

THE CURRENT WISDOM

Boy, is this a relief. We'd been starting to worry whether there would ever be a last word on the late great national obsession. Then along comes *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest*, a collection of 100-percent bias-free, gender-neutral and cross-cultural scholarly essays on our formerly favorite subject, edited by Lauren Berlant and Lisa Duggan. Published by New York University Press, at this writing, it's on five-week back order at Amazon.com. Really, really and truly, we're not making this up.

There's a moment in the Barbara Walters interview where Monica relates that he Clinton would always leave his shirt untucked because of his belly, and you just feel that . . . it was one of the ways where Monica and Bill get connected. If the right wing in this country is still really moralistic about sex, the left is moralistic about food, that's where the new style of moralism about control is. Well-educated, liberal people are supposed to be in control of the amount of body fat they have. The people who are disgusted by Clinton's fat and by Monica's aren't the right wing, they're the ones who want a yuppie president with the right amount of body fat at the helm.

Actually, I think this is also related to the place of orality in this scandal. Too much eating, talking and then oral sex.

—Jane Gallop, Distinguished Professor of English, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee

The fact that Monica was Jewish—something she herself was frank and joyous about in many of her comments, both to the president and to her biographer—was largely ignored by the American press and politicians. Ignored—or displaced into other frames of reference. Her signifying traits were distributed across a whole spectrum of discussions. She was "pushy"; she was "ambitious"; she was "zaftig"; she was "typical Beverly Hills." She was physically mature for her age. She was sexy and seductive, "the femme fatale in the soap opera of sex and betrayal." She was rich. She had designs on a political or policy role. She lacked moral gravitas. She led a weak Christian man astray...

Was Monica a spy? A number of people seemed to think so. Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan appeared on NBC's "Meet the Press" and declared that Monica Lewinsky might be part of a Zionist plot to undermine the Mideast peace negotiations.

White Trash, Body Fat & the KGB

A popular Chinese magazine proposed, in a plot not unlike The Manchurian Candidate, that Lewinsky had been sent to Washington when she was a child as a Cold War agent on a mission to entrap the president and destabilize the government. "Is Lewinsky with the KGB?" inquired the headline. . . . Meantime, the Syrian defense minister, too, announced that the affair was a Zionist plot. "Monica Lewinsky is a young Jewish girl that Mossad hired and pushed into working as an intern in the White House."

—Marjorie Garber,

William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of English,
Harvard University and Director of Harvard's
Center for Literary and Culture Studies

When Toni Morrison suggested in The New Yorker that Bill Clinton continued to hold the support of African-Americans throughout the unfolding of the Lewinsky scandal because they understood him to be America's first black president, she provoked significant controversy. Morrison asserted: "Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald's-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas..."

While doing this important work, however, she woefully misnamed this construct as 'blackness.' Far from being a black president, the boy from Arkansas she described is best understood as particularly



white. He is, in fact, a white trash president. . . .

Capitalizing on the trash tropes of uncontrollability and excess that have circulated throughout the Clinton presidency, Starr and his team presented the case that Clinton's sex with Lewinsky amounted to an extreme trash act.

—Micki McElya,

Doctoral Candidate in American History,
New York University

Something about the Clinton-Lewinsky relationship is definitely queer. . . . If, as Toni Morrison has argued, there is some truth to the claim that Clinton is our first African-American president, then I want to pipe up: he's our first queer one as well. Monica's famous navy blue dress from The Gap was stained on a day that included the bestowal of a copy of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass by William Jefferson Clinton on Monica Lewinsky. . . . Whitman has been used as a shibboleth for nonnormative sexuality since his first writings.

—Tyler Curtain,

Assistant Professor of Critical Theory and
Cultural Studies, Department of English,
University of Carolina at Chapel Hill

Confined to the hallway between the Oval Office and a more private study, Monica and Bill were unable to lie down, unable to take their clothes off and forced to remain silent. "Sometimes I bit my hand so that I wouldn't make any noise," adds Monica. . . . Spatially then, the relationship is confined to the interstices of a public building, and the hallway in which they meet is not unlike the bathrooms and parks where gay men have public sex...

The hallway is also reminiscent of Harriet Jacobs's "loophole of retreat," the space between the roof and the ceiling of a small shed, in which she spends seven years watching her family while waiting for a chance to escape safely to the North. Both prison and freedom, the garret spatializes slavery and thus provides a graphic representation of its effects. Similarly, Clinton's hallway demonstrates the constraints of the presidency. . . .

Although differences between the president and the slave girl are vast, in both narratives spatial confinement makes the impact of social systems material.

—Ann Cvetkovich,

Associate Professor of English,
the University of Texas at Austin

Testing Is about Openness and Openness Works

Caroline M. Hoxby is a professor of economics, Harvard University; distinguished visiting fellow, Hoover Institution; and member, Hoover's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education.

In the past decade, forty-nine of the fifty states have adopted some form of statewide testing, which they are beginning to report in user-friendly "school report cards." Most of the report card programs have no stakes or low stakes, so what purpose do they serve? They create openness and information. They light up schools for the people who are supposed to make informed decisions about schools but who are too often kept in the dark: parents and legislators. The information is imperfect, certainly, but parents and policymakers armed with information can at least start a discussion about school improvement.

How much can one expect from a policy that just informs, with few stakes? I initially thought that one could expect only negligible results. It turns out that I was wrong. The states that started their testing programs at the beginning of the last decade did not break achievement records, but they did improve achievement at a significantly faster rate than states that only began testing in the past couple of years.

One can show this with simple calculations based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—the only nationally uniform test that is administered to large representative samples of students in each state. State NAEP testing, which began in 1990, is *designed* to help states track their achievement over time. No one "teaches to" the NAEP test because only a sample of students take it and no individual school's NAEP scores get reported.

I recorded the first year in which each state began its report card program. (I did not count a state if it conducted tests but kept parents in the dark about school and district results.) States with early school report card programs include Texas, Washington, Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, Connecticut, and Wisconsin. States that got on the report card bandwagon only lately include Iowa, Nebraska, Utah, Virginia, and South Carolina.

I looked to see whether states experienced growth in NAEP scores after they began report card systems (compared to states that had not yet begun such systems). I found that nine-year-olds' reading scores improved 0.26 points faster each year after testing began. Thirteen-year-olds' math scores improved 0.28 points faster each year after testing began. (Full results are available at www.economics.harvard.edu.) These gains are not tremendous, but they are statistically significant and do add up over a decade. **At the end of ten years, the nine-year-olds' reading scores would be 2.6 points higher and the thirteen-year-olds' math scores would be 2.8 points higher.**

Statewide standardized tests and school report cards may be unpleasant for ineffectual educators, but they should not be controversial with parents or policymakers who want to see higher achievement. Schools conduct themselves better when their constituents are informed.

— Caroline M. Hoxby

Paid for by the Hoover Institution, Stanford University.



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