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Postelection surrealism and nostalgic racism in the hands of Donald Trump

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This article builds on interlocutor comments to "The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle" (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016), a study published before the 2016 presidential election that analyzes Trump's use of derisive humor in the Republican Party primaries. We move this earlier analysis forward by examining the ways that Trump's semiotic displays on the campaign trail now inform the material policies of the Trump administration. Our response reflects upon two currents that characterize this postelection moment: first, the surreal mix of gendered and racialized nostalgia embedded in Trump's iconography and message, and second, the intensification of white racism as Trump's rhetoric of patriotic nationalism becomes government. Bringing the responses of our esteemed interlocutors into conversation with the philosophical work of Walter Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss, and Susan Sontag and the historical work of Carol Anderson, we suggest that Trump's spectacle of governing embraces sexual transgression, civil lawlessness, and excessive opulence, all of which encourage a pro-white semiotics and a return to racisms past.

Keywords: iconography, nostalgia, pro-white semiotics, racism, surrealism, Trump, white nationalism

"Surreal" may be the most accurate word to describe the Republican primaries, the election of Donald Trump to the presidency, and the events taking place in this first trimester of Trump in the Oval Office. Our article, "The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle" (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016), coauthored with Matthew Ingram, was composed in a timeframe when Trump was merely one candidate in crowded field. We unveiled the methods Trump used to import his

entertainer brand into the fraught landscape of politics, exposing how he defeated Republican competitors through derisive uses of humor, vulgarity, and gesture. His opponents could not compete with the comedic weapons of this powerful celebrity, precisely because his antics, while inappropriate for politicians, could readily be excused in Trump's case as the stuff of entertainment.

While studying this process up close across campaign speeches and diverse media, we slowly came to realize the power in Trump's semiotic ambiguity, not just for his Republican opponents but also for the Democratic nominee that he would soon encounter. This same ambiguity enabled Trump to launch a sustained critique of "political correctness" that proved more compelling than anyone on the left might have realized at that time. Early in the Republican primaries, the notion that Trump's campaign had no real content was regularly discussed in the news. Yet Trump's style conveyed plenty to followers and critics alike, projecting a dream of a particular kind of America that resonated with some and terrified others. In our current post-election moment, we are now seeing Trump's content become government. As we witness the steady and deliberate implementation of a far-right wing political agenda, we seek deeper analysis. Thinking together with our esteemed interlocutors, we begin again and try to strengthen our critical analytics of Donald Trump.

How to Interpret the election

Michael Silverstein highlights three critical points to consider in this postelection moment. First, the election was a "squeaker" in terms of Trump winning a certain small but critical number of electoral votes in key states, some of which were once Democratic Party strongholds. Second, Trump mastered "dog whistle" politics, about which much needs to be said. And third, negative branding—that is, the ability to employ negative marketing techniques to tarnish the opponent (in this case a popular sitting president and a politically vulnerable female presidential nominee)—could provide part of the explanation for how that "squeaker" election was won. If the left in the United States once thought that political marketing techniques were effective only in impoverished, low-information populations of the imagined third world, this election outcome should disabuse us of this fantasy. Silverstein reminds us of the seemingly laughable preview of Trump's method in his leadership of the "birther" movement. We suggest that these early actions are consistent with the surreal mix of nostalgia and racism embedded in the branded slogan "Make America Great Again." In speaking to the fears of white America about so-called "Mexican rapists" and "radical Islamic terrorism," Trump signaled a return to a seemingly no-nonsense law, order, and punishment society that empowered white men to intimidate women and minority groups. One would indeed need to look a long way backward for this imagined world, because it seemed (or maybe this too was fantasy?) that for the last eight years at least, a gentler multicultural America had been on the rise. Silverstein suggests that Trump's branding practices, including his effective signaling of this nostalgic return, "worked its magic" in a handful of states on populations normally marginal to the political process.

