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I Feel Your Pain: A Reckoning

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Hillary Clinton's memoir of the 2016 election and her life in politics, *What Happened*, is an affective rollercoaster. Wrath, frustration, regret, and sorrow, among other intensified emotions, saturate the book's pages. This range of affect is surprising for a political autobiography. Books in this genre typically present their subject-selves as stalwart and emotionally controlled actors whose range of feeling is limited to the proper amount of righteous irritation or vague empathy necessary to justify a policy proposal. None has the rawness of Clinton's book, a rawness that is, I would argue, made possible by her gender. This is one of the few vectors of political expression that is expanded, not contracted, for Clinton in her role as the first woman to become a major-party presidential candidate.

Differently from her campaign, however, Clinton's memoir embraces gendered affects rather than skirting them. She showcases her pain, struggling with "a wave of sadness that threatened to swallow me whole," and she describes her failed candidacy using emotions often disparaged as "hysterics," "melodrama," and "bitterness" — indeed, she normalizes them as responses to the 2016 election and its aftermath, and to the experiences of women as political subjects more broadly. Her affective range breaks new ground, and it does important work both for Clinton and for readers of her memoir.

One could condemn Clinton's book in this regard, to say that she is painting a picture of herself as more emotive, and thus more relatable, in order to manipulate her public image yet again. It is partly why reviews of the book have been negative — her emotions are interpreted as

exploitative, her self-scrutiny as self-indulgence, her larger analysis of the political field as her refusal to take responsibility for her own failure. But the relentless cynicism that surrounds every interpretation of Clinton's utterances is exhausting, especially as it does not weigh down male candidates in a similar way. So I chose to read *What Happened* as I would any political autobiography given the obvious limitations of the genre as a self-burnishing enterprise — as I had done when reading Bernie Sanders's emotionless though politically fierce book about his own failed candidacy, *Our Revolution*, or Barack Obama's philosophical musings on identity in *Dreams From My Father*. Why should Clinton's memoir alone be overtaken by suggestions of unscrupulous pandering? Why is she always the most devious, the most suspicious, the most repugnant? What else could be gleaned from *What Happened* besides the shopworn trope of the scheming femme fatale out to hoodwink hapless naïfs into acting against their own interests?

Reading *What Happened* a year after the 2016 election is an affective experience before the reading of it even begins, at least it was for this reader, one weighted down by Donald Trump's unstable and authoritarian violence that exacerbates white supremacy, undoes what few provisions are left for popular participation in political institutions, gleefully destroys the climate in the name of American Greatness, encourages corporate raiders to plunder public coffers, criminalizes immigrants, and might lead to war with North Korea. I cannot separate an analysis of the book from my experience of it, as my rage and frustration at our present political scene suffused my reading Clinton's book and have, actually, forced me to reassess her candidacy and my own investments in it.

I was not a diehard Clinton fan in 2016. I supported Bernie Sanders in the primaries because his message of social democracy and radical economic and political redistribution most closely mirrored my own political commitments. Once he lost the nomination, I supported Clinton, in part because I was, indeed, excited about having a democratic woman as president, someone to model for my young children the growing possibilities for women and girls to shape the decisions of our society — even within positions as problematic as the presidency. My support was also fueled by the fear of Trump as a white supremacist rapist sociopath who generated personal wealth by theft and graft. I supported Clinton, but I felt she was too cozy with economic elites, too burdened by her support of war, and too timid in her visions for a better world to devote significant time and energy to her campaign. I also presumed she would easily win.

Clinton's recollection of Election Day 2016 in her memoir, and her descriptions of her overwhelming sorrow and anger — feelings she directs at the election results but also at herself — are powerful. They recall the emotions of that day with the lived intensity of a melodramatic woman's weepie of obstructed agency. Like Clinton, the morning of the election was a joyful one for me. Yes, I wore a pantsuit to vote, and my preschool-age daughter cast the ballot for Clinton. We were in a celebratory mood, about to live in a country that supported a woman to helm the highest point of power. I presumed the next day we would turn toward a different register, one still hopeful but also focused on actively pushing the Clinton administration to embrace a more just and equitable path for our society.

