

**STORYTELLING, MYTH, AND THE DREAMS THEREIN: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS
OF THE INTERTEXTUALITY OF CHRISTIANITY, CAPITALISM, AND
AMERICANISM**

JEREMY BUESINK

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Abstract

This dissertation, while dealing with many aspects of Americanism, argues that the hegemonic history of Christianity in America and the centrality of capitalism in national ethos have contributed to an impulse in the national psyche towards illusion. I argue that due to this impulse and privileging of illusion, and/or various ‘realities’, over *actuality*, much American violence takes place both within and without the nation’s borders. I demonstrate the harmful but seldom examined paradoxes produced and sustained by treating American values as sacrosanct in American life and in individual American lives, despite the varying definitions of those values along the spectrum of political and religious belief, the ways they are interpreted, and the manners in which they are executed.

Underpinning my examination of the intertextualization of Christianity and Americanism, are queer theory, postmodern theory, and critical race theory, thereby employing theoretical perspectives that are not strictly associated with benefitting examinations of Christianity or Americanism, which is to say that these perspectives can broaden our appreciation of the outcomes of intertextuality.¹

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Dedication

For my wife Selina and our children—Hunter Dylan, Tessa Dahlia, and Daphne Rose. Thank you for your patience, encouragement, and love.

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*No A.I. corrective writing programs or Grammarly-type assistances have been used in the writing of this dissertation.

Preface

On January 6, 2021, Donald Trump supporters stormed the Capitol. All of the major television networks covered the event as it happened. After a couple of hours of chaos at the Capitol, Trump finally sent out a pre-taped message letting the protesters know that they were special people, that he loved them, but that they should, as of that moment, go home in peace.

Unsurprisingly, after months of calling Black Lives Matter protestors anarchists and thugs, this message to his nearly entirely white group of followers at the Capitol and his faithful elsewhere was the repeated refrain that the election was stolen from them. It was obvious he intended to do little but to stoke the fire. Many politicians spoke with the media as the scene at the Capitol took place. These politicians called the action of the protestors *un-American*, unpatriotic, undemocratic, or something else of that nature. The predominant sentiment of the network talking heads was that what was happening was embarrassing and humiliating as the world watched the Beacon of Light acting in such horrendous manners. Those on network television repeatedly stated things such as ‘this is not Kabul’, not the ‘Middle East’, and this ‘Can’t Happen Here’. This, they said, is not how Americans act.

Joe Biden subsequently spoke in a solemn sermon-like tone to the nation, stating that Americans must remember that there is *nothing* that America has *ever* failed at, and going forward they will recover their dignity and the respect of the world. “This is beyond wrong and illegal,” tweeted homeland security adviser Tom Bossert referring to the insurrection, “It’s un-American” (qtd. in Liptak). In the minds of many, that is really saying something: *Un-American*...What could be worse?

The start of the writing of this dissertation predates this event. Indeed, my thesis was conceptualized before Trump’s initial 2016 presidential campaign. Yet, entirely in keeping with

my thesis, is that Trump's (Make America Great Again) supporters, even now that he is out of office, with their belief in his lies, act in a zealous, religious manner wherein rhetoric and the cult of personality, even celebrity culture, are more than enough to support their faith.

Moreover—and this may seem a digression or tangential but is not as this dissertation will demonstrate—regarding faith and religion and rhetoric, many Christian preachers and/or ‘followers’ are prone to state with every confidence and certainty that Christ *never* said this or never said that when they are making their point—whatever their point may be. Yet, we obviously have no idea, and could not possibly have any idea of what Christ *never* said or thought. But this type of argument, an argument of *certainty despite the impossibility of substantiation*, is accepted because of the incredibly strong pull of faith—faith in Ideology, in Leaders, in Christianity, Scripture, Constitution, Americanism. This type of faith is incessantly reinforced with associated metanarratives and metaculture.²

² Throughout this dissertation, some words will be capitalized at certain times and not at other times. The capitalization indicates when a word is being used in reference to the dogmatic characteristics that the term carries in the context within which it is written.

Chapter One

Introduction

Illusion, Morality, and Myth: Meta Matters Most

Me debunk an American myth? And take my life in my hands? – Gord Downie

This dissertation is, among other things, about the stories people tell, the stories people *believe*, the stories that more or less solidify their place in public consciousness, as well as the stories that do *not* generally get recognized despite the actuality of their circumstance. This dissertation is about the difference between actualities and reality, about certainty and unknowing, and it is situated within the context of America, Christianity, and their intertextualization within Americanism.

In this chapter, I establish what is meant by ‘metanarrative’ and ‘metaculture’ and introduce multiple postulations that are a part of American culture. I will begin to establish the means whereby multiple interpretations of ‘meanings’ can be traced, yet frequently produce and reproduce concepts that are thought to be inflexible, thereby signifying resistance to change and adaptations as they produce violence and ideological distortions, many of which will be revealed through the dismantling of accepted ‘Truths’.

I address the normativity of Christianity in America and the violence that results in part because of the normativity of Christianity in America. I will discuss deviance, morality and ethics, meta-Americanism, and the rhetoric and mythology that both produce and sustain meta-understandings, as well as the importance of acknowledging the role of uncertainty in sociocultural ‘Realities’ and how queer theory and postmodern theory productively challenge ideological certainty.

In terms of metanarrative and metaculture, ‘meta’ insinuates a collective “ideological (mis)recognition in which the common masses are immersed” (Žižek in Rancière, “Afterword” 69). Metanarrative and metaculture describe *formats*, rather than concepts like Christianity, for instance. However, concepts (or conceptualizations) such as Christianity, or Americanism for that matter, can certainly produce and sustain metanarrative and metacultural understandings. Metanarrative and metaculture oversimplify matters; they replace nuance with abridged understandings of culture and of certain narratives. Meta-understandings contribute to the obfuscation of the “hard truth of social reality” (Rancière 87). Within Americanism, we frequently find, rather than the ‘hard truth of social reality’, the prominence and prevalence of mythology, stories, legacy, platitudes. And paradoxically, therein, lies meta’s power and its hold on ‘reality’.

‘Americanism’ is introduced here as perceived, oft institutionalized, systemic ideals (though highly contested and variously interpreted) of what it means to be an American that are of life and death importance—both in ‘realities’ and in actuality—to those within America’s borders and without. *Americanism* involves the sanctity of American values—freedom, democracy, capitalism, bravery, hard work, individualism, loyalty, mythologized (re-envisioned, whitewashed) history, patriotism—ideals and ideas that are often ambiguous yet treated as certain, unchanging, paramount, righteous, unyielding, and all pertaining to *sameness*, a privileging of achieving ‘cloneliness’ as being next to godliness, and to authenticity. Americanism is a term, a faith, a *way of life*, that carries substantial meaning, much too much meaning, I argue, in the lives of American citizens and Others, providing a type of religious

significance for people that in fact often works against responsible ethical and moral thinking despite posturing itself to the contrary.³

Therefore, this dissertation is not only about the stories being told (again, specifically within the context of Americanism), but also about the willful ignorance of some stories, the often-*purposeful* ignorance of hard truths, the reasons why some stories do not get told, and the narratives that are erased, effaced from history for otherwise interrupting idealized, mythologized (meta)narratives that speak to ‘Truth’ in the eye of the beholders. Due to many of these stories, and by examining the rhetoric and resulting actions and inactions that create, sustain, and at other moments wilfully ignore certain stories, the central argument of this dissertation is that what Americanism, and Americans in general, are left with currently, and have been dwelling in to one extent or another since America’s Puritan ‘inception’, is a sociocultural paradigm wherein the absence of illusion is *cynical* and the absence of violence is *immoral*.

To say that Americans are living in a sociocultural paradigm wherein the absence of illusion is cynical is to argue that in political, cultural, and socioeconomic understandings, illusion (such as the assumption that the United States implies a potentially and/or wishfully, idyllically *united* American existence, for instance, and if that cannot happen in entirety than perhaps a national—civil war-type—divorce may be required) is part of American *reality*, and to counter the idea of ‘proper’ Americanism, however illusory, or contested, is often perceived as un-American or anti-American. Therefore, despite the oft-professed allegiance to the American tenets of freedom and democracy, we often hear statements such as ‘If you don’t like it you can

³ Briefly addressing morality and ethics here, and the distinction between the two, I argue that morality pertains more to inner conviction and judgement, while ethics pertains to justice, humanity, human rights, and the eternal philosophical queries of right and wrong which should be pursued distinct and regardless of individual moral stance.

leave'. "If you don't love our country, get out, leave," states Eric Trump while defending his father's Tweets on *Fox News*: "[Don't] complain about our country" ("Eric Trump Reacts"). This is not exactly democratic thinking at its best. But *illusion*, (such as, for instance, intertwining militarism with patriotism, or treating the *symbol* of the American flag as something much more than a symbol, or the widespread belief that neoliberal capitalism and democracy are inherently connected and complementary), paradoxically and often also ironically, produces and sustains interpretations of coherent, certain, Truth.

To argue that the absence of violence is immoral, is to say that Americanism as we know it, and certainly as it pertains to national ethos as a moral entity, simply does not exist without violence, and perceived righteous violence at that. Love of country is intrinsically tied to violence for many Americans and history has emphasized that reality. Indeed, when the draft was operating as policy, the law *dictated* this ideal. Violence and American 'freedom' have been tethered together since the Puritan 'founders' arrived and subsequently scuffled to the death with the natives. Violence is exemplified rhetorically in celebratory and reverent fashion right there in the national anthem: 'bombs bursting in air' signifies American freedom and unification. Signifiers, symbols, are paramount in Americanism—the flag, the anthem, the fireworks, the statues, the monuments. These symbols provide validation of perceived sacred, *essentialist* Truths thereby in turn (in terms of essentialism) carrying implications of naturalization and culturalization, "[casting] group conflict as rooted in ontologically natural hostility [regarding] religious, ethnic, or cultural difference" (Brown, *Regulating Aversion* 15).

Therefore, illusion and violence are intertwined, for to argue that violence is not a tenet, tradition, or at least a trait of Americanism is to defy or even disgrace the anthem, to deny the troops their due (symbolically, not in terms of actual social wellbeing), and to hinder individual

rights in a gun culture that has produced homegrown terrorism and seemingly countless mass shootings often done in the name of supposed American and/or religious principles.⁴ Many people, often exclusively on the right, will argue that we should not be politicizing issues such as the connection between mass shootings and gun control. And yet, what is the issue if not political (as well as economic which is of course intertwined with the political)? This is the promotion of illusion: purposeful, traditional, strategical illusion. To argue that violence is not a tenet nor tradition nor trait of Americanism is to deny the importance of Americanism in general and is therefore often cast as cynical. Therein lies the required illusion. The Second Amendment, the national anthem, the sanctified symbolism of the flag, particularly in the context of public panoplies, are intertwined with the ‘freedom’ to participate in righteous militarism.⁵

The idea of freedom in America is also tied to the American tenet of capitalism which creates perpetual violence of various sorts, whether because of oil interests, for instance, or utilization of cheap unregulated foreign labour, or because of the perceived lack of deservedness for social welfare for its citizens because of the rugged individualism in American capitalistic ethos. Within the context of American capitalism, contributing to the economy is often perceived as synonymous with contributing to society—a lie that carries ethical, moral, and violent implications; it is an idea that focusses on the character of what it means to be a proper

⁴ For example, in the 2022 mass shooting that took place in Buffalo NY, the shooter produced a manifesto in which he declared himself an ethno-nationalist committed to political violence.

⁵ The website for the 2022 NRA convention, which took place just days after twenty-one people, including nineteen children, were massacred in Texas in yet another school place mass shooting reads, “From entertainment to special events, it's all happening in Houston over Memorial Day weekend. Make plans now to join fellow Second Amendment patriots for a freedom-filled weekend for the entire family as we celebrate Freedom, Firearms, and the Second Amendment!” (qtd. in [Gaudiano](#)). (*Note the intertextualization of family, freedom, firearms, and the Constitution.)

(capitalistic) American, a *deserved* American, and thus too concentrates on those who do not live up to ‘proper’ Americanism.

Regarding those who do not live up to certain economic expectations, there is frequently little willingness, often (but not exclusively) from those on the political right, to help individuals nor to make systemic change, for that too is considered by many people to be anti-American; and resisting change is about maintaining power. This type of rather simplistic and undemocratic thinking often goes something like this: things such as education, infrastructure, and health care that will help the less fortunate (often “urban, non-white, poor [people who] pose an existential threat to America”), costs money, “money that will have to come from taxation. [And p]oor people don’t pay much tax—they’re poor (and lazy)—so it will be the middle class and the wealthy—mostly white people—who have to foot the bill. This is wealth redistribution. This is socialism” (Khan 43). This is un-American. This is morally corrupt. This is wrong. Indeed, socialism, for many people, in terms of views of proper Americanism, in zealotry and in actual religious fervor, might as well be synonymous with Devil worship.

Yet, poverty is an *inevitability* of capitalism—certainly relative poverty is—and violence is too often another inevitability of the draw of capital. Moreover, the ‘health’ of the economy—rather than distribution of wealth or an ethical standard of equality—is often (quite inexplicably though thought to be justified) linked to disparate issues such as marriage, family, race, religion, sexuality, gender, even contraception. By intertwining, or *intertextualizing* such matters, morality and the economy become linked in a very unique American capitalist manner.

What this dissertation speaks to then, is that the idea of what America is, is not only held onto with religious-type zealotry, but it is simply frequently unethical and (ironically) immoral, while again posturing itself as quite the opposite. Another issue being addressed here is that of

‘fundamentalist Americanism’—a terminology briefly introduced as that which pertains to holding that certain American truths are written in stone, are dogmatic, thereby producing the problematic tendency to hold certain truths to be self-evident despite evidence to the contrary.

Therefore, the precise contribution and signification of this dissertation is the examination not of fundamentalist Christianity in America, though that is included in the larger analysis, but of fundamentalist Americanism. I demonstrate that while many countries have strong ideas regarding nationalism, fundamentalist Americanism is unique and is indeed incredibly pervasive and yet insidious at the same time. Fundamentalist Americanism can be entirely obvious across the political spectrum, but at the same time, it hides in plain sight, masquerading as normalcy rather than extremism, providing the foundation for many entire belief systems, while at the same time being inevitably fragmented and delusional.

Fundamentalist Americanism holds that there are distinctly American Truths, and those who oppose these Truths—despite the fact that they are variously interpreted, therefore creating different views of what indeed is the *Truth*—are antithetical to the ultimate metaphysical Reality of Americanism and individual American identity. Fundamentalist Americanism is a faith in the *essence* of the American and the *soul* of America. The intense focus on American *identity* creates an anxiety of appearances, thereby privatizing, individualizing, many issues and thus doing little service to systemic issues. As Sam Cutler, former tour manager for the Grateful Dead, states in the documentary *Long Strange Trip*, “Americans have got this very, very strange and interesting preoccupation with the discovery of what constitutes America” (2017).

*The Normativity of Christianity in America*⁶

Within the widespread preoccupation of what constitutes ‘proper’ Americanism there is a *mélange* of religiosity—specifically Christianity—and a politics of ‘American Values’ that *detrimentally* affects American ethos, American policy, and American action both within and without its borders despite, and *because* of, pious intentions. Fundamentalist Americanism is not Christian Nationalism. It can be, but the latter term does not encapsulate the former. Indeed, fundamentalist Americanism does not need to be tethered to fundamentalist Christianity (as it has often been in the extremely limited use of the former term), but often at times it is, and it is certainly influenced by the prevalent history of Christianity in America, including its Puritan ‘foundations’ and the supposed Christianity of the founding fathers.

Christianity is admittedly (for some) a broad, ‘meta’ term, especially depending on various dogmatic details, but a term that applies here purposefully (apparently) broad and will be further dissected in following pages. I use the term ‘Christian’ in its broadest form because while there are many important differences between denominations, sects, and interpretations of Christianity, I argue that it is Christianity’s presence *in general*, despite its many incarnations, that has influenced American ethos both for those who profess America to be a Christian nation and for those who argue for secularism. Moreover, the influence of and towards dogma within Americanism, due in large part to the hegemonic presence of Christianity, provides the term ‘America’ itself with the supposed self-evidence of many ideals including the ‘reality’ of the necessity for violence and paradoxically also for peace (including violence in the name of

⁶ While this dissertation will address different forms of Christianity (Calvinism, Catholicism, Evangelicalism, etc.), the term is usually broadly utilized simply to refer to those who (profess to) believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the importance of faith, and the implications of heaven and hell therein.

peace), just as the term ‘Christian’ provides the supposed self-evidence of ‘love thy neighbour’ as well as the justification for prejudice, judgement, hatred and murder.

