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# "And with all she lived with casual unawareness of her value to civilization": Close-reading Eleanor Roosevelt's Autofabrication

Sara Polak

1 It is by now a commonplace to say that Eleanor Roosevelt was a curious feminist.[i] One of the most powerful women in American history, and yet someone who determinedly played the part of the "wife of," Eleanor Roosevelt organized her own press conferences to which only female reporters were allowed access, yet she also responded to a young woman's wish to temporarily prioritize her job over having children: "Since you married him, I should think a baby was something you would both want."[ii] Thus, she regularly said and wrote things expressive of a traditional, even Victorian, perspective. Roosevelt's implicit denial of the possibility that the letter writer to *Ladies Home Journal* could prefer not to have a baby straightaway, even when that is what the letter writer explicitly says, is a case in point. The woman writes: "My husband is all for having a baby right away, but I want to keep on with my job until the war is over," but Eleanor Roosevelt, at least within the context of the *Ladies Home Journal* has no time for such postponement of what she ought to want. On the other hand, Roosevelt's actual actions often suggest a relatively radical feminism – the press conferences secured intellectually fulfilling jobs for many female reporters even during the Depression – and she was very committed to helping women's groups and initiatives, and educating women about politics and global affairs in a broad sense, through a wide range of media, including many magazines, radio and television shows aimed at housewives.

2 Thus Eleanor Roosevelt's discourse at times seemed to fall behind her practice, which in itself might be read as what De Certeau has called "tactics from the subjugated," except for the fact that Roosevelt was, personally, all but subjugated.[iii] Those she supported often were, but in her own daily life she arguably had more power than she was legally or

politically entitled to, given that she had not been elected to political office. As such she often, particularly as First Lady, needed to play down the extent of her power. Discursively positioning herself as traditionally feminine – modest, shy, deferential – often worked to support her position and her actions as unthreatening. She did at times weigh in in the public debate, for instance when, after the start of the US engagement in World War Two, she defended her husband's position, but also at times opposed his political choices.

3 However, the overt purpose of her "My Day" column (that ran six days a week, from 1936 to 1962) was to discuss her own everyday life and First Lady-like business, and on most days she did just that.[iv] It seems that her strategy of domesticity, modesty and reticence in part also allowed her considerable space to act as she saw fit, especially in the margin of what was regarded as politically important or sensitive, both within Franklin Roosevelt's administrations, and after his death as a public intellectual, diplomat and delegate to the United Nations.

4 In this combination of reticent domesticity – often read as modesty or even shyness – on the one hand, and militant, often successful, activism on the other, the domesticity was the most visible through Roosevelt's writing. The activism was at least equally present, but it was not what forced itself into the public perception – to the contrary, Roosevelt's interventions were often highly invisible, or at least, her role in them was invisible to the outside world. This invisibility of Roosevelt's activism on the stage of public and foreign policy, and the emphasis on her homely writing, has led to a sense among many Eleanor Roosevelt fans and historians that she is not done enough justice in cultural remembrance. Jo Binker and Brigid O'Farrell, contributors to the George Washington University project which made a large portion of the Eleanor Roosevelt papers digitally available, complain for instance that Ken Burns' 14-hour PBS documentary *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* (2014), spends too little time on her life and achievements:

> 5 As a savvy producer and consumer of television, Eleanor Roosevelt would have been the first to appreciate Burns's series on her family. She would have welcomed his interest in their lives and accomplishments but she would have been puzzled and dismayed at the amount of time devoted to her private life. (...) Eleanor Roosevelt's contributions are often overlooked and undervalued.[v]

6 Although it may be fair to say that Eleanor Roosevelt's contributions have been "overlooked and undervalued" – especially compared to Franklin and Theodore Roosevelt's – I will argue that this effect can productively be read as part of Eleanor Roosevelt's highly successful self-presentation and invisible exercise of political power. As Blanche Wiesen Cook and others have already argued, there is ample evidence that, Eleanor Roosevelt despite her own statements to the contrary, enjoyed being involved in politics.[vi] One important way in which she played the political game was to present herself in such a way as to strategically allow other stakeholders to overlook and undervalue her contributions. This was, as I will show, with reference to Cynthia Enloe's model of how international relations are invisibly negotiated, particularly successful in foreign policy.[vii] This essay, therefore, analyzes the genealogy and gendered politics of Eleanor Roosevelt's clout in American foreign policy.

## Genealogy of a political career on the edge of the establishment

7 Early in the 1920s, when Franklin Roosevelt decided to take up his political career again after he had lost the use of his legs as a result of a bout of adult-onset poliomyelitis in 1921, Eleanor Roosevelt first entered the public arena, substituting for her husband, who was not yet ready to perform in public. Coached intensively by Franklin's personal assistant Louis Howe, she embarked on the campaign trail and a variety of speaking engagements. While initially loathing the public attention and fearing the exposure, she quickly came to enjoy public speaking. As Franklin was forced to learn to cope with his disability, she had to learn to assume parts of his role and she did so with more enthusiasm and talent than anyone had expected.[viii]

8 Many historians and other commentators have argued that the period between 1918, in which Eleanor discovered the affair between Franklin and Lucy Mercer, and 1924, in which FDR mounted the national political stage again for the first time after suffering polio, was crucial to his personal development.[ix] But if these years were formative for Franklin, they certainly were for Eleanor Roosevelt too. She famously commented on her discovery of her husband's affair that "the bottom dropped out of my particular world, and I faced myself, my surroundings, my world, honestly for the first time."[x] What this "fac[ing] honestly" entailed precisely is not made explicit, but the suggestion is that Eleanor Roosevelt suddenly perceived herself to have inhabited a dream world without realizing it. This discovery was a confrontation with the political realism of her world, and her position of limited but employable power in it.