Stefka Hristova deepens that insight with semiotic detail, providing a reading of the iconology that connects Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan to the

nationalist imagery of the *Uncle Sam* poster campaign issued during the First and Second World Wars. Hristova's reading of these connected images—the old familiar poster of Uncle Sam beckoning "I Want You for the U.S. Army" and the more recent Trump-era poster "I Want You to Elect Me"—helps us connect Trump to his message of patriotic nationalism. Trump's 2016 poster features an open mouth in mid-sentence tirade, perhaps beckoning his followers through his voice. According to Hristova, Trump's hands articulate the space of the enemy, the receiving end of the accusing pistol gesture that bullies all opponents. Her reading of these images side by side illuminates how Trump brought the nationalist aspirations of the popular Uncle Sam brand to his own contemporary followers. The connection of these images and what they transmit once again inspires us to come to grips with the void—that is, with the supposed lack of content—that leaves Trump's mouth and yet speaks patriotism to the faithful who brought Trump to victory.

Trump's images and their semiotic flows were able to wreak havoc not only here in the United States but also in distant locations. Remember that seemingly short timeframe between the Republican primaries and mid-February 2017 when Trump "progressed" from calling Mexican immigrants criminals and rapists to telling the President of Mexico in a diplomatic phone call that he has "a bunch of bad *hombres* down there"? Norma Mendoza-Denton's analysis of the Mexican media reading of Trump and Peña Nieto's relationship as an abusive gendered humiliation of the Mexican president expresses the extension of Trump's bodily enactments to other lands. The hands of Donald Trump now reach far past national borders, contaminating other political systems as well. In Mexico, an already weak president is represented as having been "violated" sexually and emotionally, much like Trump's North American opponents. Yet Mexico's most prevalent iconography points to a bromance between Trump and Peña Nieto that went astray: A more masculine Trump situated on top effeminizes and violates his Mexican counterpart, calling forth a homophobic iconography of male relations. (Not far from the timing of Trump's highly publicized phone call with Peña Nieto, Trump was shown initiating the holding of hands with UK Prime Minister Theresa May at the White House. Circulating images of this embrace set May's critics on fire as well, and their cries against May's cozying up inspired its own set of memes and cartoons.)

Who are the people at the margins?

But who are these voters, these American patriots and nationalists, absorbing the aestheticized message of Trump to "Make America Great Again"? Who are these voters feeling somehow heard and projected in the boisterous O-shaped mouth of Donald Trump and protected by his hard-F (you're fired-and-f*****) pistol hand? This question still burns months after this election, and we want to open ourselves up to deepening here our understanding of the America that Arlie Hochschild (2016) explores in her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land.* Hochschild wants to understand the paradox of right-wing political positions that continues to baffle the left. As a sociologist who works in ethnography, she wants to comprehend the emotional lives of her subjects. For example, she explores, from their viewpoint, how less government regulation—the quality that led to the 2008 economic

catastrophe—could be proposed as a solution to economic stagnation and taken as a legitimate perspective. How could many of the good people she communed with be fully against social programs for the poor? In one summarizing comment, Hochschild attempts to answer, at least from the standpoint of white men, why so much charisma has been generated for Trump:

> What many admired about Trump was his success as a businessman. He was a champion of private enterprise, they felt, and that fact had great appeal. During the depression of the 1930s, a number of Americans turned to a belief in socialism and communism, idealizing the central government and believing in leaders who represented their—elation-inspired—faith in it. During the current economic downturn, some on the far right have placed a parallel faith in capitalism.
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> Implicitly, Trump promised to make men "great again" too, both fist-pounding, gun-toting guy-guys and high-flying entrepreneurs. To white, native-born, heterosexual men, he offered a solution to the dilemma they had long faced as the "left-behinds" of the 1960s and 1970s celebration of other identities. Trump was the identity politics candidate for white men. And he didn't actively oppose medical care for those in need. If he got elected, you could sign up for Trumpcare and feel manly too. (Hochschild 2016: 229–30)