A Christian individual may question whether interpretation of doctrine is flawed in general, in any historical moment, or simply against another’s interpretation, while likewise an American might question how and why their or another’s version of Americanism has become corrupted. We hear these notions in political and religious rhetoric all the time, and we have heard them historically without fail. But if the word ‘Christian’ and the word ‘American’ are linked to dogmatic belief, which is then supposed to somehow be an encapsulation of these terms— ‘Christian’, ‘American’—then the wholeness of the terms becomes paramount and yet impossible to wholly enact.

Thus, while the importance of being ‘American’ is principal and dogmatic in so many contexts, it is also highly contested. The same can be said of Christianity. For instance, an article in the *Daily Mail* titled in part, “‘Don’t question my faith’: Rep. Dan Crenshaw SNAPS at teen who asked him about comments he made about Jesus,” reads,

Crenshaw appeared on the Jocko Podcast in March 2020 to promote his new book *Fortitude*, where he was asked to elaborate on his thoughts on heroism. ‘The important thing is that we have societal hero archetypes that we look up to. Jesus is a hero archetype, Superman is a hero archetype. Real characters too, I could name a thousand.’ [a] teen quoted Crenshaw as saying, adding civil rights icon Rosa Parks and former President Ronald Reagan to the list. She seemed to take issue with him putting Jesus in the same category as Superman. ‘I can’t wrap my head around this,’ [the student] said after reading his own words back to him. A clearly irate Crenshaw retorted, ‘Well, I’ll help you. Put a period after the word Jesus and don’t question my faith,’ he said dryly.

[...] Crenshaw appeared defiant, once again telling the Tea Party members in the room ‘Don’t question my faith.’ [...] ‘You guys can ask questions about all of these things and I will answer them. But don’t question my faith,’ Crenshaw defended. The teen, again referring to the quote she cited, said: ‘I can question your faith if this is what you said.’ [...] ‘That’s - I mean you can read the quote again, but nowhere in that quote am I saying Jesus is not real. That’s a ridiculous statement,’ the GOP lawmaker responded. Crenshaw [...] told the teen she was ‘twisting’ his words. [...Crenshaw] took it a step further, chiding the young Texan that her comments were ‘not very Christian.’

Exchanges such as this are entirely common when arguing religion, politics, patriotism, and, specifically in America, Christianity and Americanism. But again, it is the pervasiveness of these arguments that point to why this dissertation does not focus entirely specifically on one type of Christianity or one type of Americanism because it is their existence within the metanarrative of national ethos in general that is important in how Christianity and Americanism shape public consciousness.⁷

Yet, the seemingly paradoxical element, is that definitions and hard distinctions do become more important than practice in many circumstances, while who and what actions are exemplary of the terms is constantly in question. Love the poor, or implore the poor to provide money to their god that they may be financially rewarded in kind? Uphold freedom and liberty at all costs, or fight for the religious ‘freedom’ of certain Americans, such as the religious liberty to

⁷ Therefore, while Calvinism may be a more traditional evangelical fundamentalism, and Roman Catholicism is not as mainstream as it is in many Latin American countries, for instance, and while some more explicit characterizations of the range of positions and their specific relation to American culture will be examined as the dissertation unfolds, the distinctions of how Christianity in America is different from strongly Catholic or orthodox contexts (for example in some of central Europe and Latin America) is how in America violence and illusion are entrenched, *intertextualized* with patriotism, capitalism and national ethos.

govern over another's body? Is the impeachment of a president a partisan and un-American strategy, or is the defence of that president partisan and un-American? Do we forgive a preacher for that which he condemned others with fire and brimstone and then was caught committing the same act, or do we judge even though we have been told to judge not? The questions in this regard abound.

In other words, rather than deciphering what is the 'Christian thing to do', or what is the 'American thing to do', or what the Republican or Democrat thing to do is, the issue should be what is the ethical thing to do, the reasoned thing to do, seeking social justice rather than 'proper' dogmatic *interpretation* of ethos. And sure, at times, many people are pulled in the correct direction of being humane, but often, simultaneously pulling at their shoulder, at their conscience, and too often winning, is the 'Jiminy Cricket' of ideological loyalty, belief, faith, what is Right in the Big Picture of our existence in our given and interpreted realities. Moreover, the *intertextualization* of American Values and Christianity must be examined as each discourse emboldens the other when they are intertwined.

The 'Inevitability' of Christian America

Normative Christian values permeate the socio-cultural American landscape. Consider the following examples: religious holidays; the Protestant work ethic that informs the American Dream; the neoconservative-neoliberal alliance that pushes the Dream to its limit under the utopian guise of freedom, family, and the flag; the exceptionalism of the 'beacon on the hill'; 'In God We Trust'; Manifest Destiny; the oaths of government officials; sexuality policing; gender policing; the origin and continued justification of certain laws and punishments; archaic laws that are still on the books (such as Sabbath prohibitions, sexual prohibitions, and the like); the issues regarding Obama and Islam (is he a Muslim or isn't he?); the necessary Christian religiosity of

presidents past and present; and the role that religion tends to play in foreign policy, for instance, the Cold War, Vietnam, or George W. Bush's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan wherein the not so subtle subtext is certainly a war of religious difference, of right versus wrong, of the Christian Us versus the savage Muslim Other. This is not to take anyone 'off the hook'; there is savagery on many sides, left and right and other, cloaked in different but similar dogmatic values.

Gaston Espinosa argues that "religion has been one of the most important behind-the-scenes influences on the American presidency over the past two centuries but especially over the last thirty years" (1). Religion may influence behind the scenes (which can be terrifying, disturbing, and catastrophic to be sure), but *public* religiosity is terribly important in America as well, and certainly in American politics. In each instance, the religion at work in the context of the American presidency, is some form or denomination, or deciphering of, or distortion of, Christianity.

Due to Christianity's historical hegemonic hold in America, certain rhetoric and narratives are privileged over others in dominant discourse appealing to the faithful, but I argue, also appealing to those *who do not espouse* Christian belief. For Christianity and Americanism have long been intertextualized with one another, meaning that Americanism does not require literal Christian belief—though that is often the case—because it has certainly inherited many of its traits.

The argument that Christianity and American ethos are intertwined, or intertextualized, is to say, in simple terms, that Christianity is very much a part of Americanism, both in practice and in theory, whether professed to or otherwise, recognized or otherwise. While Christianity and Americanism on their own terms may be filled with righteous intention, both morally and ethically, the argument here is that their intertextualization in American history has carried with

it many destructive ideas and destructive actualities that belie supposed American truths and supposed American values, supposed Christian truths and Christian values, in favour of dogmatic fictions.

John Hagee, of the immensely influential, popular, and profitable Hagee Ministries, demonstrates overt intertextualization (of his vision and version) of Christianity and Americanism in a Sermon titled “Take America Back: Reclaiming America’s Freedom.” He states that the 2020 election is about “freedom versus socialism, [...] prosperity versus 70% taxation. It’s life liberty and the pursuit of happiness versus the destruction of our police force and a dictatorship of anarchy. [...] We the people of the United States must choose our destiny. As for me and my household, we choose the Lord. Hallelujah. [...] Let us return to righteousness” (“Take America Back”).⁸

Hagee begins this sermon—which is interspersed with selective readings from the Bible, and wherein the backdrop graphic behind Hagee is an old timey American soldier carrying a bayonet—by telling the tale of America’s beginnings: the Mayflower exodus and the Puritan pursuit of religious freedom. He suggests that America’s *destiny* is interwoven with biblical prophecy of apocalyptic end times by linking the timing of the Puritan founding to the timing of the current historical moment. Then, after espousing the evils of ‘Fake News’, socialism, and the evils of the teacher’s union, his definitive statement is this: “Wake up America. Our Future is at stake. [...] Ask] God almighty [to] preserve our nation” (“Take America Back”).

⁸ Hagee, interestingly, and I argue hypocritically in light of his constant emphasis on John 3:16, is also a proponent of ‘dual covenant’ theology, which argues that Jews do not necessarily need to be ‘saved’ to be heaven-bound which seems mainly geared to avoiding the awkwardness of often intensely Zionist evangelicals having to tell Jews that they are hell-bound without Jesus—always an awkward matter. I cannot be sure of course of what Hagee actually believes, but it seems an interesting concession, perhaps even a con, considering his emphasis on literal belief in the resurrection in order to ‘earn’ salvation. However, this is one of many examples of *selective adherence* to scripture, and of various interpretations that are often made to fit within the confines of ideology and dogmatism. Indeed, many ‘Jews for Jesus’ would likely challenge Hagee’s theology.

This is exemplary of intertextualization at work. Hagee takes selectively from scripture, tells flawed historical Christian-American anecdotes regarding the founding fathers, the constitution, the Puritans, and the like, and ties it all together with the message of *his* version of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (all concepts and ideals that are terribly ambiguous) in terms of Americanism and its Christian foundations, thus solidifying for his followers a *singular* narrative upheld by his disparate intertextual sourcing.

Just as there are different and contested versions of proper Americanism, so too are there contested versions and interpretations of Christianity. Nevertheless, Christianity is vital to Americanism and Americanism is vital to many interpretations of Christianity. Indeed, every single American president has publicly identified as being a Christian of one stripe or another, including, some (such as I) might argue, bizarrely, Donald Trump. There are simply too many votes to gain or lose by otherwise not professing to the nation the internalization of the Christian faith.

However, while there are many varying forms of Christianity practiced in the United States, too frequently the large presence of Protestants, Catholics, Evangelicals, Mormons, Baptists, and other Christian groups, is treated as evidence of religious pluralism, rather than evidence of denominations, branches, or sects, that are of the same ideological cloth, the same code of belief. This is the case especially insofar as the basis of faith for each group is the resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, and that eternal salvation comes through faith in Christ and thus, in most cases, the corresponding belief is that hell awaits the non-believer.

Kenneth Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown (2014) state that in terms of the size of “Major Religious Traditions,” America is 2% Jewish, 24.8% non-affiliate, 27.6% Evangelical Protestant, 15.9% Mainstream Protestant, 7% Black Protestant, and 22.6% Catholic (28). They

argue that this “confirms the extent of religious pluralism in the United States” and “[n]o single religious group comes close to claiming a majority of the population” (Wald and Calhoun-Brown 28). Yet, the vast majority of Wald and Calhoun-Brown’s numbers represent Christians. Indeed, they admit that “three groups together account for two-thirds of the American religious universe: white evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics (the single largest denomination), and white mainline Protestants” (28). Wald and Calhoun-Brown do not provide an example of religious pluralism as they suggest. Instead, they demonstrate the dominance of Christianity in America in general despite the (certainly not to be altogether ignored) differences of specific theological interpretations, scripture, and ideological differences that create various but similar religious communities. Indeed, further statistical investigation would demonstrate there to be many more subsets, denominations, and cults, sects, and traditions that are still one form or another of Christianity. ‘Christianity’ may be a term that does not properly encompass all of its differences and intricacies, but that is precisely the point here. While it may have mattered more at the time that John F. Kennedy was a Catholic rather than Protestant, he was still a Christian by most people’s standards, and it certainly matters much less today that Joe Biden is Catholic for at least he is still a Christian as well. All Trump had to do was make a declaration that he was a Christian and that was that, no matter how much his unrepentant rhetoric and behaviours—past and present—seem to betray that notion.

Espinosa writes, “One of the main reasons American presidents have always self-identified with a Christian denomination is that Christians make up the vast majority of the U.S. population” (19). Indeed, when examining the Evangelical / fundamentalist divide that split American Protestantism between 1870 and 1920 Espinosa argues that “although it appears that Evangelicalism is a new development in the history of American Protestantism, in many respects

it is simply a continuation of the long-standing Evangelical impulse that has guided American Protestantism since the Puritans first landed in the New World” (28).

Similarly, regardless of the correlation between the Christianity of American presidents and the population of Christians in the United States, even secular Americanism has been greatly informed by Christian traits and ideals. The claims of the separation of church and state in America have been vastly overly valorized. It is not too much to say that this often-toxic mix of nationalism and religion has made patriotism an imperative, yet at times, a treacherous aspect of Americanism—dangerous for those who do not follow ‘properly’. Faith is requisite in these versions of Americanism, and in American ethos generally speaking. And much like in Christianity, without faith and subsequent obedience, one is lost and title-less (or identity-insufficient) without their obligatory participation.

Christianity is so entrenched in Americanism that its tendencies have become those of American patriotism. Thus, *faith* is a key component. There is little doubt that those across the political spectrum believe—have faith—in American values. But faith can be treacherous terrain, not for the believer, necessarily, but for those considered to be not of the faith. This is a trait of religion, certainly Christianity, and also of secular Americanism. As one Trump supporter states regarding Barack Obama being a Muslim and a terrorist (although I suspect this is coming from a Christian point of view), “Do I have proof? No. Do I have articles? No. My mind is made up [without any information that Obama is a Muslim]” (“Daily Show Attends Rally”). This is an example of “symbolic meaning formation,” wherein people create and share communal meanings often influenced by mass-media venues (McLeod 657). There exists a historical tendency, magnified by intertextual Christian-Americanist dogma, to (attempt to) subjugate others according to one’s fears. Why otherwise would it matter if Obama is or is not a Muslim?

Why would ‘Muslim’ be something to fear if not for its supposedly anti-Christian and anti-American sentiment and the supposedly innate connections to Otherness, Acts of Terror, and to violence toward Otherness?

Violence in a Christian America

The callous, self-serving, violent actions that have taken place due to the history of the intertextualization of Christianity and Americanism can be seen in war, slavery, and systemic racism of course (all of which can be justified biblically if one so chooses). But violence is also present in seemingly less obvious yet oft-appalling actualities such as the initial (non)response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, the way the poor are treated (despite Jesus’ teachings according to the Christian scriptures, and despite American ideals of equality), and the discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community (despite Jesus’ teachings of ‘love thy neighbour’ according to scripture, and despite Americanist—supposedly dogmatic—ideals of equality). Violence is evident in the Trump administration’s policies of tearing families apart at the southern border which is violent not only in a potentially physical manner, but is horrifically violent psychologically, especially for children who may not ever fully recover from such an experience, or indeed, may never recover their parent(s). Furthermore, capital punishment is state-sanctioned violence that is still practiced in the majority of the United States. It is the right of the state to commit murder. (And while it has been suspended in some states, it is most prevalent in states with substantial Christian fundamentalist populations.)

The history and current state of police violence applies here as well. Many people find this violence to be not only entirely just and justified, but they are morally and ethically compelled to support laws allowing for state-sanctioned murder both in country as well as outside of its borders. (The same folks may at the same time be stridently anti-abortion, ‘Pro-

Life’.) “Self survival,” Sister Helen Prejean writes, “seems to dominate [the] moral horizon” (41).⁹ The self-certification of individual and group ideology also dominates the ‘moral horizon’, often regardless of actual circumstance. How else could Trump have garnered such an enormous following of Evangelical Christians? Sister Helen also points out that in America (and here she emphasizes the practices of the Christian American South), “99 percent of death-row inmates are poor” (47).

Many acts of violence take place in the name of a Christian America, rather than counter to it. Or, they take place in the name of Americanism, whilst the Christian underpinnings of such may go unnoticed (vice versa as well). Life and death, quality of life and death, are absolutely at stake because of patriotic ideals, because of the *sacralization* of American Values.

What establishes deviation from proper American values in the United States is often located within the ideological nucleus of what constitutes a distinctly American morality and American ethical activity which in turn cycle back to influencing American values. “Circular reasoning,” Zygmunt Bauman argues, “is infallible even if not exactly logical, and this is why so many of us resort to it—not so much to resolve baffling problems, but to be absolved of the obligation to worry about them” (*Does Ethics Have a Chance* 7). The result, as well as the internal mechanism at work, is the privileging of faith over logic, belief over reason.

Moreover, what is considered deviation from American values often takes place in the name of American values. Consider the two opposing points of view regarding the Trump / Biden election results, both from an Americanist perspective. Each side argues that American democracy is at stake, and that the other side is acting in an utterly un-American manner. The core of the argument hinges, on both sides, on the imperative question that is being posed, which

⁹ It has also been often said that there is no hate like Christian love.

is who is desecrating the *soul*, the *character*, (and not in the following terms but certainly in their sentiment) the *metanarrative*, and *metaculture* of America?¹⁰

Deviance, Morality, Ethics, and the Influence of Meta

Precisely due to its lack of substantiation in many of the differing opinions about what constitutes that soul of America and the like, meta matters most; meta provides Truth in the eye of the beholder. Metanarrative and metaculture provide simplified answers to difficult questions and quandaries. Consider this passage from Sister Helen wherein she is questioning a state executioner about his job and his reconciling it with Jesus' teachings according to scripture: he states, "I don't experience any contradiction with my Christianity. Never thought about it too much, really. Executions are the law, and Christians are supposed to observe the law, and that's that" (123). He adds, "My wife, she's a good Christian woman, and she supports the death penalty, and believe me, you can't find a better Christian than my wife" (Prejean 123). These are anti-intellectual statements ('never thought about it too much') which lack substantiation especially regarding the 'fact' that we could not find a better Christian than this man's wife. Nevertheless, I suppose, as the executioner states, that that is (supposed to be) that—end of discussion.