9 Roosevelt did not passively bear her ordeal, but her novel maturity was brought about by something that had happened to her, requiring a thorough adjustment. Her newly gained independence must be harmonized with her femininity, to address the culturally problematic incongruity between female autonomy and gender expectations. By thinking of her political activism as a function of how her marital love turned into mutually advantageous partnership, it becomes something that forced itself upon her. This fits in with her own self-presentation of someone who had taken on her highly visible role in spite of her natural inclinations. FDR's personal assistant Louis Howe, acutely aware of the need after 1921 to have a mobile Roosevelt operate alongside, and literally in the name of, the recuperating one, is often credited, by Eleanor Roosevelt herself and others, as crucial in coaching her to occupy a mature position as an independent agent beside FDR. Such factors – Howe's mentorship, FDR's need for an able substitute – contributed to enabling Eleanor Roosevelt to juggle her femininity with a public role and the acquisition of political sway.

10 I use the notion of *autofabrication* as a term to complement Stephen Greenblatt's celebrated term self-fashioning.[xi] In *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* Greenblatt discusses the production of selves of exemplary renaissance authors, arguing that they are both products of a particular culture with particular shaping demands on the individual, and also individuals reflecting on those cultural codes through their writing.[xii] Greenblatt argues that during and since the sixteenth century ideas of the self as mobile, and the belief that selves can be fashioned by internal and external factors, have acquired immense momentum in the Western world. The success of the term, also for fruitful analysis of individuals who lived long after the 16th century, suggests he is

right. However, to understand larger-than-life political leaders such as Franklin Roosevelt it is not enough to regard them as products of a culture who simultaneously through their personalities contribute to the development of their culture. Especially in a modern mass media-driven democratic setting, a leader like FDR is also a public icon, presumably representing the majority of the electorate – however impossible it is for one individual to actually represent millions of people. At the same time the president of the United States is its commander in chief, the formal embodiment of executive power, a dynamic analyzed early and authoritatively by James MacGregor Burns.[xiii] This executive power is a life-and-death matter, a harsh fact that often needs to be obscured, for a personally portrayed democratic leader to survive politically. This conscious production of a positive public image, coupled with the necessary elision of visible power-wielding are the constitutive elements of autofabrication, complementary in the case of political leaders to self-fashioning.

11 Thus autofabrication goes further than self-fashioning in illuminating the cultural production of political leaders. Self-fashioning relates to the making of an individual self, driven by the person involved, and also to the self as the product of environmental pressures and circumstances, shaped by cultural and ideological demands. This concept on its own works well to think about the fashioning of most selves, but to consider the making of iconic political leaders, it is necessary to take into account on the one hand the fact that political leaders embody power over the life and death of their subjects, and on the other the fact that political leaders in modern democratic systems represent their electorate. As such, they need to project themselves as relatable public icons that a diverse audience can identify with, and that can function to obscure their exertion of power. Franklin Roosevelt exemplifies a very successful autofabrication, as his largely celebratory remembrance attests.[xiv] Eleanor Roosevelt was a crucial agent in FDR's autofabrication and, because she survived him and remained publicly active and visible, of his legacy. What makes her particularly important is her faculty to informally and indirectly expand his influence into areas such as the domestic sphere, entertainment sections of mass media, and into the years after his death. Eleanor Roosevelt made FDR's autofabrication more powerful, because she expanded his influence into areas that are not habitually considered the realm of presidential leadership, as well as beyond his own lifetime.

12 Limiting the concept of autofabrication to elected political leaders precludes the possibility that Eleanor Roosevelt had her own autofabrication, because she was not one. However, she was one of the agents in her husband's autofabrication, and particularly after his death effectively and covertly used her own informal power – as if he were still president, and she the person with access to his wishes – while also presenting a consistent public image, visible but simultaneously stressing her modesty. Eleanor Roosevelt for instance used her deceased husband's lingering authority when she – previously always signing off as "Eleanor Roosevelt" – starting signing of with "Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt," and her protective chairmanship of organizations that could potentially be targeted as having communist sympathies.[xv]

13 An example of Roosevelt's ambiguous highlighting of her own modesty occurs in a column ("My Day," February 4, 1958) in which Eleanor Roosevelt reviews the opening performance of Dore Schary's play *Sunrise at Campobello*, a dramatic rendering of FDR's illness with polio and initial rehabilitation. About the dramatic rendering of herself she writes: "Miss Mary Fickett did an excellent job of being a very sweet character, which she

is in the play. I am afraid I was never really like Mr. Schary's picture of myself, so I could even look upon the portrayal of myself in a fictional light!"[xvi] By calling Mary Fickett's portrayal of herself "very sweet," but denying that she ever was "really like" that, she both suggests her own modesty, and assertively refuses to regard herself as such. While endorsing the idea that sweetness is a positive trait, she herself implicitly declares herself impervious to that compliment within the negotiation of power. Her presence at the play's opening night and her positive review of it, however, in themselves already lend weight as well as a suggestion of veracity to the play. *Sunrise at Campobello* was turned into a successful film in 1960, nominated for four Academy Awards and winning a Best Actress Golden Globe Award for Greer Garson's role of Eleanor Roosevelt. Both within the cinematic universe of *Sunrise at Campobello* the Eleanor Roosevelt character is crucial to the narrative's success, and outside of that the real Eleanor Roosevelt enabled its making – she mentions in a June 1960 column that the filming was "in full swing" at the main house and her private cottage at Hyde Park – and advertised and officiously authorized it.