These questions—"Who voted for Donald Trump" and "What were their motivations?"—are perhaps the most challenging to come to grips with, particularly now, when we see more clearly what may have been foggy all along. There is a sense among the liberal left that one must find the furthest distance from this man and his politics, and so it bears repeating: 58 percent of white people voted for Trump; 62 percent of people in small cities and rural towns voted for Trump; 45 percent of college graduates voted for Trump, and so forth. In spite of the small margin of his win in critical states, different kinds of voters were attracted to his candidacy, and certainly historical Republicans were not frightened by it.

Jessica Smith (2017), anthropologist and interloctor for Cultural Anthropology's online series "The Rise of Trumpism" (Bessire and Bond 2017), suggests that the majority of Trump voters "were actually college educated, middle- and upper-class whites." Smith takes offense with "liberal righteousness" and thoughtfully critiques liberal branding practices that actively vilify rural voters. For example, she rejects the representation of the mythic Appalachian constructed by left-wing academics and elite journalists as reproducing a "hypermasculine and backward Other." Yet we must also be attentive to Hochschild's quote above, which clearly speaks to some of the masculinist politics at play among the residents of Lake Charles, the town of 74,000 residents in rural southwest Louisiana that is at the book's core. Is Hochschild's observation good ethnography or a misguided representation? Aren't masculinist politics at play everywhere and not just in imagined and oftentimes misrepresented rurality? We recently witnessed the silencing of Senator Elizabeth Warren on the Senate floor by Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and the Senate Republicans when she tried to read a 1986 letter by Coretta Scott King. The letter critiqued the civil rights record of Trump's controversial nominee for attorney general, Jeff Sessions. When several male senators were allowed to read the same letter

in the hours that followed without consequence, the event circulated widely in the media as an instance of gender discrimination.

On Benjamin, surrealism, and working-class dreams

The writings of Susan Sontag, particularly her "Notes on 'Camp,'" perhaps help us get closer to the sensibility of what is being transmitted and felt, particularly in the Trump rally genre. According to Sontag, who in 1964 was still early in her career as political philosopher and essayist, Camp is "a variant of sophistication, but hardly identical with it." Near the end of her long list of qualities applying to Camp, she notes:

> 38. Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of "style" over "content," "aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy. (Sontag 1964)

What if Trump is an example of white privileged heterosexual Camp, a repackaged version of 1950s white hypermasculinity? (Is it politically incorrect to understand him this way?) Before Trump became president, the left and the media spent a great deal of time floundering in the ambiguity of his speech and gestural enactments, but still not fully grasping the sensibility he was channeling. Doesn't the left by now see all hypermasculinity as a bit campy, especially when invoked by someone widely represented in the media as a narcissistic blowhard? The villains of contemporary Hollywood cartoons and animated films inhabit this space, stylized as hypermasculine buffoons yet often imbued with a dash of stereotyped "homosexual" accent. These villains are Camp representations, making the deconstruction of their homophobic content much more complex.

One of Sontag's heroes, we should remember, was the German Jewish surrealist philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin, who tragically ended his own life after fleeing from France to Spain in 1940. Benjamin is often remembered for his important insights that emerged in conversations with fellow Marxists of the early twentieth century. Most notably, Benjamin connected working class consciousness to a revolutionary hedonism that could generate its own dreams and dialectical images. His work across the fields of Marxism and Surrealism seemed to advocate for open interpretations of historical consciousness, rejecting linear perspectives on time, history, and progress (Buck-Morss 1981). In Benjamin's version of Marx, capitalism and mass consumption are understood as religion. His connection to surrealism led him to consider dreams as formative to working class consciousness and moved him away from mechanistic understandings of class oppression (Calderbank 2003). Let us remember, in light of Benjamin's discussion, that Trump's brand, as a crystallization of his entire life story, is an ode to a particular form of mass consumption. It is also very possibly an inspiration—a collective dream, in Benjamin's terms—to those with less wealth, those who "wanna be," those who wish for another timeframe to operate in, or those who simply believe in the late-capitalist neoliberal spirit. Trump's opulence invokes desire in his followers: his acquisition of now infamous golden toilets; his