What is created, then, when metanarrative and metaculture solidify in American national ethos, is a national ethos that contains the varied list of ambiguous keywords and catch phrases that are treated as *sacrosanct*, but which are utilized in various manners across the political spectrum—'who we are', freedom, democracy, patriotism, America, the law, etc.—in turn influencing how these words are to be followed in accordance with other hallowed American

¹⁰ Metaculture has various definitions and connotations in different contexts. Here it is used to describe particular groups in terms of (supposed) shared belief, ritual behaviours, sense of community, customs, and the generality of manifestations of any or all of the aforementioned.

historical imperatives such as the supposed purity of the ‘founding fathers’ and the ‘holy scriptures’ of the American Constitution, the latter of which is paradoxically deified *and* amendable and the amendments then also become deified (yet, again, technically amendable though most often treated as dogma).

The deification of the founding fathers and of the constitution is very much influenced by Christian ideals and practices (and therein symbolic meaning formation). This includes the widespread belief that America was founded as a Christian nation and that the founders were indeed Christian. It is revisionist history, (purposeful) historical amnesia, as the interesting paradox is that while many of the founders were deeply and quite conventionally Christian, others, were not. Yet, there is reverence applied to the ‘Word’ of the constitution and to the ‘Founders’ that is to be unquestioned in the minds of many people. The States are supposedly united, bounded by freedom, democracy, and allegedly, equality. Yet socialist ideas, for example, that actually embody ideals such as equality are considered by many to be revolutionary, in a *deviant*, anti-American and anti-Christian sense, and thus are entirely reprehensible despite legitimate Christian and American-values basis for such ideas.

In *The Relativity of Deviance*, John Curra states, “Social reactions and cultural meanings strongly affect the type of deviance that exists in society, and patterns of deviance constantly evolve and change over time” (2-3). This may be a very reasonable, easily understandable, and easily demonstrated observation. One might be considered deviant because of race, sexuality, gender, ideology, in any certain historical moments only to be less deviant or indeed part of hegemonic norms in another historical moment. But more often than not, many people are myopic and morally unmovable in their views of what they consider acceptable or what they believe is deviance. Many people are also often trapped in the power of the moment, the way

things 'ought to be' because, well, that is just the way things have historically been and therefore the way things ought to be now.

Thus, while symbolic meaning formation may involve "constantly metamorphosing communal meanings," meaning also often becomes static when trapped within dogmatism, trapped within metanarrative and metaculture (McLeod 657). This is especially true in regard to laws, scriptural ordinances, and ideological certainty, including ideologically-certain views of what it means to be a member of American society, which is an ideal that a large contingent of Americans, and many patriotic institutionalized refrains such as the National Anthem and the Pledge of Allegiance link to 'God-Fearing', and specifically to Christianity. One need not look any further than the incredibly contentious Pro-Life / Pro-Choice debate, specifically but not exclusively in the United States, which divides people along issues of religion, freedom, violence, and compassion, in a myriad of manners.

Deviance rears its head on each side of reproductive rights issues, especially regarding the act of abortion which is very much an issue of religion and American freedom. For those opposed to reproductive rights, they believe that to be Pro-Choice, and especially to terminate a pregnancy, is to be complicit or explicitly involved in deviant acts. On the other hand, the (mostly male and often Christian) lawmakers who work to make safe, legal abortions, as well as other reproductive-related services *unavailable*, demonstrate their deviance by taking certain rights away from individuals while dictating how and even when babies are to be born to women. Indeed, deviance is implied by the binary semantical choices that label each side of the abortion debate. If one is not Pro-Life, what are they, Pro-Death? If one is not Pro-Choice, do they not believe in the central American tenet of individual freedom? And if one is Pro-Life but

also supports capital punishment and/or neglect provisions for the poor (for example), are they not Pro-*Birth* rather than Pro-Life?

Furthermore, though this may seem incongruent, but is entirely related, should a baker be allowed—and is it ethically legitimate—to refuse to bake a cake for a customer because of moral objection to the sexual orientation of the customer(s)? The Supreme Court ruled in the baker’s favour. Should an individual have the right to refuse another individual service (in a staunchly capitalistic country no less) if there is moral disagreement and ethical differences between them?

In regard to the latter, a restaurant owner in Virginia asked Sarah Huckabee-Sanders to leave the establishment based on the restaurant’s staff’s consensus. Responding to the request that she leave, and her subsequently obliging to do so after the request was made, Huckabee-Sanders stated, “[The restaurant owner’s] actions say far more about her than about me. I always do my best to treat people, including those I disagree with, respectfully and will continue to do so” (Dellinger). This statement and the entire scenario are specific examples of the murkiness of dealing in morality and ethics for a variety of reasons. Was it ethical for the restaurant to deny service based on their judgement of Sanders’ morality? Does Sanders’ unethical conduct require or qualify for a morality-influenced response from the restaurant staff? The queries do not stop there. At the same time, history (in this case the specifics of what Huckabee-Sanders defended regarding certain Trump administration policies) *should* speak for itself. But therein lies the irony (wherein the actual meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning), the paradox; history should make certain things all too obvious, and yet, beginning in elementary school (or before), the views of American history are at times distorted, insidious, ridiculous, but nonetheless a reality of Americanism.

American history is marred by myth, even as it happens in the (relative) present. So, history does not speak for itself, and recognizing that is an undermined component of American public consciousness. Indeed, recognition in general is a terribly important facet of consciousness. That is why this dissertation addresses the prominence of the stories within American history, history mythologized, and American ethos, including when, where, and wherein religion and nationalism become intertwined, intertextualized, presumed to be eternal, *meta*.

‘Meta’ refers here to *encompassing* ideas, cultural practices, narratives about narratives, stories about stories; it is a term for that which is perceived and often accepted to be circumscribed reality(s) by means of glossing over actualities, nuance, fact, in order to purposefully or otherwise provide *certainty* in the face of required distinctions or at the very least, examination. Furthermore, the term ‘certainty’ is utilized here not in regard to day-to-day precarious pragmatic realities such as paychecks and taxes wherein certainty is most always welcome, but to the historically common human quest to find solace in metaphysical, yet ultimately human understanding—the all too frequent reliance on finding ideals in foundational higher truths. Meta-understandings provide ideological components of encompassing ideas and ideals of culture, stories, and the perceived ‘wholeness’ or the *unfractured* nature of those narratives and their place in public consciousness.

Patricia Waugh, in *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, writes, “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). I use the definition of ‘metafiction’ as a counterpoint here, because ‘meta’ as it is used throughout this dissertation, mainly with regard to

metanarrative and metaculture, is something quite different than metafiction, insofar as the folly of ‘meta’ in the latter circumstances is precisely the lack of self-consciousness or self-reflectivity, the lack of questioning of what is or may not be, of that which may be fiction, actualities, or reality.

Waugh continues, “In a sense, metafiction rests on a version of the [...] uncertainty principle: an awareness that ‘for the smallest building blocks of matter, every process of observation causes a major disturbance’, and that it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed” (3). Again, this description of metafiction is counterpoint. Indeed, the metaunderstandings that this dissertation addresses work to stifle self-reflection and encourage willful ignorance thereby bypassing the awareness that metafiction explores and employs. Meta, in these regards, has more in common with terms such as ‘meta-politics’ and ‘meta-rhetoric’ which point to the “*problem* of how human beings reflect, construct, and mediate their experience of the world” (Waugh 2; emphasis added). One of the myriads of manners—including intertextualized logics—in which experience, understanding, and *meaning* are constructed and mediated, especially within the context of this dissertation, is through religion and national identity, and specifically, again within this context, national identity and religion intertextualized, as they are within Americanism.

Meta-Americanism

This dissertation is not an indictment of each and every American citizen of course, nor is it a condemnation of all things Christian or American. But it is also not—as many other critiques of aspects of Americanism *have* claimed—an indictment of only those on the political and religious right in America. The left and the secular are guilty of utilizing the very same Americanist *logic*, albeit usually for different ideological and pragmatic purposes. The left is

entrenched in the meta-ideals of American values as well. For those all across the political spectrum in America, there is power in invoking ‘American Values’, just as there is power in invoking (the Christian) God’s name. “Drop God’s name onto something,” comments musician Ric Alba, speaking as a gay man and a Christian, “and enough people will applaud it, no matter how unfair, unkind, or unreasonable” (O. Taylor). Similarly, drop ‘American values’ onto something and the same applies. In doing, inner conviction is supported by a supposedly higher truth which then provides dogmatic metaphysical support—proof of the truth of inner conviction. The left and the right both perpetually invoke the supposed power of locating individual morality and locating ethics in American values.

Subsequently, political beliefs, morality, and ethics are, or can become, entirely intertwined, thereby affecting one another in potentially narrow-sighted ways. Novelist and journalist Lawrence Wright states, “If you hold strong political beliefs, they might not affect your behaviour at all – in fact, they rarely do. But if you have powerful religious feeling, then it dictates every moment of your life” (qtd. in Morris, “How Lawrence Wright’s...” 41). I argue that ‘rarely’ is a dramatic overstatement on Wright’s part. Indeed, Wright is incorrect in what he states here regarding political belief, especially regarding Americanism. Because of its intertextualization with Christianity and the *tendencies of belief* therein, Americanism contributes to behaviour in whatever ideological form one’s Americanism dictates their political belief. Indeed, Wright himself states that after 9/11 he “remember[ed] so distinctly the sense immediately after the attacks that, ‘Oh we’re going to have to stand for something now’. [...] Instead we invaded Iraq. And it eviscerated that sense that we are people who want to do the right thing and are the hope of the world” (qtd. in Morris, How Lawrence Wright’s...” 41). This

statement exemplifies Americanist metanarrative: ‘we are the hope of the world’ and ‘people who want to do the right thing’. It is national identity representing morality.

Wright is making generalizations that speak to the whole of the nation, thereby (re)mythologizing what America stands for. Furthermore, the invasion of Iraq was widely supported not only because of metaunderstanding (including ‘we are good and they are evil’) and George W. Bush’s meta-rhetoric regarding Americanism, but because, counter to Wright’s suggestion, political beliefs do indeed dictate daily behaviours. The Iraq war was considered righteous by George W. Bush and by much of the citizenry, although their reasoning was (purposefully) erroneous, because of the privileging of certain Americanist and Christian beliefs. “We will win this conflict,” states George W. Bush regarding the Iraq war, “To every soldier I say this, ‘Your mission is defined...Your goal is just’ [...] May God’s peace and blessings be upon him and his companions; May God continue to bless America” (qtd. in Thistlethwaite 265).

Rhetoric and Mythology

Yes, ‘may God *continue* to bless America’. Along with the above stated central argument of this dissertation regarding illusion, cynicism, violence, and immorality, I argue that pervasive, seemingly benign, Americanist (oft intertextualized with Christian) (meta)rhetoric is not only often essentially quite empty and superfluous, but rather than being benign it is frequently incredibly dangerous especially when repeated on both sides of the aisle ad nauseum. ‘America First’ or even ‘God Bless America’ may seem like simple patriotic refrains, but when they enter public consciousness, or moreover become a primary, sacred element of national ethos, they may be far from harmless, may be terribly unethical, emblematic of inequality, and produce (the potential for) violence. Indeed, such refrains are just the kind of shortcut to thinking that allows

for injustice and inequality to exist perpetually within Americanism, to go unnoticed, to be quieted, effaced from history, or to be considered *just*.

An example: In terms of Americanist metanarrative and meta-rhetoric, declaring that racist acts or racist ideology are antithetical to American values is a refrain that we may hear from someone on the left or the right and it may seem a proper moral ideological position; but it is highly problematic. American values were built upon a foundation of racism and should be recognized as such. This type of American-values statement does not ignore history per se, but it re-envision it, thereby coming dangerously close to opposing rhetoric and ideology that may outright celebrate America's racist history and racist present. This type of rhetoric effaces history in favour of mythology thereby allowing (mis)representations of the past to influence the present.

Instead of recognizing a historical process of steps forward and steps backwards, thereby acknowledging that progress is not always linear but possible, history is often framed in terms of an America that has 'conquered' their faulty first steps of slavery; in the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s racist policy was left behind; when Obama was voted in a post-racial society was recognized, celebrated; when gay marriage was legalized, those prejudices were conquered as well. And these are only positive optimistically framed mythology(s). For many people, much sociocultural progress is rather considered to be regressive action that betrays proper Americanism.

Therefore, we often hear the rhetoric, again, from both the left and the right, that 'America has lost its way'. In each and most every case, progress is, again, not linear but possible; yet, the linear is longed for. Therefore, it is ironic that somehow at any (and/or every) historical moment, America needs to *return* to Americanism proper. Yet, if this type of thinking and espoused rhetoric is so historically common, that somehow America has never been in such

a dire state as it is in any historical moment, then at what point was America on its proper American course? Puritanism? This is where the rhetoric, faith, and narratives of utopian vision and apocalyptic ‘realities’ come in, the backward gaze to Eden-like mythology and the catastrophic future if renewal is not found or if the citizenry make the wrong political American Values choices.

The failure to uphold American Values intertextualized with Christian Values in fundamentalist fashion, and the crises caused by this, as well as the need for restoration of utopian ideals from a dystopian present and/or future apocalyptic end, are all present in the following statement from the Reverend Jerry Falwell:

We must reverse the trend America finds herself in today. [...] Young people [...] have learned to disrespect the family as God has established it. [...] I believe that America was built on integrity, on faith in God, and on hard work. [...] Every American who looks at the facts must share a deep concern and burden for our country. [...] If Americans will face the truth, our nation can be turned around and can be saved from the evils and the destruction that have fallen upon every other nation that has turned its back on God. [W]e can turn this country around. [...] I believe that Americans want to see this country come back to basics, back to values, back to biblical morality, back to sensibility, and back to patriotism. [...] It is now time to take a stand on certain moral issues, and we can only stand if we have leaders. We must stand against the Equal Rights Amendment, the feminist revolution, and the homosexual revolution. We must have a revival in this country. (17-18)

We must stand against equal rights? Is that not a foundational American Value? I suppose it can all get quite confusing when practicing dogmatization. Again, and perpetually sought for, it is

ironic that somehow at any (and/or every) historical moment, America needs to *return* to Americanism proper. This was written by Falwell in 1980, but it resonates with many people currently and surely these ideas did not come into fruition only once Falwell put pen to paper.

Likewise, during the last weeks of the 2020 election campaign Trump provided this dystopian outlook: “[Biden will] bury you in regulations, dismantle your police departments, dissolve our borders, confiscate your guns, terminate religious liberty, destroy your suburbs” (qtd. in Superville). He also Tweeted, “This election is a choice between a TRUMP RECOVERY or a BIDEN DEPRESSION. It’s a choice between a TRUMP BOOM or a BIDEN LOCKDOWN. It’s a choice between our plan to Kill the virus – or Biden’s plan to kill the American Dream!” (qtd. in Superville; original emphasis). Trump continues, at a rally in Wisconsin, “If you vote for Biden, it means no kids in school, no graduations, no weddings, no Thanksgiving, no Christmas and no Fourth of July together. Other than that, you have a wonderful life” (qtd. in Superville).

While polemical rhetoric may be typical of many election campaigns the world over, and this rhetoric is often filled with fear mongering, fear of certain types of sociocultural change, and with impassioned refusal to accept change, there is something uniquely American about this type of thinking and the pervasive, perpetual, widespread fear of catastrophic demise due to change.¹¹ Whether the fear is linked to the economy, healthcare, or any other issue, it is also in nearly every instance subsequently linked to American values which are linked to religious identity, the latter whether overtly, knowingly, or otherwise. The idea of ‘it can’t happen here’ exists across

¹¹ The yellow vests in France and the simultaneous far-right candidacies of Marine LePen and Eric Zenmour turn on a sense of a catastrophic loss of ‘Frenchness’ to be sure, and there are many similar examples regarding nationalism and fear of immigration. But amongst other things, the ‘uniquely American’ component, I argue, is that the fear of losing American Values exists *across* the political spectrum, again, historically, and perpetually. It is not fringe or considered extremist (though it can be precisely that), but it is a mainstream part of American rhetoric and ethos.

the political spectrum. We heard it in the rhetoric following the attack on the capitol on January 6, 2021: 'Violence is un-American'. Is it really? The hubris and hypocrisy of such a statement of historical amnesia is astounding.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about many American politicians and citizens comparing lockdown policies and vaccination mandates to Hitler's policies against the Jews, which is not just historical amnesia, but an intentional rewriting of history that purposefully amplifies the catastrophic component of change in the here and now. Moreover, whatever, in any context, the 'it' in regard to 'it can't happen here' (meaning that which cannot and should not take place in the context of proper Americanism), provokes the incredulity of the actuality of the 'it', which is both bemusing as well as evidence of the illusory aspects of Americanism, especially fundamentalist Americanism.