14 Eleanor Roosevelt's endorsement of *Sunrise at Campobello*, particularly her remark about Fickett's "sweetness," are exemplary of how she, through her role as agent of her husband's autofabrication, also created her own public image – suggesting both that she was too modest to call herself sweet, and hinting at something sharper than the fictional rendering as sweet. However, the fact that this remains so vague functions both to stress Eleanor Roosevelt's mysteriousness and her elusive power. On paper, Eleanor Roosevelt had no political power, but in practice she exerted a great deal of political influence, through her husband and later in his name. During FDR's presidency the Democratic party often used her to keep in the fold particular parts of its constituency on the more radical left wing in exchange for small or symbolic concessions to groups Eleanor Roosevelt particularly advocated for, and her willingness to engage in such deals, often meant party officials would not be forced to address controversial or otherwise highly problematic issues.[xvii]

15 This meant that many politicians and other leaders were in Eleanor Roosevelt's debt, and after Franklin Roosevelt's death this was compounded by the fact that her voice came to implicitly inherit some of his authority. Many of Roosevelt's citations of what her husband would have said or wanted, carried the suggestion of wifely deference, when really she appropriated his name and opinions to suit her own causes and convictions. For instance, in the "My Day"column of June 16, 1953, she invokes her husband's feelings of desolation after Pearl Harbor to denounce the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima ("As one contemplates Hiroshima, one can only say God grant to men greater wisdom in the future.").[xviii] In doing so, she suggests that Franklin Roosevelt would have agreed with her that dropping atomic bombs on Japan betrayed a lack of wisdom, but there is little evidence that such would have been the case, had FDR been alive still in August 1945. Thus Eleanor Roosevelt's, certainly at the time, controversial criticism of the choice to use atomic bombs, is given weight through FDR's presidential authority by proxy, and simultaneously toned down by the humility expressed in deferring to Eleanor Roosevelt's citation of her husband's presumable feelings. This same diffidence is reflected in her invocation of God in the quotation.

16 However, by suggesting that her husband would not have condoned the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Eleanor Roosevelt "borrowed" some of his authority, continuing a much older pattern in which she had been one of his communication channels into places FDR was physically unable to go to, or areas of society and public opinion making that

were simply not the president's natural terrain. After FDR's death, Eleanor Roosevelt's continued representation of him of course did not support him politically, although it often did contribute to his celebratory remembrance. More importantly, however, it did contribute to Eleanor Roosevelt's own authority and influence, while simultaneously constructing a public image of modesty and a gendered unwillingness to exert power. And, even if Eleanor was not formally a political leader, this combination of covertly using one's political power, while covering this up through autonomously projecting a favorable and attractive public image, is precisely what marks autofabrication as a process different from self-fashioning.

17 Another key manner in which Eleanor Roosevelt expanded the reach of Franklin's autofabrication, along the lines of culturally constituted gender expectations, is through operating as the writer and narrator of his *nomos*. A term defined by Robert Cover, a *nomos* is a "normative universe" which turns on the constant creation and maintenance of "a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void."[xix] As head of the executive branch of the federal government, Franklin Roosevelt was profoundly involved in the creation and maintenance of that "world of right and wrong" on a political and legal level. While neither endowed with the power of legislation nor jurisdiction, he literally signed into law the bills that regulated and ordered American society and lives around the world. He was both in the executive and the dramatic sense of the word the lead actor, though simultaneously, he needed as part of his autofabrication to consider the desirability of displaying his power. Eleanor Roosevelt's narrative of the *nomos* the President inhabited and participated in shaping, functioned as one vehicle for displaying some and occluding other elements of this dynamic. In fact, Eleanor Roosevelt effectively became the narrator of the *nomos* FDR was engaged in producing and sustaining, increasingly so over time, and continuing to act as the agent of his *nomos* and of his legacy after his death.

18 It is important to note that Eleanor Roosevelt filled a gap left by her husband through *writing*. Franklin Roosevelt spoke and acted – suitably for an executive and a dramatic actor. He left voice recordings as well as a library filled with documentary material of his presidency, but he wrote very little, and often prohibited note-taking in meetings with cabinet members or advisers. His signature was primarily performative, an act to transform a formulaic text into law, not a narrative kind of writing. Eleanor Roosevelt, in contrast, signed off her writings with her name, in her own handwriting, to stress their personal nature. Unlike Churchill, who, as the subtitle of David Reynolds' book *In Command of History, Fighting and Writing the Second World War* has it, was both a major actor in and narrator of World War Two, Franklin Roosevelt did not write the history of the war or any event during his presidency.[xx] However, that role was taken on by Eleanor Roosevelt, through her daily newspaper column, monthly articles in numerous magazines, and a total of four autobiographies. I have argued elsewhere that the fact Franklin Roosevelt did not leave much writing or any memoir is part of his modernity and his preference for media – radio, photography, newsreels – that would accrue even more importance in the future.[xxi] Yet at the same time Eleanor Roosevelt's writing contributed proverbially to his immortality, furthering the issues and ideals of his *nomos* through narrative.