Instead, the night of the election was filled with dismay, despair, and horror. Reading the book, I remembered how I hid my crying on live radio; I had been invited to speak to the historic event of the first woman president, and I was worried that I would appear "hysterical" on a panel of stoic men. My delayed sobbing in the cab home prompted the driver, an immigrant in despair, to tell me that every single person he picked up that night was inconsolable; the seat was wet with the tears of others. Indeed, when I first opened Clinton's book and saw the back flap image of a young girl on a woman's shoulders at a campaign rally — itself a melodramatic tableau of dashed dreams — I cried again, this time for horrors of our present combined with the vision of greater representational equity I had shared with my daughter on Election Day, only to have it dissolve overnight.

Yet I also felt Clinton's dual-edged anger, directed not merely at others but at herself. Because what is most upsetting now, and what makes *What Happened* such a difficult emotional read, is that nothing Trump has done this last year would have surprised me that night. As Clinton notes, his actions have *never* surprised her. If nothing comes as a surprise, why was my support of Clinton's campaign only tepid? My answer to this question had been to cast blame on the uninspiring tenor and neoliberal vision of her campaign, and I still think that is true. But Clinton's detailed analysis of the gendered strictures she faced throughout her long career in the public eye also forced me to think of something else, something more unnerving: how decades of misogynist invective about her also played a part in my tepidness. My susceptibility to the sexist constructs that produced her image as conniving and unappealing intensified the anger I experienced when reading *What Happened*.

Clinton's section of the book on her experiences as a woman in politics is a necessary read for anyone seeking to understand the nexus of gender and

politics in America. The flood of hatred against Clinton, as a successful woman, has been with her from the moment she left Wellesley and only increased each time she asserted her independence from her husband in public. She was seen as too forceful, too demanding, and too grating every time she gained public attention for her own work or for her strongly held political opinions. Her nonsexualized dress and refusal to change her last name played a part in Bill Clinton's early gubernatorial loss. Clinton conveys to readers how much it still hurts to be continually mocked for her appearance, even as she refuses that judgment as a valid standard for measuring women's success. Yet she knows too well how women are perceived as valuable precisely by markers of desirability and attraction, which always serves to put women in positions of subservience toward men, as objects of judgment not as subjects who make judgments.

Reading the relentless negative coverage of Hillary in the media and politics is damning and depressing. For decades, Hillary has been a container for American misogyny writ large, an acceptable persona for men and women across the political spectrum to dump their invective and resentment at powerful women. The context of reading Clinton's book at a moment when so many of the men in charge of American media are accused of rampant sexual assault and rape is also grimly clarifying. The very outlets that have spent decades painting Hillary as both a scheming manipulator and an annoying people pleaser (how gendered is that?) were run by men who treated women like trash, men who understood women to exist merely for their sexual gratification or, if they were unavailable or undesirable in that way, as devious or disgusting.

The gendered condemnations of Clinton colored her message as she ran for the presidency and contributed to both right and left suspicions of her as a candidate, beyond political disagreements. I was surprised, reading Clinton's book, that some of her policy positions were more progressive than I remembered. I was impressed by her deep early-career commitments to social democratic policies for low-income women and children, which continued into her presidential candidacy. I still disagree with her about the benefits of free trade, the use of military power, and incrementalism as a political vision, among other positions, but why did I neglect her incredibly forceful and inspirational push for universal health care back in 1994, challenged from the start by, among other things, her image in the media as a shrewish woman out to denigrate stay-at-home moms and usurp male power?

I would never say that Clinton was a perfect candidate, or that I would give her neoliberal policies a free pass, as I would not do for any

candidate for office. But Obama was more economically conservative, and his policies especially toward women and children less impressive, yet I fought more for him, so something else explains these different orientations. It is not just my hesitation about the presidency as a compromised political position that siphons democratic energies, but rather the incredibly powerful and misogynistic violence that has surrounded Hillary from the start, and that colored even this feminist's vision of her as a presidential candidate. Hillary was a better presidential candidate than most people who populate mainstream national politics, and she is unequivocally preferable to the dumpster fire of incompetence, racist misogyny, moral turpitude, and authoritarianism of the Trump administration. Yet Hillary lost the race, and millions of people like me only halfheartedly supported her, sometimes for uncomfortable reasons. Facing that discomfort is part of what makes *What Happened* such a painful but important read.

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