Crises and History Repeated

Things change; life is processional, but the degree to which things have changed is often exaggerated in terms of progress while the way things *should be* is overly idyllic and often illusory despite the aforementioned trepidation towards transition and transformation. Trump's administration was absolutely disastrous in so many respects. But let us not forget that in the eyes of many, and in actuality, all administrations have caused harm. What makes Trump an outlier is his bombast, his ignorance, and his willingness to do things outright that used to be done secretly, with finesse, with caution of public (mis)trust. There is a persistent idea that America is in a perpetual state of crisis. Well, it is. Life is a constant state of crisis. Morality is crisis; ethics is crisis. At times certain crises are worse than others, but in terms of perpetuality, there is a difference between crisis and peril. There is also a difference between America being in crisis and (one's individual idea of) Americanism being in crisis.

The way that many of these things are often talked about, thought about, written about, and framed, frequently leans toward the apocalyptic while wishing for the utopian. In short, public perception often lacks realist awareness, awareness of actualities, and ethos requires illusion in both its negativity and positivity. People of every generation fall prey to the thinking of ‘It’s not like it was in my day. Back in my day...’. In a nation that reveres progress as an essential American Truth, there is also frequently a simultaneous need for reversion and the need to return to the proper course of American values.

When American values, however defined or interpreted, inform not only American identity but are also vital to individual identity, they work to fill a void of unknowing within experience with supposed truth. Thus, when those values are threatened, American identity and individual identity, the ‘core’ of who one is because of what one believes, is threatened. American Reality itself is threatened, destabilized. This is why it is a dangerous and violent practice to find ‘Truth’ in American Values. Moreover, these ‘Truths’ are *essentialist* ‘Truths’ meaning they carry with them fundamentalist logic which portrays reality in a manner that cannot be swayed by actualities that belie its Truth, its (unrecognized) metanarrative status.

When deeply entrenched metanarrative(s) (producing and sustaining elements of essentialism and fundamentalism and vice versa) is/are perceived to be threatened by fracture, then not only might American Truth be destabilized, but individual Truth as well. There are many historical American examples of the worry of fracture—Iraq, the fear of Islam, and the violent response to the ‘Red Menace’ of communism among them. In the current historical moment, metanarrative (despite equality supposedly being a metanarrative American characteristic) is threatened by the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests therein, wherein an honest reckoning and evaluation of systemic racism and the historical and present

actualities of such, threaten the vital mythologized ‘Truth’ of America’s righteous history and the symbolic representation of said righteousness.

The Symbolic

Identity is often informed and supported symbolically. For instance, the American flag, or the cross and the nativity scene in Christianity are simply symbolic of ideals and perceived truths. Yet, to desecrate any one of these symbols is to violate values that are at the core of individual reality, belief, and understanding. Indeed, Reverend Barry Lynn argues that when it comes to “religious icons and public property” the issue exemplifies “the ultimate triumph of symbolism over substance” (86). All communication is symbolic; but when identity is informed by the type of symbolism that Lynn speaks to, ‘reality’ overtakes actualities while ethics and morality become informed, comprised, and compromised by signifiers of dogma. Lynn cites the biblical Ten Commandments, which many Christians, including former Alabama Supreme Court chief justice Roy Moore, have fought to hold a symbolic place in judicial buildings as “the font of all moral and civic law” which Lynn correctly asserts is “wrong legally, theologically, and historically” (89, 88). Moore further demonstrates the symbolic realm superseding actualities by fighting as hard as he did for his religious rights while more than tainting his cause as he later became famous for his erotic pursuit of young teens at Alabama shopping malls. This is the power of symbols; however, the desecration or removal of symbols can provoke reaction that is stronger than the desecration of actual living human lives.

We can see evidence of this when a sports figure, for example, is reviled because they take a knee during the national anthem—a symbolic gesture that is in turn met by contempt for desecrating the symbolism of the flag and the anthem. We can also see evidence of symbols being privileged over human lives when judges, for instance, (most of whom at state level are

voted in by the public in the United States and are thereby often compelled by populism to please their constituents by demonstrating their strictness when it comes to law and order) hand out longer than necessary sentences in order to make an example—or a symbol—of an individual person.

See the story of John Sinclair in this regard. Counterculture revolutionary Abbie Hoffman, in 1969, writes,

John Sinclair is a huge lover with masses of curly black hair flowing all over his head and shoulders. [...] He and his White Panther brothers and sisters from Ann Arbor, Michigan, are the most alive force in the whole Midwest. They turn on thousands of kids each week to their own beauty and build them into warriors and artists of the New Nation. For this John Sinclair was entrapped into giving two joints of grass to two undercover [cops]. For this some bald-headed judge named Columbo sentenced John Sinclair to nine-and-a-half to ten years in the penitentiary at Jackson, Michigan. (136)

This is an example (and not an untypical example) of a subjugation of human rights for the sake of a symbolic statement. To speak of American values as though if they are collectively followed then some sort of *utopian* condition of shared humanity would take over—or be reinstated as ‘Make America Great Again’ insinuates—is not only to ignore the fact that American values are interpreted differently by different people who may nonetheless have American values in common, but to ignore the fact that American values *produce* injustice, violence, and inequality. (Aldous Huxley refers to utopian thinking / reality as the “insane life” of utopia (vii)).

Furthermore, referencing Hoffman and Columbo in this example also demonstrates two polemical opposing worldviews colliding both in the name of American values and both which

share a utopian outlook (from the, or in the, dystopian present) in terms of ordinance to said values.

Thus, Americanism is inevitably flawed as a metanarrative concept and as a metacultural reality, and to act as though the problem is not the faith in the values themselves but instead is an issue of the lack of *proper discipleship* is highly problematic and has been an issue since the Puritan ‘founders’ left Europe seeking to establish a utopian, likeminded community because of the issue of proper discipleship to Christian doctrine. Indeed, when referring to education in America, Lynn writes, “A discussion of Puritan Massachusetts without looking at the underlying religious impulse of that society would be useless” (63). In other words, a metaunderstanding serves no logical, truthful purpose. It does serve ideological purposes, purposes of indoctrination, and educative purposes, and in that sense, it is not useless (for those who wish to wield it) though not without (un)ethical consequences.

Lynn (a self-professed devout Christian) states that the approach to education in America must be “educational, not devotional. [...There are] curriculum materials that claim to teach about religion but in reality, promote fundamentalist views of Christianity” (62). This is certainly true, though many teachings of Americanism and American history are also devotional rather than (historically) accurate, religious devotion aside. They are devotional to America. The mistake, however, is to not acknowledge that accurate or not, these teachings are still educational, it is just that they inform and promote metaunderstandings of a nation glorified with a legacy of very certain righteous values that purposefully disregard historicity and thus proper contextualization.

Certainty and Dreams

American values (and likewise Christian doctrine) require contextualization that is often lacking. “In America, we believe in the majesty of freedom and the dignity of the individual,” Trump states (qtd. in Ward). What does that even mean in terms of actualities? It is a statement that invokes a metaunderstanding of reality; it is part of the metanarrative of American ethos. However, specifically, what does it mean in the context of the treatment of immigrants, minorities, the imprisoned? What does such a statement mean within the context of the American Dream—another tenet of dogmatic American values and American freedom wherein one may become rich or poor supposedly simply according to one’s effort and ambition, which then may produce ‘success’ that translates to one’s worth, both economically and otherwise? In regard to the latter, what does it entail when a ‘Dream’ is the nucleus of national ethos and that *Dream* then becomes a metanarrative ‘fact’-based American truism, a moral barometer of individuals, families, cities, the country?

Because of their essentialist and fundamentalist impulses, metaunderstandings produce stances of certainty: ‘Freedom is majestic and it is *ours*’. Within Americanist metanarrative, freedom is supposed to be protected rigorously with bravery, truth, and capitalistic integrity, with (selective) equality (for those who earn it or deserve it) and dignification, and that is where the story is supposed to end in public consciousness and national ethos. That is why it is such a powerful rhetorical tool. Certainty goes a long way in American truths and in the pursuit of truth in general. Indeed, it is much more comfortable for most people to *arrive* at truth rather than to pursue it without end, and certainly to allow that it is potentially and quite likely without end. Richard Hofstadter writes,

Characteristically, the political intelligence, if it is to operate at all as a kind of civic force rather than as a mere set of maneuvers to advance this or that special interest, must have its own way of handling the facts of life and of forming strategies. It accepts conflict as a central and enduring reality and understands human society as a form of equipoise based upon the continuing process of compromise. It shuns ultimate showdowns and looks upon the ideal of total partisan victory as unattainable, as merely another variety of threat to the kind of balance with which it is familiar. It is sensitive to nuances and sees things in degrees. It is essentially relativist and skeptical, but at the same time circumspect and humane. The fundamentalist mind will have nothing to do with all this. (134-135)

Thus, when Americans practice their constitutional freedom to peacefully protest (such as in the BLM movement), they come up against those who believe in fundamentalist fashion that American Values are in turn being violated and thus the protesters are met with tear gas, ammunition, general violence and violent posturing including a president who calls them “sick and deranged Anarchists & Agitators” (Trump qtd. in Dickenson). Therein lies the paradox and the illusory aspect of American values; they are wielded as though fundamental(ist) truths, but they are malleable, ambiguous, uncertain. American values are violated in the name of American values.

There are those who during the COVID-19 pandemic are protesting their rights for free assembly, freedom of movement, and freedom to disregard medical science by refusing to wear a mask in certain public places and private establishments where it is required to do so, freedom to endanger others by refusing the vaccination. Again, the logic therein can be directly linked to American values and the supposed freedom therein. The idea of wearing a mask during a pandemic, or the refusal to ‘lockdown’, which are entirely scientifically-based public health

issues, have become (in part thanks to the former president) highly politicized issues, as are vaccinations. It is not too much to state that a large portion of the population has an aversion to facts and science because of the dogma of American Values and the supposed inherited freedom therein. In many cases this freedom is not necessarily freedom in fact, but a longing for (a return to) normalcy. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek states, citing Jacques Lacan, “*Normality is a version of psychosis*” (qtd. in *Pandemic!* 2 110; original emphasis). The statistics regarding COVID death rates and political disposition bear out that assertion.

The logic of the ‘no-mask’ argument not only demonstrates the shortcomings of Wright’s aforementioned argument that political beliefs rarely affect daily behaviours, but it is flawed in some very simplistic manners. Where is their freedom with regard to wearing a seatbelt, to driving on the right side of the road, to wearing clothing in public, stopping for a stop sign, not smoking in a hospital, or yelling ‘fire’ in a movie theatre? These things are not all the same for a variety of reasons, yet, the logic (or lack thereof) demonstrates a ‘grocery list’ or ‘cafeteria’ approach that is being utilized; people pick and choose what infringes on their freedom and what is simply that which they obey because certain matters are common sense. ‘Common sense’—a problematic term in its own right—is only considered common sense because of sociocultural norms that are regulated, overtly or otherwise, and/or often exist simply because of historical longevity. Depending on context then, one’s common sense is another’s nonsense.

For instance, in terms of Christian values intertextualized with American values, as well as nonsense and common sense, George W. Bush responded to the federal court ruling that “‘under God’ in Pledge of Allegiance public school exercises [is] unconstitutional” by stating, “‘I believe that points up the fact that we need common sense judges who understand that our rights were derived from God. And those are the kind of judges I intend to put on the bench’”

(Lynn 40). A declaration such as this is not only highly problematic in its use of ‘common sense’, but is in violation of the separation of church and state, whilst at the same time being upheld by American values (and Christian) ideology. This is again a paradox of American values and Christian values and the interwovenness of both: ideological (essentialist and/or fundamentalist) dogma is upheld by built-in blind spots and purposeful ignorance to the fact that the blind spots exist at all. Truth becomes a certainty in the eye of the beholder, upheld by (paradoxically) malleable dogma and self-interest in terms of inner conviction. When certainty is produced or secured by inner conviction despite that which may challenge said conviction (science versus faith, fact versus conspiratorial fiction), there are obviously moral and ethical implications. Thus, certainty as Truth—Christian, American, or otherwise—is again a rather illusory and potentially dangerous concept.

For example, in September of 2021, there were pictures released of Haitian migrants being whipped by border control agents. This was Representative Watson Coleman’s response: “Those images of the Haitian refugees, in particular the one that we saw who was being whipped upon, were horrific and they hearken back to another era in this country where slave overseers would be whipping runaway slaves. And I thought, my God, this is 2021. This is un-American. This is unacceptable” (“Images of U.S. Border Patrol”). ‘This is unacceptable’, sure, but un-American? Coleman just admitted in the same breath, that indeed these types of acts are a part of Americanism, foundational to Americanism, a part of a legacy and current reality of institutionalized racism. The first go-to response by politicians and countless others to what they perceive to be unseemly acts in America is the ‘this is un-American’ argument, as if there could be *nothing* worse than that which is un-American, because ‘American’ is presumed to encompass proper moral and ethical thoughts and deeds. This is the illusory aspect of holding certainty in

creed, in dogma, in symbolism, and it demonstrates the lack of certainty in the first place.

Moreover, many people can and have argued that what took place and what was presented in those aforementioned pictures was indeed done in defense of America and Americanism.

Uncertainty and Theories Thereof (Including a Brief Introduction to Queer and Postmodern Theory Relevant to this Discussion)

I am certainly not the only one to tackle some of the things that are discussed in this dissertation, (and indeed, since the election of Donald Trump some of these issues have become a topic of thought and discussion in a way that was previously quite unpopular and relatively unheard of especially in popular / populist consciousness), but my argument is unique not only in terms of my thesis regarding illusion, cynicism, violence, and morality, but in terms of recognizing the problematic aspects of the importance of American identity *across* the political spectrum, and recognizing the influence of the intertextuality of Christianity and Americanism for those who *may or may not* profess to subscribe to either. Yet, at the same time, as Hofstadter points out, demonstrating the *overt* intertextuality of Christianity and Americanism (though it is but a minor notion in his text), “the fundamentalism of the cross [is] supplemented by a fundamentalism of the flag” (131).

Furthermore, my theoretical approach is unique insofar as it incorporates, and examines closely, critical race theory, theories regarding utopianism and apocalypse¹² (which in terms of

¹² It may appear that I utilize the term ‘apocalypse’ quite loosely, and admittedly I do so at times, but not without purpose which I hope will be clear to the reader as the thesis progresses. Nevertheless, I will address certain aspects of the term’s usage here in brief. Mainly, the use of the term is in regard to what is considered purposeful and needful violence, purposefully inflicted, and thus an imposition of righteous destruction. As well, I employ the term, in part, with regard to militaristic zeal, or, the historically enthusiastic militarism in America, which not only has apocalyptic consequences in terms of destroying life, destroying ways of life, or life as one knows it, but certainly also apocalyptic significance in terms of ecological destruction, economic destruction, and the like. I also argue that it is important that when the Others’ point of view is not only disregarded or belittled by the media, political rhetoric, general ignorance, and purposeful ignorance, but, as mentioned, their destruction considered righteous, a

belief and incorporation into ‘reality’ have been embedded into mainstream Americanism), as well as queer and postmodern theory in support of my central argument. Both postmodernism and queer theory will be closely examined in the coming pages. But as a brief introduction as to why they underpin my research, the theoretical content therein tends to dwell in fluidity rather than rigidity, and validates ideas of becoming, unbecoming, and unknowing, rather than certainty in terms of culture, language, narrative, discourse, and individual identity.

Queer theory, among other things, addresses the “‘sexual morality that we are force-fed from birth’” (Hirsi Ali qtd. in Shehabuddin 121). This is especially true in a religious context. Ideology, in terms of religious ideals, is also frequently ‘force-fed’ from birth. D.H. Lawrence writes, “Not only was the Bible verbally trodden into [my] consciousness, like innumerable foot-prints treading a surface hard, but the foot-prints were always mechanically alike, the interpretation was fixed, so that all real interest was lost” (4). Fixed interpretation is an element of orthodoxy, of fundamentalism, and queer theory challenges such ideas, whether in the realm of sexuality and gender, or, as I argue, in terms of Christianity, Americanism, and metaunderstanding.

Postmodernism dwells (purposefully and otherwise) in the social, cultural, and economic fractures that came out of the modernist period wherein the axioms of previous times were in collapse, thereby challenging orthodoxy, dogma. As such, queer and postmodern theory underpin this dissertation because it is imperative to examine the causes and effects of worldviews that infuse *ethics* with ideological certainty, and to be conscientious of, and explicit about, that which results from these worldviews, thereby questioning and destabilizing that which appears to be

term as strong as ‘apocalypse’ be employed in order to counter the lack of thought, or lack of reflectivity, regarding what is too often taken for granted as righteous, or at least rightful, militaristic acts and/or economic consequences.

certain, providing a space for ethical conduct to be grounded in the recognition of the precariousness and uncertainty which in actuality binds humankind *together*, rather than the subdivisions of humanity that ideological certainty often creates.