19 Although I understand Eleanor Roosevelt's writing here as contributing to Franklin's autofabrication, it is clearly part of a double deal: by enabling his public image to reach new realms, Eleanor Roosevelt also created a massive platform for herself. Her narrative

voice became a household article with unprecedented authority throughout the Western world. The public image she developed over time continued to relate back to her role as an agent representing FDR, often to lend authority to her own positions, as well as a sense of appropriate deference to a male leader's perception. Nonetheless, Roosevelt assertively assumed and argued her own positions on national and international issues, packaged usually as intended to educate and inform American audiences with a relatively large distance from the machinations of international politics. In that shape, and channeled through the well-known voice of the US's long-time First Lady, whom Harry Truman later dubbed "First Lady of the World," Eleanor Roosevelt's words were received as both unthreatening and commanding respect. Such gendered reception, and Roosevelt's astuteness in catering to these unspoken expectations and needs of the formal stakeholders in the field of foreign policy, suggests that Eleanor Roosevelt did actually auto-fabricate herself as a politician would, but, through the use of gender and gender expectations, to the effect that she came across as less of a politician than she really was.

## *Beaches, Bananas, Bases*: Eleanor Roosevelt and Foreign Policy

20 Eleanor Roosevelt's manner of carrying herself as an activist influencer on the edge of the establishment during her husband's presidency, and particularly thereafter in the arena of international politics, can productively be understood as foreshadowing Cynthia Enloe's paradigmatic monograph *Bananas, Beaches, Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (1990).[xxii] Enloe radically expanded the study of international politics beyond usual focus on powerful white men in dark-blue suits and red ties who hold final sway over the complex machinations of global international politics. The book argues that for a real understanding of this impenetrable and seemingly unalterable apparatus of world order, it is necessary to expand the focus to include the tourists, chambermaids, prostitutes, military wives at foreign bases and all others who have little formal power, but are impacted by and are part of the global choreography of international politics.

21 Enloe's question "Where are the women in international politics?" is fruitful because it leads to an understanding of politics that is not limited to official institutional loci of power. The status quo of women around the world supporting the international political system as secretaries, wives and chambermaids seems so natural and fixed that the people involved are in perfect harmony with patriarchic ideology, unaware of their contribution. Since Enloe made this argument, however, some American women have achieved great formal power in international politics – Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, Condoleezza Rice – partly perhaps as a result of increased awareness of the culturally constructed character of an apparatus that once seemed unchangeable or even predestined. However, I argue that Eleanor Roosevelt both an unconscious precursor to Enloe's ideas and yet also a firm supporter of the patriarchic *nomos* her husband shaped and represented, used her understanding of her value to the patriarchal system to maximize her clout, and to obscure her exertion of power. Moreover, she functioned, through her position, also as a paradigmatic enabler of the later more formally established power positions of women such as Albright, Clinton, and Rice.

22 Enloe's research traces many examples of women crucial to the system of global international politics, for example examining how wives of soldiers at foreign bases

played essential roles in turning the base into a community and also in creating and sustaining relationships between American military bases and their foreign local surroundings. She convincingly shows that these women were vital to the success, perceived legitimacy and continued existence of many bases. However, groups of military wives only started to claim recognition in the 1980s, until which time their crucial contribution had been taken for granted by themselves as well as by the male military leadership.[xxiii] Enloe argues that this presumption of wifely support is essential for male leaders, without being recognized as such. What she lays bare is essentially an internalized conviction that female contributions ought to be invisible sacrifices made out of devotion and borne in silence, rather than requiring a formal due in money or power on an equal footing with men. Her book wants to radically pull into the light the indispensable contributions of women which are nonetheless often made from marginalized or disempowered positions, in order to show the size and space of their agency, and their unused room for negotiation.

23 Enloe introduces an expanded notion of the realm of politics to show the potential for empowerment of those who are not or only marginally involved in political decision-making. If Eleanor Roosevelt had a similar agenda it was far less pronounced or radical, but she did understand that other spheres than the traditionally political could hold sway over political decision-makers. The key difference between Enloe and Roosevelt is that, instead of creating or demanding visibility to gain recognition, Roosevelt used the political invisibility of her gender and traditional spheres of operation to covertly exercise power. By operating informally, on the edge or outside of politics, she used this power to contribute to the enfranchisement of women, laborers, and minorities, by helping them in civically and medially symbolic ways, outside of traditional politics.

24 Thus, Eleanor Roosevelt, in practice if not explicitly in theory, shared Enloe's vision that power could be exerted from marginal and seemingly non-political spheres – or in other words, that the political realm was larger than it is commonly perceived it to be, but unlike Enloe, she used this invisibility during the White House years as an opportunity to extend her agency to help the marginalized, rather than a problem reinforcing the status quo. She learned to substitute for Franklin Roosevelt physically, to act as a portal to the White House for marginalized groups, and thus to negotiate social and political victories on their behalf, and to use her prerogative to narrate and disseminate his story. As such she learned to use to his and her own advantage the gaps Franklin left to be filled. From that vantage point she could, famously, organize for black contralto Marian Anderson to sing at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC in 1939, on the one hand a great symbolic act in the slow emancipation of African Americans before the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, and on the other an act that was indeed symbolic in the sense that it did little to increase the political influence or visibility of African Americans. As such, she could be argued to have placed many of the people she tried to help in a similar position to her own: not directly powerful, but located so that indirect influence might be exerted.

