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An investigation of political women through the phenomenon of Sarah Palin

Sarah Palin, the current governor of Alaska, was announced as Senator John McCain's running mate in this year's general election on August 29th 2008. As a Republican woman, she poses a number of complex, thought-provoking, and ultimately revealing (for us as viewers, for her, and for both the Republicans and the Democrats) questions as members of the public witnessing her narrative unfold on TV screens and newspaper headlines every day. As a politician thrown into the spotlight of an already-intense and already-tense presidential election season, Palin has had multiple narratives about her already woven in a thick braid of story-telling about her (just as much as she has had a role in her own myth-formation). Some see McCain's choice as an appeal to those who were left feeling disempowered by Hillary Clinton's failure to secure the Democratic nomination, but ultimately this view simply leaves behind a sense of an equality between women simply because they are both women.



As quoted in *The Nation*, at a rally in Dayton, Ohio, McCain introduced Palin in the following manner: “I am especially proud to say in the week we celebrate the anniversary of women’s suffrage, [she is a] devoted wife and mother of five” (September 22 2008, pg 10) – a strange conflation of the politics of a woman’s right to vote and her conceptually traditional role as a mother and wife. Moreover, as has been noted in a variety of media, Palin’s narrative of her family and her role as a devoted wife and mother of five (a phrase that seems to be ever-popular in the political framing of familial life) has become a huge portion of the talk surround her as a figure. Alternatively, she is known for hunting moose in her home state – a distinctly “unfeminine” act of deliberate violence.

In my thesis I plan to take Sarah Palin as an entry point into a number of issues, with the question of what it means to be a political woman (as compared to being a woman in politics) today being a primary part of my scholarly investigation. I plan to venture further into the territory that Sarah Palin occupies in the minds and imaginations of the American public, as a mother or as a politician and, importantly, where these two overlap and are perhaps even conflated. What does it mean that she is a Republican *and* a woman? Many publications have suggested that this is somewhat antithetical to the notion of women’s issues as a whole, and I am intrigued to explore further the implications of being something that is apparently oxymoronic to many.

Furthermore, I am interested in the flows of conversation taking place in conservative media about Sarah Palin. The focus on her as a woman is less gendered than it is sexed – “the hottest governor from the coldest state”, the narratives of her as a vital and active woman and mother (compared to the relatively muted narratives about Hillary as a mother) – and this curious obsession with her as a sexed woman requires a closer reading because this subtle but somewhat graphic obsession with her as a vital and vibrant candidate perhaps bears implications for gender relations and the politics of interaction as a phenomenology of contemporary experience and gender presentations.

Ultimately, while I hope that these subjects will guide my research from this point out, I imagine Sarah Palin to function here as a vehicle to something else, be it a deeper investigation of just one of the points made above, an analysis of all aspects, or a discussion of something else entirely. The layers of interpretation, understanding, wishfulness, desire, disgust, nausea (and other visceral reactions that I have heard many speak of), the multiple sensations that surround her are full of meaning and, I trust, will ultimately speak to greater issues in contemporary society.