Queer theory and postmodernism not only critique metaculture and metanarrative's rigid ideology in general, because of the aforementioned characteristics, but can provide explicit analytic examples in Americanist and Christian culture and discourse that demonstrate how postmodernism and queer theory and queer lives can provide an understanding that is different from a more generalized critique of ideology. For example, Jerry Falwell, the late American pastor and co-founder of the political/religious organization 'The Moral Majority', employed the argument of nature, opposing it with nurture, saying that the "perversion" of homosexuality was not "normal" because "a person is not born with preference to the same sex but *he* is introduced to the homosexual experience and cultivates a homosexual urge" (182; emphasis added). He continues, "Homosexuality is reprobate and an abomination—a sin against the human body and against nature" (Falwell 183). Furthermore, Falwell links the naturalness of sexuality to procreation by citing Genesis 1:27-28 "Be fruitful and multiply..." (Falwell 183). (Interestingly, Falwell actually misquotes the Bible in his argument by citing Genesis 9 wherein God told the ark survivors to replenish the earth. Replenishing was the reason why Noah and company entered the ark two by two, male and female, thereby confirming for people who select this passage to affirm their moral posturing including the naturalness of procreation and heterosexuality.)

A glaring deficiency in Falwell's argument involves the concept of original sin. Most Christian theology and subsequently ideology accepts that since Adam and Eve's fall from Eden all people are born innately sinful and are in need of redemption and forgiveness through the

blood of Christ. If all are born sinful, and homosexuality is an unimaginable abomination, it stands to reason that one could be born a (sinful) homosexual. If human beings are all fallen sinful creatures at birth, it would not be unbiblical or unnatural if people were born ‘sinfully’ gay, rather than ‘introduced to the homosexual experience’ and subsequently ‘cultivating a homosexual urge’. This is an explicit example of queerness challenging certain Christian notions but also, in terms of ‘unnaturalness’, challenging longstanding hegemonic norms regarding sexuality. Judith Butler, by way of Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*, argues that because the hetero subject secures and stabilizes itself by renouncing other identities, gender and sexuality are sites of denial and prohibition of desire for one’s own gender, meaning that all are potentially born gay (*Gender Trouble*). Therefore, gender, and more potently sexuality, is a site where original desire is grieved and so to become a *man* one must renounce men as an object of desire.

Butler argues that the subject that is associated with society’s norms secures and stabilizes itself by renouncing other identities (*Gender Trouble*). She writes, “The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 170). Now this might not be an all-encompassing theory, or an entirely accurately depicted reality, but what might this claim mean within the context of Sunday services, hymns, prayers, and devotion and faith in general? Many people, currently and historically, in the Christian ‘community’ have rejected the possibility of the morality of queer lives, and in doing so confirm for themselves the stability of their own (supposed) morality.

Yet it is in the communal setting of mass or Sunday service, that the hegemonic determination, though not exactly a heteronormative practice (unbeknownst to many participants), is that men, women, and children sing songs of the deepest of all human love and

devotion for a decidedly male God and his self in human form—Jesus of Nazareth. The congregation can be found singing repeatedly—one might say anxiously—of how much they love Jesus Christ while front and center behind the pulpit there frequently looms their spiritual significant other nailed to a cross in that ever-erotic death pose with the swimmer’s body, the blood, the sweat, the carefully draped undergarment hanging so precariously just above the genitalia. It is a symbol of violence, suffering, redemption, punishment, sacrifice, and yes, it is sexualized.¹³

One might wonder what psychological toll may take effect on a male who is adamant of his staunch heterosexuality, insistent that the rest of the world abide by the same ideal, but is also so often in the position of professing a profound love in a poetic and emotional manner to a man the likes of which he may likely never profess to another human being in any other circumstance. Meanwhile, his wife and kids may be standing next to him completing the portrait of American family values while professing that their love for the man-God Jesus Christ is a greater love than they could ever afford their husband and father. Is it not possible that there might be an emasculating fallout? Something perhaps to overcompensate for? According to Aristotle “there is both a ‘natural’ and learned homosexuality, and the latter type he clearly disapproves of” (Nissinen 81). (According to Falwell and many other notable pastors, preachers, and popes, it is only the latter that exists.) Though we now know that Aristotle’s statement is not the true case, without entering into a church-like nature/nurture debate but instead remaining momentarily in

¹³ The Jesus statue is certainly more widely used in say Catholicism, while the Unitarian Church, for example, is known for its wide acceptance of homosexuality. However, the songs of praise and devotion and love for Christ are a staple of the vast majority of Christian traditions, some more somber than others (Catholicism, Anglican) and some more ecstatic (Evangelicalism, Baptist). If one makes a divide between the two supposed dominant oppositions—Protestant and Catholic—they might be surprised to find that the Christ on the cross, muscular, and nearly naked, is quite popular in venues of both ‘sides’.

the realm of the hypothetical, if Aristotle was correct, towards which category is the church providing nourishment and to which category does it practice intolerance?¹⁴

From the warrior culture of the Old Testament that is vividly portrayed in various manners of pectorals, abs, and sword-swinging in children's Bibles' pictorials, to the patriarchal bonding over a decidedly male god presumably residing in another realm with a giant celestial penis, to his human form of Christ depicted countless times as a white twentieth-century rock star, there is an undeniable erotic element to many visual representations of Christ and to aspects of Christianity and presentations of itself—and therein a homoerotic element as well, demonstrated through the visual aesthetics of art and those of song. Herein lies a potentially anxiety-inducing influence on the heteronormative fixation of regulating sexuality over other biblically-based (bodily) 'defilements' such as gluttony, for instance, and its manifestation in frequent self-inflicted obesity. Religion has metanarrative built into itself while furthering metanarrative as well. And Christianity is at the heart of American metanarrative.

¹⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* circa 1995 (which describes itself as a “*complete* summary of what Catholics *throughout* the world believe in *common*”—again demonstrating the ever-present striving to present the wholeness and stability of culture and community) states, “Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction towards persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on sacred scripture, which presents homosexual acts as grave depravity, tradition has always declared that ‘homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.’ They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved” (emphasis added; 625). The *Catechism* continues, “Sexuality is ordered to the conjugal love of man and woman” (626). Accordingly, sex is only legitimized by the potential for the ‘gift of life’, i.e. *procreation*. Traditionally (and continually) this has not only been the stance of the Catholic Church but of many denominations of Christianity in general. (Interestingly, the idea that sexuality is only acceptable between a man and a woman within the confines of marriage could be understood as the rather incestuous notion that sex is only okay once the man and the woman become family.) It should be at least notable (and therefore repressible) that the all-important lineage—a word with implications of procreation, progress, family, and blood—that Jesus Christ is said to have been descended from includes King David, who amongst other sexually-fueled offences like having a man killed in order to bed-down with his wife, had a relationship with a young boy, Jonathon, son of King Saul, that has proven to be quite easily, if not difficult not to be, interpreted as being a homosexual relationship.

Conclusion

As this introduction has made clear, it is important to examine the prominence of metanarrative and metacultural understanding, and therein essentialism and fundamentalism, in a country that continually celebrates its freedom as a core tenet of national ethos while spending much of its time stifling freedom. ‘Meta’ is an abstraction, a distraction from what are actualities. Metaunderstanding distances “the dubious pretences of rights and representation from the hard truth of social reality” and “appeal[s] to a communal incarnation of social truth” (Rancière 87-88). When Christianity and Americanism are intertextualized, then freedom is often treated as a rather static concept frequently linked to moral stances that often acquire meta-qualities rather than hard truths of sociocultural actualities. Ideology becomes reality and actualities become inconvenient truths.

Slavoj Žižek suggests that ideology is *forced consciousness (First as Tragedy)*. If the intention here is that it is forced from within, I tend to think that is correct to an extent. If there is an element of coercion from without, that is also correct. But it is not entirely forced from without, for that would overstate the coercion—insofar as ideology is often (realized or otherwise) *chosen* consciousness. Nevertheless, Žižek is correct in pointing out that ideology is a mystification of real problems in order to deal with real problems (*First as Tragedy*). He contends that the way in which many people perceive or conceptualize a very real problem is indeed part of the problem, because what is precisely mistaken is Reality for reality, or more accurately, Reality is mistaken for actuality.¹⁵

¹⁵ In this sense it is not so different from Althusser's imaginary relations wherein ideology “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” Ideology establishes relationships. It “does not ‘reflect’ the real world but ‘represents’ the ‘imaginary relationship of individuals’ to the real world; the thing ideology (mis)represents is itself already at one removed from the real” (Felluga). The logic therein is that one (mis)recognizes oneself, or the thing, due to ideological interpellation (Žižek).

The latter is both a symptom of, and the reason why, many people compensate for precarity, for everyday uncertainties, by seeking metaphysical certainty, or the supposed certainty of ideology such as that which pertains to national ethos wherein the *essence* of ‘moral’ values seemingly precedes their existence. When metaphysical ‘realities’ are intertwined with ideologies and national and individual identity, they are all that much more stringent and solidified in the eyes of the beholder. “[A] free government,” Dwight Eisenhower states, “without a foundation of deep religious faith makes no sense. [F]aith in God is the necessary base for a free nation” (qtd. in Espinosa 266).

Yet, the supposed reality of the Christianity of the founding fathers has long been taken for granted in historical American narratives, while at the same time, as mentioned, there is often a call from the Christian right for America to return to, and rededicate itself to, its (meta) Christian values. Frank Lambert writes, “All of the [Christian] conservative groups share a ‘restoration rhetoric’ reflecting their desire to go back to a time when America was a Christian nation” (204). In doing, these groups (and individuals, families, politicians, evangelists, etc.) employ the backward gaze toward the supposedly idyllic in the face of a fallen and catastrophic present.

However, the claims regarding the founders and America’s Christian past are often erroneous. Eisenhower states that “the founding fathers wrote their religious faith into our founding documents, stamped their trust in God on the face of their coins and currency, [and] put it boldly at the base of our institutions” (qtd. in Espinosa 266). Yet, as Michelle Goldberg points out, “The constitution contains not a single mention of either God or Christianity” (44). Moreover, “While many of America’s founders were Christians, others were deists. Thomas

Jefferson, for example, [...] rejected [Jesus'] divinity, resurrection, and virgin birth" (Goldberg 44).

Nevertheless, the agenda of many on the Christian right "seeks to resurrect some aspects of Puritan society, as the restoration of the founders' principles, rather than a wholesale rejection of them" (Goldberg 43). I argue that they need not 'resurrect' Puritan society as it has never left Americanism in the first place, despite some folks' desire to reimplement that which is already present in American sociocultural ideals. Certainly, ideas regarding insufficient purity affected the Puritans as they affect many Americans today.¹⁶ The list of those who espouse that America must reclaim its Christian values is terribly long, suffice to say that those who make that claim drastically underestimate or simply do not understand Christianity's hegemonic position in America and in American metanarrative.

With the need to *understand*, often comes the need to stop searching, stop questioning, stop thinking, and just accept. 'Understanding' can come from any number of sources: Jesus Christ, God, Satan, Allah, Nation, Constitution, Founding Fathers, 'Build a Wall', 'Zero Tolerance', 'law and order'. When any of these and/or other sources of understanding become Written in Stone in the eyes of the beholder(s), they may provoke violent (physically and otherwise) opposition to that which creates questions—to that which may potentially burst the 'bubble' of belief. 'Written in stone' is an effective, affective, and prominent notion across the political spectrum. It is not simply a politically and/or religiously Right fundamentalist issue. The musician Bruce Springsteen, a self-described 'person on the left' who has publicly rallied for Democratic candidates, writes,

You know the flag flying over the courthouse /

¹⁶ The Puritan story of Anne Hutchinson here is a relevant cautionary tale.

Means certain things are set in stone /

Who we are, what we'll do and what we won't /

It's gonna be a long walk home / (Long Walk Home).

'Set in stone' is a fundamentalist assumption wrapped up in the supposed certainty provided by the symbolism of the flag, while the 'long walk home' is the longing for the return, the resurrection, of American Values—the backward gaze and restoration rhetoric regarding the moral purity of a nation with proper and concrete values,

The stories that people settle on to frame their reality, their identity, become of the utmost importance, and there is often much solace to be found within the confines provided by the categories produced when settling in stativity and staticity. In turn there is much anxiety, as well as potential violence, when the (illusory) 'set in stone' is challenged or assumed to be betrayed.

Again, the contention here is that America has produced a predominant ethos—both for the individual and in a more grandiose ideal the 'United' States—that it should be a utopian community of sorts, an exclusive monolithic unit. Moreover, self-identification with nation is precisely what has allowed for a prominent American phenomenon—largely not consciously identified—to live as though, and celebrate as though, and enact policy in a manner in which the Americanist metanarrative is that there is something pure and noble about violence and illusion.

Chapter Two

Fundamentalist Americanism, Metanarrative, Sociocultural and Socioeconomic Hegemony, and Plurality as an Inevitability of Acceptance: A Literature Review

Introduction

Much has been written about politics and national identity in America, as well as about politics, identity, and religion intertwined. Much has also been written on Christian fundamentalism in America. But very little at all has been written on fundamentalist Americanism. Indeed, when I started using the term ‘fundamentalist Americanism’, I had never come across it anywhere else, until reviewing Richard Hofstadter’s *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1962) wherein he utilizes the term just once. I have since encountered the term here and there, but rather exclusively used only when oriented to the political right and strictly tethered to Christianity, not in national metanarrative or metacultural terms, but in terms of literal Christian belief.

Therefore, the following literature review does not examine in-depth works on fundamentalist Americanism, for that literature does not exist in any significant manner outside of this dissertation, except in unacknowledged forms rather than inquiries or overt examinations of the subject matter of fundamentalist Americanism to which this dissertation speaks. This review of the literature, rather, examines that which touches on ideas within the dissertation, and literature that this dissertation is situated within predominantly in terms of theoretical grounding in often tangential yet important manners.

The review of the literature here focuses first on the very limited existing literature on metanarrative, secondly on literature regarding postmodernism and queer theory—two areas of study that overtly or otherwise speak to issues of metanarrative, metaculture, essentialism, and

fundamentalism—and thirdly, literature relevant to the interconnectedness of violence with American capitalism, neoliberalism,¹⁷ law and order, representation, and politics, religion, and policy, thereby demonstrating how each of these discourses circularly reinforces the other.

This review is not an exclusive examination of political left or right commentary on aspects of Christianity in America for that would be an exercise in redundancy insofar as much of the existing literature is quite similar in nature, there is an abundance of it to be sure, and this dissertation moves away from such commentary as its main argument is not focussed solely on one side or the other in terms of the political and religious left and right and thus is not precisely situated within such commentary. As mentioned above, the central argument of this dissertation is that within Americanism the absence of illusion is cynical, and the absence of violence is immoral. Therefore, my argument does not simply refer to any single political position or posturing.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Neoliberalism* can be defined as ideas and policy regarding the deregulation of markets, increased privatization, and the ethos of ‘small government’.

Neoconservatism espouses “morality and traditional values” in order to mobilize their base “through the positives of religion and cultural nationalism and negatively through coded, if not blatant, racism, homophobia, and anti-feminism,” diverting attention away from “capitalism and the neoliberalization of culture” (Harvey 50).

Liberalism, in economic terms, subscribes to “market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities [being] surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment [of w]orking class institutions such as labour unions and political parties of the left” (Harvey 11-12).

Conservatism advocates the preservation of established, conventional social institutions.

¹⁸ The illusion and cynicism I speak to certainly does infect some areas of thought more than others, but it is with regard to national ethos in general, political rhetoric specifically, as well as in patriotism enacted in various manners, including in public panoplies—which include those across the political spectrum—such as the Super Bowl, the Fourth of July, or the celebration of the vanquishing of an enemy of America. In all of these things, metanarrative and metaculture, and the essentialist and fundamentalist tendencies therein, are paramount in upholding the illusory aspects of what definitively constitutes Americanism and wherein the cynicism comes in when acceptance of illusion as definitively portraying proper Americanism is deemed lacking. In regard to the latter, for example, withholding support for American violence can be equated to Anti-Americanism, while not standing for the anthem at a sporting event may be considered un-American due to its supposed obstinance towards metanarrative and therein its internal (expected / accepted) violence.