"success" in having three marriages to beautiful women; his influential branding of architecture, wine, golf courses, and endless luxury items with his name. In short, Trump embodies revolutionary hedonism (or at the very least, a dream of what may be possible if the United States returns to a protectionist national economy). His combative relationship with the legal system, for example, resulting in a lifetime series of lawsuits that leave him mostly triumphant, has created a powerful dream sequence for those who are tired of government intervention (Hochschild 2016) and the routine dullness of everyday life. Indeed, understood from this perspective (something the left could not fathom), Trump's pussy-grabbing abusiveness was not overlooked; it was part of the dream. The fact that so many (white) women voted for Trump perhaps tells us that these transgressions were seen not just as trivial but also as appropriate for a new kind of unregulated leadership. Trump's spectacle of sexual transgression, civil lawlessness, and excessive opulence is exactly what is being embraced. This is an extension of the entertainment value we discuss in our 2016 essay: After all, transgressive dreams are also entertaining.

From patriotic nationalism to white racism

The dreams embraced by many of Trump's followers appear to extend most directly and exclusively to white people. Jeff Maskovsky's call for deeper analysis of the reappearance of white nationalism in the post–Civil Rights era is an important one. Maskovsky argues that Trump's nostalgia can indeed be temporalized to the "mid-twentieth century, and to the industrial economy and welfare statism of that era." This, he explains, is a nostalgia (a collective dream?) to return to that era *as it actually existed*. How did the left fail to grasp the intensity of this smoldering white racism? Indeed, more potently, Trump's speech and gestures spoke clearly to what Maskovsky calls "white male resurrection." With the benefit of hindsight, many more people can see this now. But Trump's political style was signaling all along to white people a derogated representation of depraved inner cities filled with black and brown people—locations reviled as places needing more law and order, living hells that white people did not wish to inhabit, forgotten sites that demand government intervention. In this way, Trump stoked a revived white nationalism while denying its racist content. The threat offered was that white people would be replaced in the market by the cheap labor of brown and black bodies and by the multicultural face of globalization. As Maskovsky rightly argues, the rank and file of Trump followers "turned out to be more concerned about race and immigration than it was about debt and fiscal constraint" (Maskovsky, citing Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 2011).

Kaifa Roland further illuminates and explains how this same Trump style was received by black voters (although recognizing that this is already a diverse group), 88 percent of whom cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton. Roland suggests in her response that Trump's speech and gestural enactments were experienced as a collective nightmare. Black women, for example, did not dismiss "pussy grabbing" as a minor transgression (see also Harris-Perry 2016): The black electorate understood the lawlessness that Trump claimed for himself as part of a long history of

white privilege and hypocrisy. This may also explain the low voter turnout of this constituency, particularly when Clinton's record demonstrated its own sort of lawlessness with respect to black incarceration. The long list of black lives lost reflects a current racism seen most clearly in the trivial nature of the instigating offenses: a broken taillight leads to a jail room death; the selling of loose cigarettes on the street prompts a fatal chokehold; the wearing of a hooded sweatshirt in a suburban neighborhood provokes an excessive and ultimately lethal response. These events, Roland reminds us, are "biopower and the violent state" in "color and high definition." Trump's calls to "Make America Great Again" by returning to an intensified law and order timeframe of Jim Crow racism is passed off as nostalgia, but black people were not fooled by Trump's dog-whistle politics: They heard him loud and clear. This divided ability to hear was enacted on *Saturday Night Live* (2016) by Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle in a popular skit called "Election Night." Delusional white liberals glued to the television anticipate a "historic night" that will bring a new female president to the White House. As the election results roll in, however, they are nudged to realize, if only barely, that "America is racist." At the end of the skit, one of the white liberal viewers says, "This is the worst thing America has ever done," setting Chappelle and Rock into hysterical laughter.

