women" went viral (Rentschler & Thrift, 2013). But when Clinton announced her candidacy for the 2016 race, gender issues stopped being "a legitimate point of entry for political engagement" on either side of the partisan divide (Albrecht, 2017, p. 512), and Hillary-hating returned. Again, it surfaced with an ugly face, but this time the ugliness was endorsed and amplified by Clinton's chief opponent, who called her "crooked" and "nasty."

Here memetics is pre-eminently useful for how it conceives of the relationship between the producer and the consumer of an image or unit of speech. As user-generated content, internet memes are of course a paramount example of interactive media culture. But more than that, the great extent to which the WFT memes I will analyse here mimic what Trump says, together with the great extent to which Trump mimics previous iterations of the Hillary-hating meme, demonstrates that the practice of Hillary-hating is never reducible to the feelings of one author. Rather, Hillary-hating is a mobile effect of a whole network of affective, political agencies. Whenever a WFT meme or an insult from Trump produces in its audience an affirmative response, each responder becomes in turn another author of this feeling, enacting Clinton's marginalisation over and again.

WFT more often refer to Clinton as 'Killary' or 'Hellary' than Hillary, a short-hand for her association with Judeo-Christian death that is most elaborately figured in the prolife memes they share. Prolife memes are often gratuitously sentimental, showing either a glowing in-utero foetus or a cold white baby lying face-down amongst bloodied sheets and surgical tools. This dual icon is crucial to prolife activism, for "chaste silhouettes of foetal forms, or voyeuristic-necrophilic photographs of its remains" haunt the courtrooms, dining rooms, bedrooms and other spaces where abortion is debated (Petchesky, 1987, p. 264). Berlant (1997) argues that foetal imagery produced the prolife movement as we know it by capturing the perfect citizen in foetal form, a form utterly vulnerable to the will of the woman represented by the ominous darkness surrounding its sublime 'life'.



Figure 3

*Clinton is pro-death #1
(Women for Trump,
Oct. 15)*

The prolife memes WFT share cast Clinton as a monstrous antimother. The dark heart of Figure 3 inscribes a magical evil to the blackness of the body that may choose abortion, and by extension, those who permit her choice. This is very political: the bodies of women are figured as obstacles to both personal and national flourishing, for the foetus's "fate is said to be the nation's fate" (Berlant, p. 87). Berlant argues that prolife politics is rooted in women's fantasy of living the good life, for the foetal corpse

threatens to dash their hopes for it. She links hope to fear: prolife emotions are part of the same optimistic attachment to the American Dream, for motherhood is the condition of possibility for aspirational female citizenship, citizenship that is not just a legal category but a “horizon of social practice” (Berlant, p. 98). Foetal imagery uniquely implicates women in the project of nation-building, for “the space of public dignity and value that used to be reserved as a Utopian promise for women” has been taken up by the image of the bright, perfect, horrifyingly vulnerable foetus (p. 98).

Another prolife meme shows Clinton brandishing a bloodied mallet, which recalls the weapons she had as castrator in political cartoons – whips, chains, bared teeth. As though pregnancy is the closest thing to phallic power women can have and Clinton threatens to castrate the life-giving core of women, hers is a politics that, with all the guts and gravity of its imagined violence, can only be called *pro-death*. Images of male castration and of abortion have similar affective potency, for they go straight to the body’s vulnerable centres; they have similar symbolic potency, too, for they go straight to the body’s source of (normatively) gendered belonging. A bloody murder (Fig. 4), abortion smears the sanctified icon of woman-as-mother, which is to say, it jeopardizes women’s place of belonging in the nation. This coupling of female citizenship with motherhood provides a key to WFT’s feminism: *reproducing the nation is women’s political work*. For WFT, abortion is antifeminist because it breaks the coherence of woman-as-mother, which is women’s political calling.



Figure 4

Clinton is pro-death
#2 (Women for
Trump, Oct. 21)

If reproducing the nation is women’s political work, we should ask what this work asks of them more specifically, which requires asking what kind of place this imagined nation is. This is key to understanding why, for instance, the reproductive rights of the “welfare queens” I mentioned earlier are – to say the least – not defended by right-wing women (see Schreiber, 2008). I suggested earlier that whiteness is a crucial component of the American Dream, the fantasy of perfect happiness in a suburban family, so that aspirational female citizenship depends on a triangulated ideal: *woman-as-white-mother*. Being pro-death,

then – pro the death of that ideal figure – Hillary Clinton is also a threat to whiteness.

This is best considered in light of the racial framing of Bill Clinton. Calling him the “first black president,” Toni Morrison (1998) argued that people were so readily outraged by the Clinton/Lewinsky affair because, as a man with “nearly every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas”, Bill Clinton was already guilty of criminally excessive sexuality in the public imagination (Morrison, 1998, n.p.). The corollary to this male stereotype, also often treated as deviously black, is the matriarch: the woman who, often in the absence of male support, takes charge of all the work in- and outside the home (see Collins, 2005). Paglia criticises the Clintons along exactly these lines: Bill is a “Female Man”, pathologically weak because he was raised without “positive models of manhood”, and Hillary modelled herself on her “crustily independent father”, giving her a “butch substrate” she’d never successfully disguise (1996, pp. 24-26).

Paglia’s description protects the sanctity of good (white, hetero) family life by casting the Clintons out of it, boundary work Micki McElya (2001) describes when she argues that Morrison overlooks the racial stereotype Bill Clinton actually is: *white trash*. Just as trash, an ugly substance, must be expelled and forgotten to protect the coherence of the clean, living, consumerist world, ‘white trash’ names what must be jettisoned from the category ‘white’ to protect its purity. What McElya doesn’t say is that this amounts to the same thing: gender/sexual transgressions are racialized as either black or trash to protect whiteness from losing its heteronormative definition and thus its dominance.