25 Her own empowerment as a woman through the limitations of her husband alerted her to the complex expectations of American femininity. In a "My Day" column on August 13, 1942, she wrote about the effort of women to preserve the "prewar world" in the absence of their husbands. She quotes at length from a text a friend has sent her of an inscription on a statue of the Pioneer Woman, a quintessentially American archetype:

> 26 ... the line in the inscription which I like best: "And with all she lived with casual unawareness of her value to civilization."
>
> 27 There we have the secret which should be driven home to every woman. In countless homes in this country today, there are women who are "casually unaware" of the great accomplishments which are theirs. They will be recognized by history, but today we forget them because they do their daily tasks so casually that their heroism and the vital place which they fill in our world passes almost unnoticed, and certainly unsung in the present.[xxiv]

28 Part of what is praiseworthy about the frontier woman, according to the inscription – which Eleanor Roosevelt and her friend both affirm remains of paramount relevance in 1942 – is her "casual unawareness" of her contribution. She is crucial but does not command, or get, her due reward in money or power, because she is unaware of her value. Her modesty and the casual nature of her accomplishment is part of her "value to civilization." Roosevelt does not suggest that it should be otherwise, she does not spur the women "in countless homes" on to demand recognition of the "great accomplishments which are theirs." However, she does explicitly stress that they "fill a vital place," at home and during the war also in jobs left vacant by men, and moreover, that "their heroism" will be "recognized by history." It "passes almost unnoticed" because women's heroism culturally includes their renunciation of any claim to recognition in the present, but Roosevelt argues future narratives will not leave women's heroism "unsung." Thus, the suggestion is, that while these women may receive little material recognition in the form of money or power within the normative universe they inhabit, they will not escape the attention of future narrative. Whether or not this is really the case – Roosevelt's own contributions to American history and culture tend to be underrepresented as Binker and O'Farrell note in their critique of *The Roosevelt's* – the suggestion is that a modest place in the narrative and an invisible, but not powerless, position in the *nomos*, is suitable for the blueprint of the American woman.

29 However, Roosevelt also writes that this casual unawareness is "the secret which should be driven home to every woman," alerting readers publicly to the value of women's contribution, while simultaneously stressing the importance of its hidden nature. Thus, she draws attention to women's uncashed checks, and at the same time praises their generosity in not demanding recompense. As discussed, this was her own strategy also: if she did require compensations in other forms, she did so, characteristically, not for herself, but for those groups and goals she wished to empower. In the broadened definition of the political Enloe suggests – which included groups and interests that were not always regarded as part of that realm – Eleanor Roosevelt thus did claim political power, while simultaneously disguising it.

30

## Eleanor Roosevelt's casual unawareness in cultural memory

31 In American popular cultural representations, the Roosevelts' informal and personal style still reverberates, and Eleanor Roosevelt's officious acting as presidential substitute or supplement is a central part of that style. Even the fact that Eleanor Roosevelt could guide attention away from other issues, and allowed FDR an unofficial second voice, to own or to distance himself from as he saw fit, is in itself reflected in cultural memory. Instances of this can be found in the movie *Hyde Park on Hudson* (2012): throughout the film the suspicion is raised that the Eleanor character takes the initiative to serve hotdogs to the British King and Queen to humiliate them publicly through a vulgar snack associated with American Independence Day.[xxv] Thus she is portrayed as rebellious and politically active on the sly in the emotive margin of otherwise pragmatic and rational international politics. However, in the end the film suggests that the hotdogs were FDR's plan after all, having made deliberate use of his wife's reputation, in order to deflect any suspicion away from himself. What has come to be known as the Hot Dog Summit of 11 June 1939 was, according to David Woolner, planned in detail by FDR, including the hot dogs.[xxvi] Whether or not there is a historical basis to believe that he attempted, as he does in the film, to suggest that the hot dogs were his wife's malicious idea, it is exemplary of an actual as well as a popularly remembered dynamic between them.

32 A key effect of casting Eleanor Roosevelt as an officious voice alongside FDR's official one, especially together with her introduction of domesticity into the public icon, is that Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, in autofabrication as well as remembrance, are extremely successful as the nation's projected parents. The broad knowledge that during the presidency they shared no sex life is no problem here – indeed for the popular imagination, this might be thought of as an asset, especially since they did have five children to prove that they had had a sexual relationship in the past. This lack of an erotic relationship between them opens up the potential to fantasize about erotic relationships Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt may each have had with others, while yet, despite the imagined or real lack of sexual monogamy, they were real parents, and successfully functioned as symbolic parents to the nation.