Inside Metanarrative Literature: Shortcomings and Actualities

Despite the newfound popularity of the term ‘meta’ (Facebook etc.)—if not the term’s encompassing understanding—there is a shortage of academic literature that provides an in-depth examination of metanarrative, other than predominately in postmodern works, queer theory, and critical race theory, which often pertain to metanarrative without necessarily examining the subject explicitly. However, in “Telos, Chronos, and Hermēneia: The Role of Metanarrative in Leadership Effectiveness through the Production of Meaning” (2004), Justin A. Irving and Karin Klenke provide a succinct, accessible, and accurate definition of metanarrative as it applies to their work: “Metanarratives include some of the basic elements of narrative inquiry but, as the word implies, go beyond. They can, for example, take the form of master stories for individuals that form, ‘a comprehensive explanation of all that exists and occurs’” (5). “In addition,” the authors continue, “more intentionally than narrative, metanarrative requires the integration of historical, sociological, psychological, cultural and contextual perspectives. Moreover, metanarratives can also take the form of master stories for organizations—master stories which form the very cultural fabric into which new members are woven through the acculturation process” (Irving and Klenke 5). “At both the individual and organizational levels,” Irving and Klenke argue, “metanarratives carry with them *inherent meaning* and *cultural values* which serve as *encoded standards*” (5; emphasis added).

Somewhat contradictorily, Sandra Baringer, in *The Metanarrative of Suspicion in Late Twentieth-Century America* (2004), writes that included in her idea of metanarrative,

[a]cceptance of the beast within as a given of millennial America achieved a sort of official status in popular discourse by the turn of the century. These narratives are beyond asking who killed JFK. Rather, they operate on the common ground of an assumption that

our government conceals profound and terrible secrets from us. The only place left to go is to explore the ramifications of personal growth and values under such a regime, or in the case of the final episode of the X-Files, retreat to faith in an afterlife. (1)

The reason that this somewhat contradicts, or certainly differs, from Irving and Klenke's definition is because what Baringer is speaking to is not (American) metanarrative per se, though could certainly be argued at times demonstrates elements *within* metanarrative. The retreat into '*faith in an afterlife*' is, however, a retreat into the solace of metanarrative.

Baringer cites Stuart Hall as pointing out that widespread 'moral panic' is often associated with "crises in the legitimation of the state" (1). Much like the crises of legitimation during the modernist period, when certain authoritative, once-axiomatic truths are thrust into question there is nevertheless a retreat, or a longing, for the reclamation of metanarrative, meta-Truth. For example, the Law-and-Order rhetoric (and action) in many administrations but notably in Nixon's and in Trump's (January 6th aside), is a response to that which is seemingly cut-and-dry truth being challenged by dissent—dissent that is perceived to be immoral as it challenges dominant discourse or common sense. Again, however, Baringer is referring to narratives prominently of the political right rather than national metanarrative.

"It is a two-way street," Baringer argues, "the state's crisis in legitimation is projected onto portions of the population in such a way that the state can demonstrate its legitimacy by policing that particular group, and the public's moral panic over social unrest is projected back at the state" (2). Thus, the crises are not simply that of legitimation, but in an existentialist manner, crises of Truth. However, this statement from Baringer is also problematic in that the policing of a particular group is usually an already marginalized part of the population (people of colour, the poor), while the public's moral panic is the panic of that which *disrupts* metanarrative,

metaculture; the panic itself is not metanarrative. Who can we trust? What narratives can we turn to in order to restore ‘big picture’ faith, meta, certainty, knowing, meaning? In this regard, “Class struggle,” Baringer correctly notes, “the history of the United States must be examined through an American history of enslavement and genocide of native peoples” (2).

Baringer’s claim here is undoubtedly true, but precisely within American metanarrative it is often unrecognized. Indeed, Howard Zinn, in *A People’s History of the United States* (1980), demonstrates this to be true in its examination of American Reality versus American actualities (though he does not phrase it as such) demonstrating that American Reality frequently holds more cultural capital than the ‘hidden’ history of American actualities.

The distinction between actualities and reality is paramount. For instance, if a person cuts their finger with a knife and it bleeds, that is an actuality. It happened and we can know it happened. But the reality of that circumstance, while it may be shared to some degree from person to person, it differs from person to person; it is subjective, unknown to varying degrees unless it is happening to you because the pain or lack thereof takes place within your reality. We can share in the knowing of the *actuality* of a cut finger, but we cannot know precisely how the experience feels from one person to another. That experience exists within the individual’s reality. We can empathize with the actuality without actually knowing the reality.

The colloquial metaphor is that until you walk in someone else’s shoes you do not know what they are going through.¹⁹ But at the risk of destroying, or minimizing the metaphor, we still

¹⁹ This colloquial saying actually can be tracked back to a poem titled, “Judge Softly,” written in 1895 by an American methodist minister born in Michigan, Mary Torrains Lathrap: “Pray, don’t find fault with the man that limps,
Or stumbles along the road.
Unless you have worn the moccasins he wears,
Or stumbled beneath the same load” (qtd. in Milson)

do not know precisely the reality of what the other person is going through, we only know the actuality of what they are going through. What can be shared concretely is the actuality of circumstance. Reality, on the other hand, exists and does not exist at the same time. Do we tell a story the way it actually happened or the way we remember it, or want to remember it? Reality and actuality are intertwined but separate...to varying extents. Therefore, we can discuss 'reality', but it is again subjective, and is, and should be, subjugated or 'reality-checked' by actualities.

Metanarrative, rather, is an 'official' version of events ideologically influenced by, as well as influencing, meta-reality rather than actuality, which indeed oppresses and suppresses actualities. We know that historically, examining the history of enslavement and genocide, among many other atrocities and systemic issues, has not often been the popular case. Indeed, as Black Lives Matter currently, and many other important civil rights movements historically, have demonstrated, is that this type of examination produces for many people a crisis of faith as the stories they had been told and have held to be self-evident, their reality as they know it—often their American and Christian reality—fragments in the face of counternarrative. For example, BLM disrupts the metanarrative tenet of equality in America—a 'truth' that has always been a lie. Accordingly, Baringer asserts that there is a "buried master narrative" in America (3). However, it is the *master* narrative that is far from buried—it is reality; it is rather the actualities, the truths, the facts, which have been relegated to subtext at best, that are buried, and when they surface, crises arrive because the master narrative—metanarrative—is in crisis, and thus needs to reassert itself one way or another.

Because of the influence and the prominence of metanarrative in America (specifically, not exclusively), it is important to note the lack of literature on the subject. Baringer's is one of

very few studies of metanarrative in America, so a close review of her work is important. Regarding her theory of the Metanarrative of Suspicion, she writes, “I call this narrative of suspicion [in America] a metanarrative because it is narrative about narrative: a narrative about what stories to believe” (Baringer 3). She is not wrong that metanarrative is narratives about narratives, stories about stories, but metanarrative is the dominant discourse, dominant Truth sustained over time, not that which is suspicious or subversive towards dominant discourse. Baringer’s use of the term metanarrative may simply be an issue of semantics (what she deems metanarrative is much closer in definition to metafiction), but in this context distinctions are important. There *is* suspicion and paranoia within American metanarrative—McCarthyism, the Cold War, racism, cancel culture, fear of the Other in general—but as Jean-Francois Lyotard (*The Postmodern Condition* 1979) correctly uses the term metanarrative, it describes “*traditional* means by which we order the world” rather than that which counters traditional and therein dominant ideas (qtd. in Gratton; emphasis added).

Indeed, Peter Gratton, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, states that Lyotard was “interested in consider[ing] ways to think of justice after the loss of [...] metanarratives.” While some metanarratives do become disregarded or ‘lost’ over time to one extent or another, it is important to recognize that metanarrative is still entirely relevant in sociocultural public consciousness. Gratton writes,

[T]here is also what Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) called a general ‘loss of authority’ in traditional institutions. Hence both progressive and conservative political views are found flailing in diagnosing the problems of the political, especially when facing the devaluation of all values in consumer culture. The range of Lyotard’s works were not limited to diagnosing the politics of postmodernity, but also made important contributions

to aesthetics, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of language, among other areas. (*Stanford Encyclopedia*)

These types of contributions that Gratton speaks to demonstrate the flaws in metanarrative(s) in general and the significance of relativism in postmodernism which offers more situational and pragmatic ethical inquiry.

Suspicion, or “skepticism towards [...] metanarratives” is not meta in and of itself as Baringer suggests, but rather is how Lyotard and many others, in part, define the postmodern condition (Appignanesi and Garratt 103). However, Lyotard incorrectly argues that due to postmodernism, metanarrative no longer functions dominantly as it did previously. Postmodernism offers a valuable critique of metanarratives, but it certainly does not do away with them in terms of their validity culturally speaking, and in this case their prominence in national or religious contexts, and certainly not in the latter’s functioning intertextually within Americanism.

For instance, regarding science versus religious metanarrative, in “Not All Skepticism Is Equal: Exploring the Ideological Antecedents of Science Acceptance and Rejection” (2018), Bastiaan T. Rutjens, Robbie M. Sutton, and Romy van der Lee “systematically investigate the ideological antecedents of general faith in science and willingness to support science, as well as of science skepticism” (1). It is the inconsistencies that Rutjens et al reveal that demonstrate Baringer’s Metanarrative of Suspicion to be a problematic distinction. Their findings are that “religious conservatives consistently display a low faith in science and an unwillingness to support science, [while] science acceptance and rejection have different ideological roots, depending on the topic of investigation. [...] The main predictors are religiosity and political orientation, morality, and science *understanding*” (Rutiens et al 1; emphasis added).

The fact that understanding (or lack thereof) of science provokes those who may reject it outright is obviously quite telling. Faith in ideology can quite easily trump scientific fact, and as conspiracies regarding COVID-19 vaccines, for instance, demonstrate, suspicion need not be based in actuality, but rather in one's reality. Rutiens et al point out, "Importantly, different ideological predictors are related to the acceptance of different scientific findings. [For instance], [p]olitical conservatism best predicts climate change skepticism. Religiosity, alongside moral purity concerns, best predicts vaccination skepticism" (1). Thus, while ideological views may take precedence over scientific findings, this may be intensified in Americanism because of its intertextuality with Christianity (which becomes very clear in the role of fundamentalism in anti-vaxxism). Therefore, within the context of Americanism, one need not be religious to fit into the authors' findings, because the influence of Christian religious *tendencies* within much Americanist ideology is in many cases sufficient cause to lead to, for example, a distrust of science and intellectualism in general, and in other cases distrust in any counternarrative to metanarrative.

Yet, this is not to say that skepticism, again, cannot be located *within* metanarrative, but to say that meta exists in various forms. Scientific narratives may be meta while contradicting religious narratives that are also meta. Metanarratives in the dominant discourse of national ethos such as freedom, democracy, and patriotism, because of their ambiguous nature despite fervent belief in their concreteness, spark passionate debate and division precisely because of the faith in that which is considered meta-Truth. So, while Baringer does speak to some of the paradoxical elements of American democracy such as the distrust of government (but sacredness of the constitution and the founding fathers), and distrust of intellectualism (but not necessarily those who make *money* from their intellectual capabilities), the fears and suspicions she refers to are

often that which confronts metanarrative—(understandings of) racial divides, social and class division, and of science—rather than metanarrative itself. For instance, while ‘fake news’ has certainly become a meta-cry of sorts, and while distrust of government is always present, it is that which is disruptive to metanarrative, such as postmodernity, for instance, or science in many cases, civil rights, queer lives, and marginalized communities, that is often widely subversive in America, certainly not being of or belonging to Americanist metanarrative itself.

Rather, “[m]etanarrative,” Klenke argues, “is a qualitative method of inquiry which integrates historical, psychological, and cultural perspectives and offers a highly developed *body of self-knowledge* depicting the narrator’s self-interpretation that reflects the ontological integrity of meaningful experiences in the individual’s life” (in Irving and Klenke 5; emphasis added). When *inquiry* is involved, Klenke describes a fine and worthy exercise. Where the problem lies is that for those enraptured with metanarrative understandings, for those ideologically engulfed in meta-ideas, self-reflectivity, self-inquiry, self-examination of metanarrative or metaculture is what is lacking. Indeed, that lack, in part, is precisely what defines it as meta. Instead, we find self-reflexivity—a rather immediate aversion to that which counters belief despite any justified evidence.

“Defining metanarrative in this fashion,” (see Klenke’s aforementioned quote) Irving and Klenke continue, “adds several new dimensions to narrative interpretation (such as integration of contexts, purposeful meaning making of lived experiences, multiple-level approaches)” (6). Again, this is correct from an examination point of view, much less so, if at all, from a lived-in point of view. Irving and Klenke assert, “In the current literature, several authors [...] bring a postmodern critique of metanarrative from their respective areas of interest in the field of organizational studies, but none of these works have addressed the function of metanarrative in

[the] specific role metanarrative plays in the production of meaning” (6). Therefore, the authors’ focus, as it should be, is on *the production of meaning* while also demonstrating the shortcomings of both the existing literature on metanarrative as well as of those whose ideological perspectives exist within the realm of metanarrative.

Baringer writes,

Many postmodern theorists have been overly celebratory of the subversion of ‘master narrative’ by Bakhtinian notions of multiple voiced discourse, destabilization of the ‘terrorism’ of the Real, etc. A descent into a world of the cacophonous voices of Babel cavorting in carnivalesque fashion may be cathartic, but to maintain oneself perpetually in such a liminal state [...] is to choose a life of individual or collective psychosis. (15)

While quite poetic, Baringer is somewhat hyperbolic though generally correct in some of her claims. However, she does portray the findings of many of these postmodern theorists in an unflattering and condescending manner. Moreover, her charge of *psychosis*—a loss of contact with reality—is simply incorrect in terms of postmodernity debunking metanarrative acceptance of reality.²⁰ Regarding liminality, what postmodernism helps to elucidate is that all human beings exist within a state of liminality—between knowing and unknowing, between life and death, and in terms of Christian metanarrative, between heaven and hell, between those who believe we are finite or infinite, the “two poles of the human experience” (Bono 26). Bono, of the band U2, writes that what “we do, think, feel, imagine, discuss is framed by the notion of whether our death is the end or the beginning of something else” (260). Liminality is threshold, existing in instability, the space between A and B or A and Z, and that is a facet, an inescapable reality and

²⁰ For instance, to paraphrase Karl Marx, the idea that some people may have a billion dollars while others have nothing is insanity, which is a loss of contact with reality (*Capital*). Yet, this insanity is *normative* within the confines of American capitalism (and capitalism writ large). This insanity is an American reality.

actuality of the human condition. Metanarrative and metaculture often (conveniently) act as a balm for that instability.

Metanarratives are “the supposedly universal, absolute or ultimate truths that are used to legitimize various projects, political or scientific” (Appignanesi and Garratt 103). Therefore, metanarrative is ideological in nature, and ideology often passes quite invisibly and thus unexamined. Metanarrative can also look quite similar from one side of the American political spectrum to the other: freedom, democracy, the rule of law, constitutional rights, while being *interpreted* quite differently according to ideological impulses. For example, Lyndon Johnson can state in the days before the '68 Democratic convention in Chicago that in Martin Luther King's memory Americans must remain peaceful; all the while the war rages in Vietnam on his orders. Abbie Hoffman's response to LBJ's call for peace was (to paraphrase) 'Christ, I didn't know he was a pacifist'. The internal contradictions of meta-ideals remain paradoxical precisely because they are meta and therefore lacking distinction, understanding, and examination.

Baringer, then, is correct to point out that a “persecution complex is very deeply historically embedded in [American] national consciousness, and it continues to replicate itself in ways that are somewhat exacerbated by both our earlier historical heritage and by twentieth century developments in our law enforcement system” (14).²¹ (This quote from Baringer is one of the better examples of her argument that there is a metanarrative of suspicion in American culture, however, I still argue that suspicion is not metanarrative in and of itself but is an aspect existing within Americanist metanarrative in terms of the fear of that which lies without.)

She writes that certain

²¹ I argue that this persecution complex exists, at least in part, because of Americanism's intertextualization with Christianity which has a persecution complex all its own (including many sub-complexes such as the 'persecuted' south and more recently the 'men's rights' movement).

literature is a focal point of many of the key elements of the metanarrative of suspicion, and the dramatic increase in the American prison population in the past two decades is symptomatic of the centrality of these discursive practices to contemporary American culture. The concentration and development of the more severe forms of such discursive practices in the prison environment spill over into the general culture in such a way that the metanarrative feeds on itself and proliferates. (13)

Here, again, Baringer better utilizes the term metanarrative than previously, and she is precisely correct regarding the insidious ways in which metanarrative both produces and sustains, in a very cyclical manner, certain (problematic) aspects of American national consciousness.

The latter example demonstrates that while there is a lack of literature on the concept of metanarrative, and metaculture for that matter, and this lack has led to confusion over the terminology itself, there are nevertheless other narratives of suspicion, such as postmodernism, and literature and theory regarding marginalized lives, that demonstrate in their challenging of meta-type thinking, not only the prominence of metanarrative and metacultural thinking in America, but also the extremely problematic aspects therein.