This brings us to the final essay by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, which returns readers to the context of the Civil Rights era. The form of racism in Trump's America reminds us of racisms past. If anyone ever doubted the content of Donald Trump's message, we now have its materialization in the nomination of Jeff Sessions as attorney general, confirmed by the Republican Senate on February 8, 2017, in a straight-party vote (52-47). Scheper-Hughes's detailing of unprosecuted episodes of racist violence during the 1970s and 1980s, when Jeff Sessions served as attorney general in southern Alabama, brings clarity to Trump's manufactured ambiguity. Trump chose a man deeply implicated in sins of omission in the Jim Crow South, a man who in the 1990s brought back the use of prisoner chain gangs in Alabama and stood against efforts to reform the criminal justice system (Berman 2017). We do not need an analysis of style to know why this man was chosen. Trump's choice of Jeff Sessions as America's top law and order administrator, eagerly supported by Republicans, resurrects the racism of the Civil Rights era and constitutes a new chapter in our country's battle with racial inequality, one that requires our vigilance and active resistance.

In her essay "Obama and the Image," published in a period of optimism after the election of Obama in 2008, Susan Buck-Morss (2009) suggests the following: "Those who launched Obama's campaign came together around the most basic political decencies. They rejected rationalizations of torture and preventive war. They refused to excuse administrative incompetence and executive arrogance" (146). Our current political moment is marked by a sense that the malevolent forces have triumphed, and for many, including ourselves, it is hard to imagine a way forward. The commentaries in this postelection forum suggest that a return to decency can be achieved only by reframing the conversation on race and racism in America. Historian Carol Anderson (2016) has recently written about white rage, detailing the historical emergence of white backlash in our courts and legislatures each time that African Americans make significant advances in our democracy. Anderson shifts the frame of reference away from media focus on black rage and

instead explains structural racism as energized by multiple forms of white backlash in times of progress. She notes that Obama won the presidency in 2008 with votes from "two million more African Americans, two million additional Hispanics, and 600,000 more Asians" (Anderson 2016: 39). We suggest that it is the fear of a civically engaged multiracial electorate that left the Republican Party in crisis, leading them down a troubling path of regression and reversal that now threatens us all. The essays in this forum, when taken together, stand as an early record of the ways that a pro-white semiotics on the campaign trail has come to structure the material policies of the Trump administration.

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Du suréalisme post-électoral et du racisme nostalgique aux mains de Donald Trump

Résumé : Cet article s'appuie sur les commentaires d'interlocuteurs répondant à l'article "The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle" (Hall, Goldstein et Ingram, 2016), une étude publiée avant les élections présidentielles de 2016 qui analyse l'emploi de la dérision par Trump lors des primaires Républicaines. Nous poursuivons cette analyse en examinant la manière dont les performances sémiotiques de Trump lors de la campagne deviennent maintenant un support aux politiques concrètes de l'administration Trump. Notre analyse pense deux courants caractérisant le moment post-électoral. D'une part, le mélange surréaliste d'une nostalgie genrée et racialisée encrée dans l'iconographie et le message de Trump, et d'autre part, l'intensification du racisme blanc au moment où la rhétorique patriotique et nationaliste de Trump intégra le gouvernement. En mettant en conversation les réponses très pertinentes de nos interlocuteurs, les travaux philosophiques de Walter Benjamin, Susan Buck-Morss, et Susan Sontag et les travaux historiques de Carol Anderson, nous suggérons que la gouvernance spectacle de Trump embrasse la transgression sexuelle, l'illégalisme civil, et l'opulence excessive, qui tous encouragent une sémiotique pro-blanc et un retour vers un passé raciste

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