33 This remembrance of the Roosevelts as a presidential couple whose officious acts and expressions are interwoven in their public policies and administration, is borne out for instance in Doris Kearns Goodwin's paradigmatic *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, The Home Front in World War II*.[xxvii] This biography weaves the Roosevelts' private and public lives into one, starting with what in a film would be a parallel projection of the German occupation of Europe in 1940 and FDR's illness with polio in 1921. Thus, the home front is consistently interpreted as "national American" on the one hand and "domestic" – within the intimacy of the Roosevelts' household – on the other. The suggestion throughout is that the Roosevelt home is a direct reflection of America as a whole, casting the family as an inclusive allegory for the nation and all its citizens.

34 *No Ordinary Time* consistently uses the first names of its narrative's dramatis personae, and, like Daniel Petrie's *Eleanor and Franklin* biopic, it often stages Eleanor Roosevelt as the narrator – presumably because the personal, familial side of the narrative relies heavily on Eleanor Roosevelt's autobiographical writings.[xxviii] As the use of the first names already signals, the biography is intensely intimate. It strongly links

private events in the Roosevelts’ lives to public affairs of American engagement in the war. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, for instance is framed in an elaborate discussion of the deaths of FDR’s mother and Eleanor Roosevelt’s brother in the months previous to December 7th, 1941. A great deal of attention is spent on the personal memories and grieving processes of both FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt, and the recurrent suggestion is that both worked so concertedly on preparing for the war they realized was coming, partly to alleviate their mourning, for instance when Goodwin quotes Eleanor Roosevelt’s memoir: “I think it was in an attempt to numb this feeling that I worked so hard at the Office of Civilian Defense that fall.”[xxix]

35 The final chapter similarly links Eleanor Roosevelt’s personal grief over her husband’s death, and her discovery that his extramarital relationship with Lucy Mercer-Rutherfurd had been revived, to her decision to continue to bear out his political and ideological legacy. As the war ended, Eleanor Roosevelt, according to Goodwin, also made peace with the past of her troubled marriage.

36 For the rest of her life, her son Elliott observed, Eleanor “chose to remember only the lovely times they had shared, never the estrangement and pain.” She loved to quote word for word the things they had told one another. She kept up the traditions he had established for the family – including the picnic on the Fourth of July and the reading of Dickens at Christmas. Maureen Corr, Eleanor’s secretary during the forties and fifties, remembers her “constantly talking about what Franklin did or what Franklin said or... how Franklin thought about this or that. And every time she mentioned his name you could hear the emotion in her voice and see the glow in her eyes.” ...

37 In these first months on her own, Eleanor derived constant comfort from a little verse sent to her by a friend. “They are not dead who live in lives they leave behind, In those whom they have blessed they live a life again.” These simple lines, she wrote, inspired her to make the rest of her life worthy of her husband’s memory. As long as she continued to fight for his ideals, he would continue to live.[xxx]

38 Goodwin here interweaves public and private, suggesting that Eleanor Roosevelt’s constant mentioning of “what Franklin did or what Franklin said” was primarily motivated by her personal grief and wish to retain affectionate memories for herself. The final sentence suggests that Eleanor Roosevelt’s motivation for continuing “to fight for his ideals” after FDR’s death was to keep alive his memory, where I would read this as a pretext to claim space for her own political ideals. Goodwin does in this manner include the Roosevelts’ private life, and particularly Eleanor Roosevelt and the dynamics of their marriage in her discussion of the American executive war leadership. However, she does not, like Enloe, expand the scope of what she regards as political through including the Roosevelts’ private lives, but rather treats their lives as allegorical to national event, casting FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt as metaphorically parental figures to the nation. Together, or really, as a family, they are treated as premediating the US at war, and therefore able to guide the US through it. Goodwin does not, like Enloe, include the private and the officious in what she regards as political, but rather treats it as a separate level that mirrors the public level of international politics, a movement that Eleanor’s posing as “casually unaware of her contribution” alongside FDR in a sense makes possible.

39 Goodwin in her preface compares the United States and the Roosevelts noting that they share: “the sense of a cause successfully pursued through great difficulties, a theme common to America itself and to the family which guided it” (11). She suggests that the success of both the US and the Roosevelts hinged on the greatness of the difficulties

experienced, and that the Roosevelts' success in "guiding" America depended on their knowledge of those same "great difficulties." Goodwin's phrase "the family which guided it" firmly espouses the notion that Eleanor Roosevelt occupied a deputy position in leading the US, while expanding the presidency into the private and the officious, to benefit FDR's public image as a paternal war president.

40 Although Eleanor Roosevelt remained very influential in her post-war career, her lowered visibility was an explicit choice – she was often invited to run for political office but continued to present herself rather as FDR's "aura", even if her projects in reality were more her own than extrapolations of FDR's. As she wrote about this in an article in *Look Magazine* in 1948, following her refusal to run for vice-president with Harry Truman:

> 41 At first I was surprised that anyone should think that I would want to run for office, or that I was fitted to hold office. Then I realized that some people felt that I must have learned something from my husband in all the years that he was in public life! (...) The simple truth is that I have had my fill of public life of the more or less stereotyped kind.[xxxi]

42 Clearly she continued to auto-fabricate herself as FDR's wife, suggesting that any fitness for political office would have to have been learned from him. Moreover, even if she continued to exert great influence, she also continued to pose as someone who only reluctantly, despite herself, and to her own surprise, had a public life at all.

