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'Our Monica, Ourselves' examines the history-making incident and what it says about American sexuality, morality and policies



An Affair to Remember

A new book of academic essays reconsiders the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal

By B. J. Sigismund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

July 27 — It was mid-1998, the height of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, when Lisa Duggan got an idea. She e-mailed a colleague, Lauren Berlant, suggesting that the two of them put together an academic study of the history-making affair. Both were professors with backgrounds in gender and American studies—and both were obsessed with the imbroglio and its improbable players: the president, the intern, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Paula Jones, Linda Tripp and Kenneth Starr. “People were caught

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up in the moment and throwing language at something we all knew was more complicated than any single explanation,” says Berlant, a professor of English and director of the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Chicago.

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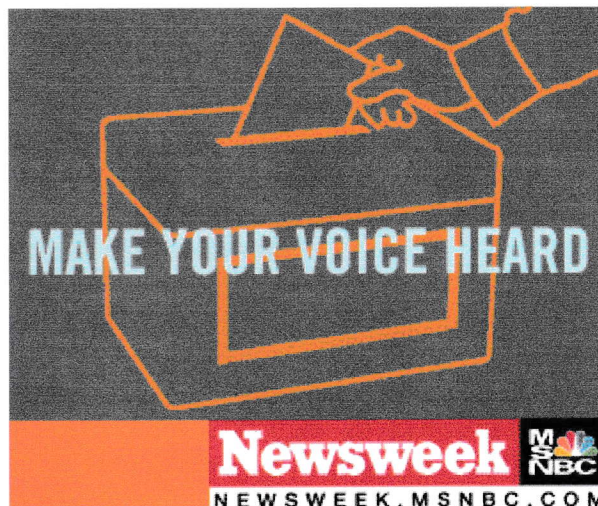
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BERLANT SPENT A COUPLE years co-editing “Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest” (NYU Press) with Duggan, an associate professor of American studies and history at New York University and a longtime scholar and activist around issues of sexual politics. The book contains 18 essays that link the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal to patterns in American and global public life. Highlights include “Moniker,” which looks at the incident through a prism of Monica Lewinsky’s Jewishness; “The Face That Launched a Thousand Jokes,” a study of why Americans were so quick to make fun of Linda Tripp; and “Sex of a Kind,” in which the author revisits the discomfort broadcast journalists clearly felt when discussing the more tawdry details of the story.

NEWSWEEK’s B. J. Sigismund asked Berlant to page through the book and provide quick summaries of its sometimes funny, sometimes incendiary, sections.

NEWSWEEK: Before we get to the individual chapters of your book, tell us how people reacted when you told them you were working on a book of essays about the scandal.

Like Paula Jones,
she was a figure in
a political battle
that didn’t have a
lot to do with her.

— LAUREN
BERLANT
co-editor, “Our Monica,

Ourselves: The Clinton Affair
and the National Interest"

Lauren Berlant: There tended to be two responses. One was to be excited. Everyone had to have an opinion about the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. It allowed them to restate their opinion. On the other hand, because it was a scandal about people's disappointment in the political process on a number of levels, some people didn't know why academics would want to spend time on something so banal and trivial. The topic raises ambivalence as much as the crisis did.

How did you approach the book?

We started with a question: What was this scandal a case of? All the essays try to answer that question. Central to our project was the thought that the ways the media talked about sexuality and judged sexuality in terms of [Bill] Clinton, Hillary [Clinton], Monica, and Paula Jones were narrow and unself-questioning. We thought it was important to reexamine the question of what sex means in the public sphere.

Clinton and his policies are examined in many of the essays.

Bill Clinton is a man of enormous contradictions. The essays in the book not only open up questions of how it's possible to think about sexuality, but they also try to address the contradictions expressed by the scandal. For example, when the right talked about Clinton in terms of sexual morality, they characterized him as their opposite. But when it came to questions of policy issues related to economics and the military, there was much more continuity than difference.



What was the most important moment in the whole drama, in your mind?

The [press] conference in which he said he "did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky." I watched it at the actual time. I knew immediately that the shaking of the finger was a bad idea. It was oppressive and overdramatic. I just knew that was a mistake.

How so?

The relationship between "that woman" and the finger meant he was going to take her down. He was going to use a strategy of diminishing her in order to save himself. It might seem that he was simply and pathetically trying to cover his increasingly voluminous shame. But at the same time, he wasn't wrong to think that the media would not have been able to deal rationally with any other kind of response from him. Because they were always looking for waffling, he had

to resort to hyperbole.

Your book has very harsh essays devoted to the media coverage of the scandal.

The magnifying glass of the media made the stereotypes even louder. In the end, it was bad for women, bad for feminists and bad for arguments for a less repressive America. It intensified stereotypes against Southern white people, Jewish people, people of color and working classes of all races.

In the book's introduction, you write that "the analytic challenge posed by the scandal is that so much of its implication seems 'obvious.' On the other hand, the whole thing defies common sense." What do you mean?

Because this is a scandal about sex and lies, it seems, from some perspectives, that there's no mystery to who did what to whom. The only question would be what you thought about the event. On the other hand, so many different interests and ideologies were animated by the scandal that many events seemed just amazing as we watched them unfold. For example, and Eli Zaretsky talks about this in his essay ["The Culture Wars of the 1960s and the Assault on the Presidency: The Meaning of the Clinton Impeachment"]: it's widely thought that the public still esteemed Bill Clinton, even if they thought he was morally compromised. And the fact that the public was said to be against impeachment seemed to make no difference from the point of view of the political process. That's an example of something that defies common sense. That's what we tried to examine in the book.

Let's talk about a few chapters in particular. This one's sure to get some attention. It's about Linda Tripp and it's called "The Face That Launched a Thousand Jokes."

That essay asks why it is that Linda Tripp's face became an occasion for moralizing and joking. And in particular, it asks why people are so averse to the ugly. The author, Laura Kipnis, is especially interested in ugliness.

Chapter 5 is about a porno film.

Yes, central to this essay ["The Door Ajar: The Erotics of Hypocrisy in the White House Scandal," by Simone Weil Davis] is a pornographic film titled, "Deep Throat 5: The Quest," whose subtitle is "Slick Willy Rides Again." The author asks what's behind the pornographic interpretation of Clinton's sexuality? Is it

a hunger for an untarnished presidency, or a dig at sexual hypocrisy?

I watched a lot of TV news during the scandal, so I laughed a lot reading "Sex of a Kind" by Sasha Torres.

Yes, this is a brilliant essay. It does two things. It tells the history of the TV code that regulates the "hard news," which says TV news should appear to be "rational, neutral and disembodied." And then it hilariously narrates the discomfort of the broadcasters who suddenly had to sound like gossip scandal sheets.

What about "Moniker" by Marjorie Garber? Great title for a chapter.

Hee-hee. Another great essay. It tells the history of the American fascination with Jewish female sensuality and loudness, which Monica and Monica's body represented.

What does Chapter 15 tell us about the Starr Report that we don't already know?

Ann Cvetkovich's essay ["Sexuality's Archive: The Evidence of the Starr Report"] asks, "What's the relationship between one's sex life and the rest of one's life?" She uses the open doors of Clinton's office—as he was having sexual encounters with Monica—as a way of tracking that problem.

Last question. Would you like to meet Monica?

No. I'm interested in studying her. What would meeting her tell me? She's nice. She's not nice. She's smart. She's not smart. Like Paula Jones, she was a figure in a political battle that didn't have a lot to do with her.

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