Hillary Clinton is not white trash, but we can extend that phrase’s activity to cover what WFT’s Hillary-hating achieves vis-à-vis her belonging to the category ‘white woman’. White womanhood should be performed in a certain way: Clinton is too ambitious, too authoritative, and too nearly childless to belong. Frederick Moten (2001) wrote that Bill’s respect for Hillary “cannot be tolerated in the WHITE/HOUSE, physical embodiment, ill synecdoche, of the conflation of white supremacist patriarchy in the domestic and public spheres” (p. 149). This applies equally to Clinton’s traitorous independence, her slim reproductive record, and her (murderous) support of women’s reproductive choice. Becoming President might have validated Clinton’s way of being a white woman and thus invalidated – killed – the American ideal.

Conclusion: Ugly Protests and the Carceral State

Faludi (1992) wonders why Clinton was, even in 1992, so much more hated than other First Ladies who engaged actively in politics. She argues that previous politically active First Ladies paid for their transgression by taking pains to look demure, even dour, as though they worked in public out of a nun-like duty, never for pleasure (Eleanor Roosevelt is exemplary). They pre-empted the politics of ugliness, which is the ugliness of their being political rather than wifely, by aligning themselves with the unbeautiful so that the public might be more likely to ignore them. “What galls [Clinton’s] detractors is not so much that she is independent — but that she enjoys it”, Faludi (1992) writes; “she doesn’t bear the grim visage of the stereotypical female policy wonk. Because “Clinton is visibly, tangibly, having fun, [she has] violated the cardinal trade-off of American womanhood. Women are told: O.K., gals, go ahead and do your liberated thing, but you must pay the price with personal happiness” (Faludi, 1992, n.p.). Faludi reminds her reader that ‘public woman’ used to mean prostitute, another figure we are meant to understand as wretched, only ‘public’ out of base necessity, never desire.

“Good subjects will not experience pleasure from the wrong object[s]”, Ahmed writes (2010, p. 37), and as their prolife memes testify, the ultimate right object for WFT is the child produced by the white family – particularly, as their adoration of Ivanka Trump indicates, the *beautiful* child of such a family. The “happy family” is the example Ahmed (2010) uses to show that happiness tends to be a normalising affect: as a girl, you are taught that your wedding will be the ‘happiest day of your life’, so you inherit the promise of the “happy family,” which means you “inherit the demand to reproduce its form” (p. 46). If you don’t find happiness in the family you become “an affect alien [...] who ‘kills’ the joy of the family” (p. 49). Memes that show Clinton as a foetus-murderer depict her killing family joy all but literally. Being a killjoy does not necessarily mean that she feels like an affect alien herself, but that she is treated as one by those who hold fast to the fantasy that (white) family = happiness. WFT do not circulate any images of Clinton simply smiling. Their smiling Clinton always has the kind of manic grin common to supervillains – Jack Nicholson’s character in *The Shining*, or the Joker from *Batman* – so that her enjoyment of public life gives

her a face reminiscent of the criminally insane.

2016's Hillary-hating culminated in Trump's election promise to send her to prison and the ensuing 'Lock her up!' chant that was so loud at his rallies – so “*feverishly fixated*” (Duncan, 2017, p.517). 'Lock her up!' was also abundant in WFT's Facebook conversation, often repeated as if chanted in writing, and sometimes elaborated on, as in: “Killary is a Conniving, Scheming, Devious, Machiavellian, Sneaky & Deceitful socialist. She needs to be sent to Gitmo...” (M.T)⁷. Calling for imprisonment, particularly off-shore in a facility well-known to deprive inmates of all basic rights, is the ultimate turning away from the unhappy object in a prison-industrial nation. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013) writes that 'I could have you arrested' really means 'I could take your body' (p. 95), strip it to bare life; your body belongs with the other unhappy bodies, the killers of (white family) joy, the dissenters and deviants, the black American men who make up 8% of the world's imprisoned. By demanding that Trump confiscate Clinton's citizenship, WFT defend the ideal American coupling of whiteness and hetero-reproductivity, the coupling that promises them a happy life. This has little to do with political reason (otherwise 'Lock her up!' would've faded when faced with proof that Clinton had not broken any laws), and everything to do with the affective role of prisons as holding areas for boundary-dwelling bodies that disrupt feelings of safety and belonging in the national community, bodies that become unhappy objects by disrupting the collective sense of progress in the pursuit of happiness.

Endnotes

- 1 Literal marginalisation is enacted by the policing of national borders, and almost literally by many more ways the state organises people spatially (prisons, Native American “reservations,” and ghettos, to name some). All have a marginal relationship to the suburbs, built for the white middle-class and generally understood as a cultural centre.
- 2 *Women for Donald Trump*, ‘About’ page: https://www.facebook.com/pg/WomenforTrump/about/?ref=page_internal
- 3 *Women for TRUMP* post, July 29.
Note: All WFT Facebook writers are cited by their initials to protect their privacy, but their names are known to me, and comments are available via the links provided in the bibliography (alphabetised by group, then date). Each footnote refers to the post each FB comment was written in response to. Comments may be progressively difficult to access over time due to Facebook algorithms that bury aging content.
- 4 *Women for Trump* post, Oct 19.
- 5 *Women for Donald Trump* post, June 20.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Women for TRUMP* post, Oct 16.

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