## Conclusion: First Lady for President?

43 In a December 1945 Gallup poll respondents were asked to name potential candidates who "might make a good president", and Eleanor Roosevelt came fourth.[xxxii] This fantasy of Eleanor Roosevelt as presidential candidate has proved persistent. Robin Gerber's historical "what if?" novel *Eleanor Vs. Ike* (2008) has Eleanor Roosevelt run for president against Dwight Eisenhower in 1952 and win, thus allowing her a position of real power in an imagined *nomos*.[xxxiii] Although Eleanor Roosevelt never in real life had the aspiration to become president or otherwise run for political office, and despite the fact that she would probably never have had a serious chance to be nominated within the Democratic party – not just because she was a woman, but also because she represented the party's radical left wing – the idea that she could have been a good candidate is easily revived by Gerber. Ellen Feldman – author of *Lucy* (2004), a historical novel about FDR's extramarital affair with Lucy Mercer – in her appraisal called *Eleanor Vs. Ike* "oh-so-timely" in the context of 2008, when Hillary Clinton was running for the nomination as Democratic candidate. It seems indeed that – much as Feldman's own novel may have been inspired by Bill Clinton's Lewinsky affair – Gerber is led to remember Eleanor Roosevelt as a potential presidential candidate by the events of 2008. Eleanor Roosevelt in the novel even encounters a five-year-old Hillary Rodham. If the novel aimed to stage a fictional premeditation of Hillary Clinton's candidacy, Eleanor Roosevelt was the only historical character Gerber could have cast in the lead role. However, the novel does more than that – it draws Eleanor Roosevelt into the center of political power, a position in which it is only too easy to imagine her, especially with the benefit of hindsight.

44 Obviously, Hillary Clinton, too, has been aware of striking parallels between herself and Eleanor Roosevelt, possibly throughout her adult life. Clinton has said on many

occasions that Eleanor Roosevelt functioned as a role model and inspiration for her, and even that she was wont to mentally "talk" with her: "[Eleanor Roosevelt] usually responds by telling me to buck up, or at least to grow skin as thick as a rhinoceros.", Clinton wrote in 1995. She did this in a weekly syndicated newspaper column, which ran from 1995-2000, and was titled "Talking It Over". It was modeled explicitly on Eleanor Roosevelt's "My Day" columns.[xxxiv] Apparently, as an activist First Lady with a political agenda of her own, Clinton considered contributing to the narrative of her husband's *nomos*, as Eleanor Roosevelt had done, helpful and appropriate.

45 Still, there is a major difference between Eleanor Roosevelt's and Hillary Clinton's potential space to become president after having been First Lady. Whereas Eleanor Roosevelt could only operate from the sidelines of the political establishment – influential for someone who did not hold elective office, but still a marginal position, from which she had to leverage her power on the sly – Hillary Clinton in many ways came to embody the Democratic establishment. Indeed, whereas male candidates, like Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders, may be competitive for the nomination as outsiders or more marginal figures, for a female candidate to become nominee for one of the major parties, being an establishment candidate with ample party support is vital. Eleanor Roosevelt could never have become that, and so, in reality was about as far removed from becoming president herself as she said, regardless of what polls among voters suggest in response to a hypothetical question, or authors later imagined.

46 On the other hand, to acquire the position she has now, Hillary Clinton does use strategies similar to Eleanor Roosevelt's "casual unawareness", not in the subservient style of the frontier woman, who is truly unaware of the value of her contribution, but, like Eleanor Roosevelt, astutely mindful of the need to seem unaware and unimposing. Especially in the race for the highest office in the United States, it was increasingly important for Clinton to perform a traditional gender role and expectations. Unlike her opponents, she had to smile in debates and speeches, limit modulations in her voice and gesticulation, and refrain from interrupting male candidates who did interrupt her. However, she managed also to communicate the existence of such implicit limitations to her audience, creating space for herself and others to challenge more explicit sexism in policies, such as the absence of parental leave, and the gender pay gap. She also called out her opponent on his blunt sexism, while at the same time countering society's tendency to first-name women while addressing men by their surname, not by insisting on being called by her surname herself, but rather by addressing her opponent as Donald, something that seemed to irritate him.

47 Although Hillary Clinton and Eleanor Roosevelt thus have operated in very different circumstances, and have (had) different strategies available, they both found ways to comply with limiting gender expectations, and yet negotiate those expectations, often invisibly, but still influentially. Although in real life FDR was a leading figure in his *nomos* and Eleanor Roosevelt a narrator of his narrative, who could not have obtained anything like Hillary Clinton's executive power, she veered to that other side of the dialectic at times too.

## NOTES

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**ii.** Eleanor Roosevelt, “If You Ask Me,” *Ladies Home Journal*, January 1943. *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers* (Digital Edition).http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/IYAM/January1943.html. Retrieved 13 December 2015.

**iii.** Michel De Certeau, Trans. Steven Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 38.

**iv.** Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day” (Digital Edition). https://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/. Retrieved 13 December 2015.

**v.** Mary Jo Binker and Brigid O’Farrell, “This Is What Ken Burns Neglected to Tell You about Eleanor Roosevelt”, HNN.com. *History News Network*, July 12, 2014. http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/157795 Retrieved 13 December 2015.

**vi.** Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume I, 1884-1933* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 382.

**vii.** Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

**viii.** Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2007), 199.

**ix.** E.g. Hugh Gregory Gallagher, *FDR’s Splendid Deception: The Moving Story of Roosevelt’s Massive Disability and the Intense Efforts to Conceal It from the Public* (St. Petersburg (FL): Vandamere Press, 1985).