Metanarrative: Storytelling as an Example of its Pragmatic Purpose

John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, the authors of *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (1998), provide a fine definition of metanarrative's purpose. They argue that

retold stories have important cultural functions. Under the guise of offering children strange and exciting worlds removed from everyday experiences, they serve to initiate children into aspects of social *heritage*, transmitting many of culture's *central values* and *assumptions* and a body of shared allusions and experiences. The existential concerns of a

society find *concrete* images and *symbolic* forms in traditional stories of many kinds, offering a cultural inheritance subject to social *conditioning*. (Stephens and McCallum 3; emphasis added)

These stories that children engage in may be ‘strange’ and ‘wonderful’, seemingly fantastical, but they nevertheless primarily reassert dominant discourse—and discourse surrounding national identity can be quite infantilizing. This assertion can be demonstrated in the way American history is taught in schools, churches, and homes as well as the manner in which it is expressed and celebrated: the stories of Manifest Destiny, the Puritans at Plymouth Rock, the inherent beauty and wonder of America, and the truth of the American Dream found in mythical Horatio Alger rags-to-riches stories. That which counters these stories, myths, and ideals is then considered cynical.

In terms of the strange and exciting worlds removed from everyday experiences, an examination of Christian children’s Bibles, or for that matter children’s Disney stories, offers insight into the way that metanarrative operates in insidious manners to long-term societal effects. Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock’s *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (2010), demonstrates the way metanarrative operates by instilling children with social norms, as fictional stories can be pedagogically powerful. While Giroux and Pollack do not discuss children’s Bibles in the context of their discussion of Disney, there is a valuable comparison to be made. The children’s Bible is an overtly pedagogical tool meant to fascinate in order to ultimately function as an indoctrinatory device. The vast majority of children’s Bibles capture and captivate children’s attention with, among other things, explicitly violent illustrations, and stories of plagues, floods, God-ordained genocides, and all matter of a god’s

holy wrath in order to clearly define and induce fear and reliance on supposedly universal (meta) truths including divine exclusion: the separation of good and evil, the sheep and the goats.

Similarly, Giroux and Pollack's text demonstrates that historically the ideological underpinnings of racist, gender-biased, and classist characteristics seep pervasively into Disney's characters and films, instil metanarrative and metacultural ideals about good and evil, and their influence is vast.²² The danger of Disney, as Giroux and Pollock demonstrate, is in its position as "an icon of American culture and middle-class values" disguising its "cutthroat commercial ethos" while "[t]he contradiction between the politics that shape Disney culture and its effort to construct and influence children's culture is disturbing" (27).

The authors argue that there is nothing innocent—despite Disney's oppositional posturing—in what children learn from Disney films about race, gender, class, and other cultural constructions that constitute "illusion[s] of fixity" (Giroux and Pollack 165). Disney's Americana capitalist ideologies are also disseminated and are cause for examination and concern; for American capitalism is to Disney as salvation is to the children's Bible: eternal, fundamental, meta, Truth. However, the ideologies that Disney has historically emphasised, including ideas regarding race and the status quo, are not so much explicitly tools of indoctrination—though certainly their effect can be as such—but are utilized to speak to easily agreeable social norms already in place (metanarrative/metaculture), thereby increasing Disney's economic bottom line.²³

²² Indeed, to bring up the possible evils of Disney to an undergraduate class—and I have experienced this first hand—is likely to be met with gasps, and expressions of such claims as being terribly cynical and potentially emotionally crushing: a refusal to confront myths of innocence.

²³ Indeed, we can see this to be true in the quite severe aversion to change and racialized boycotts of movies such as *The Little Mermaid* remake.

There is nothing innocent about the pictures and stories in a children’s Bible either, neither in production nor reception, but this is a much more overt tool of indoctrination. Moreover, illusions of fixity, especially as they pertain to the Christian Bible, are of the utmost importance for those who produce these texts and those who receive them. They are produced to indoctrinate, and its indoctrination is damaging, even debilitating in terms of the intellectual capacity to face indoctrination head-on. Stephens and McCallum write,

Although the notional significance of a story is [...] potentially infinitely intertextual, subject to every retelling and every significance that has ever accrued to it, it is also arguable that the processes of retelling are overwhelmingly subject to a limited number of conservative metanarratives—that is, the implicit and usually invisible ideologies, systems, and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience. (3)

Stephens and McCallum provide here another example of why Baringer’s idea of the metanarrative of suspicion is problematic. Metanarrative is not a realm of questioning; suspicion is. She writes, “The metanarrative of suspicion tells us that people with power will lie to us. Why should this be so? One could argue that since they have the power, they have no need to lie. But to overgeneralize is to oversimplify. A lie, especially a big one, can be a means of retaining power” (4). The idea that people in power lie to us is often cut down party lines—each side suspicious and cynical of the other. Certainly, Trump blew the Big Lie up in a big way, but nonetheless, again, what Baringer is referring to may be an element of metanarrative—suspicion of the Other (though this is usually outright prejudice and/or disdain of the Other)—but is not metanarrative per se. Suspicion of metanarrative is not metanarrative. The suspicion that dwells within metanarrative is commonly the suspicion of that which lies outside of metanarrative.

“The major [or meta] narrative domains which involve retold stories,” Stephens and McCallum correctly assert, “all, in the main, have the function of maintaining *conformity* to socially *determined* and *approved* patterns of behavior” (3-4; emphasis added). The latter issue of approved patterns of behaviour in America historically includes white supremacy as well as patriarchy, classism, sexism, xenophobia, and the like. If metanarrative is suspicious in general, it is suspicious of change that challenges hegemony, culture, heritage, values, tradition, morals, the (meta) way of life.

There is a plethora of literature outside of the scope of a literature review and academic research that focuses solely on what America should look like in metanarrative and metacultural terms, and where America has gone wrong according to the authors’ moral American framework. It often takes little more than a glimpse at the title to recognize that the theses within these works pertains to that which is considered correct in terms of American values: Kevin Balfe and Glenn Beck (2009), *Arguing with Idiots: How to Stop Small Minds and Big Government*; Jerry Falwell (1980), *Listen America!*; Rush Limbaugh (1992), *The Way Things Ought to Be*; Pat Robertson (1986), *America’s Dates with Destiny*; Jesse Helms (2001), *Empire for Liberty: A Sovereign America and Her Moral Mission*; and much more. A list of some of Ann Coulter’s work, meanwhile, demonstrates her position(s) explicitly: *Slander: Liberal Lies About the American Right* (2002); *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (2003); *How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must): The World According to Ann Coulter* (2004); *If Democrats Had Any Brains, They’d Be Republicans* (2007); *Guilty: Liberal “Victims” and Their Assault on America* (2009); *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob Is Endangering America* (2011).

There are too many authors and works to mention, but those that are mentioned here are representative of the problematic nature of thinking that one side or another has the patent on American values, and the problematic ‘nature’ of the fundamentalist idea that American values are set in stone according to one’s morality, rather than that these values are entirely malleable and stealable. Yet, these works and others like them are framed by the rhetorical question, how can anyone argue against standing up for (meta)American values?

Metanarrative is pretext, and/or produces and sustains pretext, and pretext bends towards essentialism—the idea that essence precedes existence: unquestioned Truth(s) considered historical but lacking in historicity, often dominant, but lacking nuance and ethical examination. The misunderstanding of metanarrative, in terms of (the lack of) literature on the topic, demonstrates that it is undervalued as a subject of interest. It is, however, demonstrated to be widely available as oft ignored or unwelcomed and unrecognized subtext. In other words, metanarrative is present in many places where it is completely unacknowledged as such.

Fundamental Texts Pertaining to Metanarrative and Intertextuality

The following texts are entirely valuable in providing theoretical insight regarding the hold of the metanarrative on essentialized American ideas, though not expressing it, or terming it, as such, or indeed without necessarily intending to express it as such, nor necessarily directly approaching the topic specifically at all. These texts also help to affirm, again in their theoretical exposition, the faultiness of the cyclical nature of American piety and the claims to the righteousness of American values regardless of how illusory or mystified they may be as well as affirming the intertextuality of politics, economics, morality, violence, and culture.

In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (2009), a valuable contribution to Cultural Studies and Critical Theory which examines political and economic liberalism and modern morality,

Žižek writes, “[T]o locate a phenomenon in its totality does not mean to see the hidden harmony of the Whole, but to include within a system all its ‘symptoms,’ its [sic] antagonisms and inconsistencies, as integral parts” (76). Similarly, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) Adorno and Horkheimer posit,

Reason is the ‘faculty ... of deducing the particular from the general.’ [...] Without intellectual perception [...] no impression would harmonize with a concept, and no category with an example; and the unity of thought (let alone of system) toward which everything is directed would not prevail. [...] If ‘all empirical laws ... are only special determinations of the pure laws of the understanding,’ research must always ensure that the principles are always properly linked with factual judgements. (82)

The work argues that impressions harmonize with concepts without *intentional* intellectual perception. Using a specific historical example with regard to the hidden history of violence due to American values, Chomsky states in *Imperial Ambitions* (2005),

The kindest thing you can say about Ronald Reagan is that he may not have known what the policies of his administration were, but I’ll pretend he did. The Reagan years were a period of devastation and disaster in El Salvador. Maybe seventy thousand people were slaughtered. The decade began with the assassination of the archbishop. It ended, rather symbolically, with the brutal murder of six leading Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, by an elite battalion, trained, armed, and run by the United States, which had a long, bloody trail of murder and massacres behind it. (93)

Here we can see an oft-forgotten history of brutality and force that is hidden behind a veil of righteousness. We can see the preference for generality and thus the glossing over of actualities in favour of American metanarrative ideals.

In terms of American capitalism within Americanist metanarrative, the blind spots of dogmatized ideology, and therein the intertextualization that takes place in order to solidify metanarrative ideas and ideals, Marshall Berman argues in *All That is Solid Melts into Air* (1982) that

[t]he bourgeoisie and its ideologists have never been known for their humility or modesty, yet they seem strangely determined to hide much of their light under a bushel. The reason, I think, is that there is a dark side to this light that they cannot blot out. They are dimly aware of this and deeply embarrassed. [...] What is it that the members of the bourgeoisie are afraid to recognize in themselves? Not their drive to exploit people, to treat them purely as means or (in economic rather than moral language) as commodities. [...] The real source of trouble is the bourgeois claim to be the ‘Party of Order’ in modern politics and culture. [...] And yet, the truth of the matter, as Marx sees, is that everything that bourgeois society builds is built to be torn down.²⁴ (98-99)

Despite being an overgeneralization of how the bourgeoisie may feel about themselves (especially the ‘embarrassment’ part), Berman demonstrates the dualism of supposed order and actual chaos and exploitation within capitalist economics, as well as the intertextualization of often disparate ideals of virtue, order, and capitalist economics in order to solidify and sustain a righteous metanarrative regarding actualities which requires a much higher degree of ethical examination. Again, when ideas and ideals are intertextualized, they are often much easier to frame in binary terms: capitalism and virtue versus chaos and laziness, hard work and success versus failure and lack of ambition.

²⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, in *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (2008), echoes the latter point when he writes that American capitalism is now a cycle of “buy it, use it, chuck it out,” which I liken to a modern-day hyper-capitalist version of the Sixties countercultural mantra ‘tune in, turn on, drop out’ (147).

Either/or, binary conceptions of reality work to disregard nuance, instead inevitably leaving something(s) out of the context of the discussion. Binary conceptualization works to *frame* matters a certain way, and thus inevitably works to disregard that which lies outside of the frame (and to obscure the actuality of the frame itself for that matter). The frame, or the framing mechanism, which can be thought of as a provisional and biased contextualization—whether that be rhetoric, dogma, text, discourse, language, narrative, or media—does not “simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (Butler, *Frames of War* xiii). Thus, binaries, because they frame matters in rather simplistic terms that can be easily chosen (Republican/Democrat, pro-choice/pro-life), often become the foundation(s) of many of the stories we are told and we in turn tell ourselves.

The Story of Tolerance and its Intertextualities

In *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (2006), Wendy Brown aptly demonstrates how American hero narratives frame ideal American subjects and shape American morality within dominant discourse. She also demonstrates that even as ‘tolerance’ is a political principle used to mark an opposition between liberal and fundamentalist orders, liberal tolerance discourse may function not only to anoint Western superiority, but also to “legitimate Western cultural and political imperialism,” while promoting “Western supremacy and aggression even as it veils them in the modest dress of tolerance” (*Regulating Aversion* 7).²⁵ As such, fundamentalist thought and essentialist versions of morality become part of the logic of

²⁵ And speaking of ‘*dress*’ Brown has also argued that *implicit* cultural imperatives—such as the Western (perceived) *obligation* for a bikini at the beach or high heels at a fancy dinner—are not that different in terms of obligation and are more insidiously potentially oppressive than perhaps (perceived) religious imperatives such as a burqa.

tolerance. Indeed, ‘tolerance’ itself is an individual and a sociocultural mechanism, or an understanding, that operates as ‘goodness’, as justice. Yet, as Žižek suggests, tolerance reduces understanding and *humanity* to the idea of ‘I will tolerate you if you don’t harass me’ (*First as Tragedy*). It is akin to saying that ‘it never bothered me that you were gay until you threw it in my face’. Likewise, there are those who are of the opinion that their tolerance was betrayed because they never had an issue with blackness until ‘you said that black lives matter’—the insinuation here being that the tolerant but betrayed are upset that it was not stated that ‘all lives matter’. What shines through in tolerance discourse is the idea that ‘I will not harass you as long as you stay away in proximity, or at least behave in accordance with my ideals’.

Tolerance presupposes disdain, dislike, disfavour, or indeed, intolerance. Brown argues, “Designated objects of tolerance are invariably marked as undesirable and marginal, as liminal civil subjects or even liminal humans; and those called upon to exercise tolerance are asked to repress or override their hostility or repugnance in the name of civility, peace, or progress” (*Regulating Aversion* 28). It is important to note that the way Brown is utilizing the terms ‘tolerance’ and ‘liminal’ is in a cultural context, not, for example, in the postmodern philosophical sense that we are all liminal, but in terms of the binary actualities of those who are considered stable and those who are considered unstable, marginal, deviant. Therefore, tolerance has problematic internal presuppositions; it also has its limitations.

However, limitations and *exceptions* are quite different. Certain actions or rhetoric—murder, hate speech—may be intolerable, but making exceptions such as defining oneself as someone whose moral code will only allow for tolerance for certain members of humanity based on their supposed moral code is different. For instance, tolerance may be defined by an individual or a group through a specific religious or patriotic lens. Brown singles out George W.

Bush's rhetoric after 9/11 in this regard: "[T]here are millions of good Americans who practice the Muslim faith who love their country as much as I love the country, who salute the flag as strongly as I salute the flag" (qtd. in *Regulating Aversion* 94). In this context, tolerance is conditional. Brown writes, "America can tolerate Islam in its midst to the extent that Muslims have fealty to the (American) nation-state over transnational Islam" (*Regulating Aversion* 94). She continues, "This transfer of loyalty is paradoxically literalized through love of a symbol—the flag, a literalization that Arab business owners and cab drivers in New York understood perfectly as they plastered their windows with American flags in the aftermath of the attacks" (Brown, *Regulating Aversion* 94). So, there is tolerance at play, but in this scenario it is conditional, and therefore exceptions can (and will) be made. In this regard, George W. Bush's tolerance rhetoric has a not-so-subtle dismissive and even threatening undertone.

Furthermore, if the lens of one's tolerance is heavily affected by (American) patriotism, what happens when religion is thrown into the mix? The findings of James L. Gibson indicate that "as religious traditionalism increases, tolerance decreases" (Wolfe and Katznelson 164). In his study, Gibson finds that "even when tolerance is corrected for the 'objection precondition'—meaning that all respondents are reacting to a group they highly dislike—the religious are more intolerant than the irreligious" (Wolfe and Katznelson 164).

Certainly, when the heaven and hell of the eternal hereafter inform one's earthly ideology, we can recognize how a religious basis for intolerance may be influenced. In the United States particularly, "Atheists are widely disliked, and that antipathy readily translates into political intolerance" (Gibson qtd. in Wolfe and Katznelson 164). Yet, in this regard there are a few scenarios, two highlighted here, that could take place in terms of tolerance, intolerance, Christianity (or religiosity), and Americanism. For instance, the callous treatment of Others can

be defended by Christians as ‘tough love’—temporarily difficult judgmental earthly teachings that may save souls from the fires of hell for all eternity, i.e. the Westboro Baptist Church’s mantra of ‘God Hates Fags’—intolerance in order to save souls. Therefore, the intentions are supposedly righteous and in keeping with the directive to love your neighbour, as backwards as the logic may appear. Likewise, in regard to the battle for the heart and soul of what it means to be an American patriot, tough love can be incorporated there too as an explanation for hard distinctions: proper Americans teaching Others how to be proper Americans.