**x.** Joseph P. Lash, *Love Eleanor: Eleanor Roosevelt and Her Friends* (Garden City (NY): Doubleday, 1982), 66.

**xi.** Sara Polak, *“This is Roosevelt’s World” – FDR as a Cultural Icon in American Memory.* Dissertation, Leiden University, 2015.

**xii.** Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1-10.

**xiii.** James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt, the Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, 1956).

**xiv.** This is analyzed in detail by David Reynolds in “FDR’s Foreign Policy and the Construction of American History 1945-1955” and David Woolner in “FDR: Reflections on Legacy and Leadership, the View from 2008”, both in *FDR’s World: War, Peace and Legacies.* David Woolner, Warren Kimball, and David Reynolds, eds. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

**xv.** Dario Fazzi, *A Voice of Conscience: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Anti-Nuclear Movement* [forthcoming 2016], 59. Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 2005).

**xvi.** Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day”, February 4, 1958. http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1958&_f=md004030 Retrieved 13 December 2015.

**xvii.** This argument is made, for instance, in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 185-186.

**xviii.** Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day”, 16 June, 1953. http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1953&_f=md002564 Retrieved 13 December 2015.

**xix.** Robert Cover, *Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, eds. Martha Minow, Michael Ryan and Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 95.

**xx.** David Reynolds, *In Command of History, Fighting and Writing the Second World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

**xxi.** Sara Polak, *"This is Roosevelt's World" – FDR as a Cultural Icon in American Memory.* Dissertation, Leiden University, 2015.
**xxii.** Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* .
**xxiii.** Ibid., 73.
**xxiv.** Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," August 13, 1942. https://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1942&_f=md056263 Retrieved 13 December 2015.
**xxv.** *Hyde Park on Hudson*, dir. Roger Michell. Perf. Bill Murray. Day Break Pictures, 2012. Film.
**xxvi.** Beth Michaels, "The Royal Hot Dog Summit of 1939." *HistoryAndHeadlines.com*, June 11, 2014. http://www.historyandheadlines.com/royal-hot-dog-summit-1939/ Retrieved 13 December 2015.
**xxvii.** Doris Kearns Goodwin, *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, The Home Front in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
**xxviii.** *Eleanor and Franklin: The Early Years and The White House Years.* Petrie, Daniel, dir. Writers: James Costigan and Joseph Lash. Perf. Jane Alexander and Edward Herrmann. 1976-1977.
**xxix.** Ibid, 279-280.
**xxx.** Ibid., 633.
**xxxi.** Quoted in Steve Neal, "Correspondence: 1948." Harry Truman Presidential Library Website. http://www.trumanlibrary.org/eleanor/1948.html Retrieved 13 December 2015.
**xxxii.** Maurine H. Beasley, Holly C. Shulman, and Henry R. Beasley, eds, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia* (Westport (CT): Greenwood Press, 2001), 394.
**xxxiii.** Robin Gerber, *Eleanor Vs. Ike* (New York: Avon A, 2008).
**xxxiv.** Cynthia Koch, "Hillary R[oosevelt] Clinton: Or, Channeling Eleanor and Franklin" *FDR Foundation Blog* September 17, 2016. [http://fdrfoundation.org/hillary-roosevelt-clinton-or-channeling-eleanor-and-franklin/] Retrieved October 15, 2016.

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## ABSTRACTS

Eleanor Roosevelt's presumable modesty and shyness are among her most habitually applauded private characteristics, by academic historians and public educators alike (e.g. Binker and Farrell, Ken Burns, Doris Kearns Goodwin), and yet she remains the most powerful American female political agent who has never run for democratic office. This paradox is often understood as part and parcel of Eleanor Roosevelt's enigmatic quality, but doing so mystifies rather than explains the rhetorical and cultural mechanisms that produced ER's audacious modesty as a crucial factor in her success. This article uses methods from literary studies to analyze the rhetorical strategies and transnational reception of Eleanor Roosevelt's self-presentation and reticence, in order to show how these created a position of great 'soft' power for her. I will close-read excerpts from Roosevelt's "My Day" columns and magazine articles against contemporary and later representations of her invisible power and powerful invisibility. First I trace how ER cast an impression of modesty and reticence, and through that, of a seemingly innocent but powerful agency. Then I turn to American and transatlantic receptions of Eleanor Roosevelt's self-presentation in the American and international establishment, focusing particularly on fictional and non-fictional projections of ER as a globally recognized maternal figure or, within the American context, a potential presidential candidate. I argue that what Roosevelt herself once termed "casual unawareness of her value to society" was crucial in the construction of a

feminine power position that enabled her to wield unusual influence, both as first lady and as a public intellectual and diplomat. The article, through analyzing discourse and cultural construction, sheds new light on the detailed rhetorical mechanics of how Eleanor Roosevelt put her temperament to work in realizing her ideals.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Agency, Autofabrication, Bill Clinton, Casual Unawareness, Condoleezza Rice, Cultural memory, Domesticity, Dwight Eisenhower, Eleanor Roosevelt, Feminism, Foreign policy, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Hillary Clinton, Ken Burns, Louis Howe, Lucy Mercer-Rutherfurd, Madeleine Albright, Mass media, Winston Churchill, "My Day"

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