The discourse of tolerance is precarious terrain. Brown writes, “Insofar as tolerance does not resolve but manages antagonism or hostility toward difference, the psychic costs of this particular management technique may mount in the form of palpable social effects when tolerance becomes a ubiquitous ideology or an element of governance” (*Regulating Aversion* 28). The latter is a ‘moment’ when *implicit* cultural policy and authoritative policy intersect or divide. Depending on one’s political views or concerns with social justice, and therein ideology, BLM or the March on the Capitol are informed by authority or by cultural impulses. In either case, the guiding force is regulated on moral grounds one way or another.

As Butler points out, that which frames morality is “always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the *official* version” (*Frames of War* xiii; emphasis added). In this manner, the frame operates to *limit* knowledge, and thus, operates as a part of the anti-intellectualism that limits what should rightfully be part of the conversation: that which is questionable, fallible, socially constructed, ‘created’, historical, uncertain, and fluid. For instance, the discourse of tolerance implicitly and explicitly presupposes disdain and disapproval: ‘I do not agree and in fact I am deeply uncomfortable and morally object to this, but

I will tolerate it'. This approach is condescending at its inception. If instead we make both the semantical and ideological decision to use a term and an idea such as 'acceptance', not only does it then not presuppose disdain, but it potentially presupposes love, equality, humanity: 'I disagree but I accept and acknowledge you and your choices'.

Acceptance rather than tolerance prioritizes the individual ahead of the act or the morality of a person and could thus be seen as an ethical starting point that is not only more pragmatic and situational than tolerance is, but at the same time throws views of war, capital punishment, laws pertaining to LGBTQ+ rights, racial divides, and the like, into a realm of questioning that may otherwise never be considered. Indeed, this approach does not even require tolerance. We may not tolerate someone's views, but we may accept and acknowledge that these are their views, or their acts for that matter. For example, I do not tolerate the actions of George W. Bush and his administration's warmongering policies, but I accept and acknowledge that it happened. Now, how do we move forward? Indeed, we can accept without toleration. This approach would be a step toward a more peaceful and promising realization of democracy while also destabilizing metanarrative, dominant discourse, sociocultural and socioeconomic hegemony, as plurality is an inevitability of acceptance.

Postmodernism, Marginality, Queer Theory, and the Problematics of Binaries

If plurality is an inevitability of acceptance and thus a disruption to meta-ideals (something that tolerance is not prone to doing), the subject, theory, and aesthetics of postmodernism, then, are valuable areas of study regarding metanarrative, metaculture, and the essentialism and fundamentalism that often exists therein. Though many of the literary works on postmodernism themselves do not necessarily use the specific terminology (of meta), they nearly inescapably, in almost all regards, speak to the subject matter of metanarrative (again if not

specifically or explicitly), thereby not only demonstrating the importance of its study, but the relevance of postmodernism as well. As the field of metanarrative is slight in terms of literature, postmodernism and queer theory are important insofar as contributing to the recognition of metanarrative and metaculture, and to the follies therein of their widespread acceptance.

As Eve Sedgwick indicates, queer theoretical grounding provides for an approach wherein recognition of the “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances” frames the discussion fluidly rather than rigidly, while the oft criticized fragmented, ephemeral, and ‘superficial’ conditions of postmodernity work to interrupt the “uniform and binding groundwork of norms” upheld by dominant discourse (Sedgwick 8, Butler, *Frames of War* 108). Texts such as Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Tendencies* (1993), and Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) and *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), provide theoretical grounding even as they are not necessarily strictly, or even at all, necessarily, pertaining to my subject matter regarding Christianity and Americanism thereby also demonstrating the inner workings of intertextuality.²⁶

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues, “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as *a point of support*, as a linchpin, *for the most varied strategies*” (103; emphasis added). This is precisely intertextuality at work. He continues,

²⁶ Judith Halberstam now goes by Jack Halberstam—for the most part. However, Halberstam accepts ‘he/him’ and ‘she/her’ pronouns, and the name ‘Judith’ as well as ‘Jack’ as per the website *Jackhalberstam.com* (2023). Therefore, going forward any references will be in accordance to the name used on the publication referred to and the corresponding pronouns.

There is no single, all-encompassing strategy, valid for all of society and uniformly bearing on all the manifestations of sex. For example, the idea that there have been repeated attempts, by various means, to reduce all of sex to its reproductive function, its heterosexual and adult form, and its matrimonial legitimacy fails to take into account the manifold objectives aimed for, the manifold means employed in the different sexual politics concerned with the two sexes, the different age groups and social classes.

(Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 103)

Again, this is intertextuality: utilizing various narratives or discourses, and intertwining them in order to create and sustain other narratives, discourses, and normativities, and thus hegemonic metanarrative(s).

Sexuality is fluid, insofar as it is not simply hetero; it does not simply legitimize nor is it only legitimate in patriarchal matrimonial terms, and it is not only acceptable by all in its reproductive functions. Yet intertextuality, and often the motive for intertextualizing various discourses (such as religion and sexuality), is precisely the increased ability to both legitimize the naturalization of certain ideas and delegitimize various ideas in accordance with one's ideological impulses or their moral posturing. In terms of postmodernism's critique of metanarrative, it too exists in the fluidity of its content and the delegitimizing of that which presumes to be natural, normal, axiomatic.

Postmodernism is both an extension of, and evolution of, modernism, or the modernist period, wherein axiomatic institutions were in collapse and the 'God's eye' notion of the stability of an omniscient narrative was being largely rejected and/or disrupted by many alternative ideas. Modernism, in terms of the arts and aesthetics specifically, was a period of innovation, experimentation with form and genre distinctions, often including lamentation of "the profound

and tragic loss of the golden age of unity and belonging” (Snipp-Walmsley 410). (This quote can certainly be not only allegorical in terms of the idyllic backward gaze of Americanism, but also characterizes it as well. It is both a utopian and nostalgic longing for an illusory past that nevertheless *feels* or *felt* real.) Yet, there is in modernism a new search for meaning, truth, and beauty, as previous (oft institutionalized) understandings became recognized as being fragmented, though this realization was not without mourning and pain. As Chris Snipp-Walmsley writes of modernism, “The sense of purpose and continuity that had previously held sway was ruptured and fragmented” (409).

If this brief synopsis of modernism appears to be a generalization, it is to an extent, though no less true because of it. Berman indicates that as with most categorizations of this kind, *sharp* distinctions may often be, in their finality or totality, problematic: “[M]odernism contains its own inner contradictions and dialectics; that forms of modernist thought and vision may congeal into dogmatic orthodoxies and become archaic. [...] If we learned through one modernism to construct haloes among our spaces and ourselves, we can learn from another modernism [...] to lose our haloes and find ourselves anew” (171). In short, while much of the aesthetic work of the modernist period grapples with the loss of an axiomatic past, or of axiomatic elements of the past, the pull of dogmatism, the enticement of certainty, and the lure of wholeness, both produce and illuminate (for those who care to take notice) the contradictions that exist when trying to find unity where there may only be fragmentism and knowing in spaces of unknowing.

Within postmodernism, rather, we can understand the loss of unity as not something to be mourned *per se*, indeed quite the opposite. Postmodernism recognizes the room to celebrate the (for many people often uncomfortable) loss of unity by throwing off the shackles of prior

axiomatic understandings, and without seeking new ‘T’ruths, experimenting and purposely dwelling in the fragmentary nature of reality. Postmodernism, in its often-unsettling revelations and ideas regarding our fragmented reality, reveals the flawed logic of fundamentalism and essentialism, and the erroneous attraction to either/or dichotomies (such as American or un-American lives for example) and us/Other distinctions that underpin “systems of domination” (hooks, *Yearning* 62). Indeed, the idea of ‘proper’ American morality, on the other hand, fosters a prevalent spirit of blind patriotism and cultural supremacy, and locates morality in axiomatic tradition thereby producing ethics that are ideologically certain rather than that which should be entirely situational and pragmatic. The latter form of ethics, in other words, is able to navigate contradiction and fragmentation.

The postmodern condition is a sociocultural paradigm that makes perpetual the fact that “legitimation becomes visible as a problem and an object of study [...] at the point in which it is called into question” (Jameson qtd. in Lyotard viii). Thus, postmodernism, in its *simplest* understanding, presents us with a relativist sociocultural realm. Yet, its simplest understanding also frequently relieves postmodernism of its nuance which should be recognized as one of its distinguishing characteristics. Many critics of postmodernism including Dick Hebdige (1979), Fredric Jameson (1984), Roger Scruton (2000), Daniel Boorstin (1992), and Terry Eagleton (1996) lament its conditions and frequently present postmodernism in terms of binaries, which is one of the major shortcomings of much of the literature regarding postmodernism: postmodernism/modernism, superficiality/depth, simulacra/authenticity, mimesis/originality, illusion/reality, plurality/unity, fluidity/absolutism, and the like.

Indeed, Jameson argues that postmodernism pertains unequivocally to the logic of late capitalism, thereby epitomizing the reductionist polemical claims regarding the postmodern

condition: “every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today” (3). This assertion undermines the plethora of vital issues at stake in postmodernity, such as marginality, subjugation, hybridity, race, gender, essentialism, difference, universality, Otherness, etc. Judith Halberstam writes, “[T]he assumption that cultural production will always only represent the dominant economic order, erases the multiple disruptions to hegemony that have emerged from subcultural and avant-garde art practises in the past, [for instance], and it leaves us with a sense of inevitability about our relationship to the dominant” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 98). While Halberstam does speak to the dominant economic order, she also makes a distinction in terms of disrupting hegemony in general. Therefore, accordingly, cultural production is not simply only tethered to the dominant economic order as Jameson suggests.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1994) echoes Halberstam in terms of viewing globalization (often, though problematically, the term ‘globalization’ is utilized synonymously with postmodernism) as the realm of the dominant: “The implication of the modernity / globalization view is that the history of globalization begins with the history of the West. But is it not precisely the point of globalization as a perspective that globalizations begin with world history? The modernity / globalization view is not only geographically narrow (westernization) but also historically shallow” (“Globalization as Hybridization” 568). In other words, proper intellectual examination does not settle for the simple binary of the West and the rest, but also recognizes historicity beyond normative understandings of history. The dominant does not have the patent on history—though when speaking of or recognizing actualities and reality...the dominant does often have the patent, not in actuality necessarily but in ‘reality’.

In terms of postmodern aesthetics, capitalism, and the United States in their dominant role of disseminating metanarrative understanding, Arjun Appadurai, in “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Culture Economy,” (1990) states,

I would like to suggest that the apparent increasing substitutability of whole periods and postures for one another, in the cultural styles of advanced capitalism, is tied to larger global forces, which have done much to show Americans that the past is usually another country. [...] The crucial point, however, is that the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes. The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. (513)

Pointedly, then, regarding aspects of Americanism, it is paramount to recognize that “in an essentialist sense [there is] no such thing as *one* national identity [but] rather that different identities are discursively constructed according to audience, setting, topic, and substantive content, [and therefore national identities are] malleable, fragile and, frequently, ambivalent and diffuse” (Wodak et al 4; original emphasis). Thus, an ‘America divided’ is only divided as such according to presuppositions and pretext of what it means to be American in the first place, while America-united is an illusory communal utopian idea also rooted in pretext, in the axiomatic idea of ‘being’. Indeed, Appadurai states, “One man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison” (Disjuncture and Difference” 514).

Slavoj Žižek, in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), argues that “‘being’ is the poorest, most imperfect, notional determination (everything ‘is’ in some way, even my craziest phantasmagorias); it is only through further notional determinations that we get to existence, to reality, to actuality, which are all much more than mere being” (xxvii). In other words, there are

distinctions to be made between reality and actuality, between being, becoming, and/or unbecoming.

In part, what Žižek speaks to is why postmodernism is often theorized as profoundly unsettling, fragmentizing, alienating, and the like, and may be considered as such, to some degree, because it demonstrates a distrust of metanarratives and of absolute ways of speaking Truth, Reality, and Being. Instead, postmodernism discourse seeks, embraces, and dwells in instability, contradiction, antithesis, inconsistency, and thus, ultimately, uncertainty. “The postmodern turn,” write Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1997), “is exciting and exhilarating in that it involves an encounter with experiences, ideas, and ways of life that contest accepted modes of thought and provide new ways of seeing, writing, and living” (ix). As such, the postmodern turn is quite similar to Hegelian Negation wherein Hegel offers that it is in the ‘negativity of thought’ “that the static (or habitual) becomes discarded or dissolved, made fluid and adaptable, and recovers its eagerness to push on towards ‘the whole’” (Spencer). The difference here between postmodernism and Hegelian Negation lies in the ‘push towards the whole’—Hegel’s pursuit of Truth.²⁷ My argument is that the importance of postmodernism is not the push towards Truth but the push against it. Thus, as with all things ‘exhilarating’, or uncertain, it is not for everybody, and critics abound.

For instance, Dick Hebdige argues that postmodernism is a “deliberate nihilistic attempt [to] undermine the validity of the distinction between [accepted dichotomies such as] good and bad [...] by challenging the authority of any distinction which is not alert to its own partial and provincial status [and] impermanence” (Snipp-Walmsley 418). Yet, from Nietzsche we can

²⁷ The logical analysis of existence is usually credited to GWF Hegel (1770-1831) who established being, becoming and nothing as a necessary conceptual package for understanding existence and change. In some translations ‘nothing’ has been shifted to ‘not-being’ (Wallace).

recognize that there is a distinction to be made between good and bad, even without an authoritative or ‘valid’ distinction such as, for example, good and evil: “[b]asically the ‘good’ is affectively defined as what brings maximum potential and connection to the situation. It is defined in terms of becoming” (Massumi, *Navigating Movements* 218).

Moreover, ethics is over simplified when thought to apply to simplistic dichotomies such as good and evil. Hebdige, alternatively, does just that as he alleges that the postmodern ‘project’ divides us into two worlds:

One is a round earth which still holds on to principles of truth, social justice, political commitment, and reason. The other is a flat earth in which everything is levelled and its inhabitants exist in the sphere of the hyper-real, divorced from the annoying contours and crevices of ethical, moral, political, and rational judgement, [...] an eclectic free-for-all [where] all notions of right and wrong are dissipated. (Snipp-Walmsley 418)

Binary explanations such as this frequently miss the point, and worse, as bell hooks reminds us, binary understandings are the “underpinnings of systems of domination” (*Yearning* 62). Thus, the ‘social justice’ that Hebdige speaks to is compromised by his way of thinking and the way of thinking that he praises and appraises as metanarrative. Moreover, the ‘annoying contours’ of ethics and morality are only made more potent and recognized, situational and pragmatic, within the ‘sphere’ of postmodernism.

Indeed, it is precisely binary understandings which allow for America to posture itself as a nation personifying freedom, democracy, and opportunity, against the Other of socialism, fascism, oppression even as it “extends its jurisdiction beyond its own borders, [...] suspends its constitutional obligations within those borders, and [...] understands itself as exempt from any number of international agreements. It jealously guards its right to sovereign self-protection

while making righteous incursions into other sovereignties” (Butler, *Frames of War* 47). This is not to position America in binary terms myself as the nation of freedom and the nation that infringes upon Others' freedom, for example, only to say that both things can be true at the same time. Indeed, this is precisely not putting matters into binary oppositions. But when the nation defines itself one way while justifying (or keeping hidden) the actions and characteristics that betray the portrayal and the belief of themselves in national ethos, this is highly problematic. Binary oppositions allow for the ignorance of the spectrum of reality whilst masquerading as *real*, objective, singular truths.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, is often dismissed outright for its utter lack of any claim to objectivity or to truth—what one might call a totalizing narrative of untruth. This too is reductionist and misinformed. For instance, in *economic* terms, including American metanarrative ideas and American neoliberal actualities, Roger Backhouse suggests, “Whilst it is certainly the case that knowledge is constructed, and that much of our knowledge of economic events is conditioned by what we take for granted as members of particular discourse communities, it is going too far to argue that there are no such things as empirical evidence” (45). And certainly, postmodern theory does not deny the existence of empirical evidence. Postmodernism’s subversiveness, rather, is found, in part, in

a participatory culture that speaks back to the hegemonic limitations and restrictions brought about by media convergence and consolidated ownership of the culture industry [...] while traditional theoretical oppositions between political economy and cultural studies cannot adequately address the multiple, dynamic, and complex relationships between media convergence and [postmodern] participatory culture. (Durham and Kellner 384)

Thus, again regarding the logic of late capital, insofar as the danger of “a worldwide labor bureaucracy of technocracy taking charge [...] can be warded off only to the extent that local struggles directly target national and international axioms, at the precise point of their insertion in the fields of immanence,” postmodernism in its participatory critique of fixed human, racial, gendered, national, social realities is entirely relevant and importantly subversive (Deleuze and Guattari 464). This is true in the case of globalized neoliberalism, rather than, as Jameson asserts, being a cause of, or indeed the very essence of globalized neoliberalism.

Postmodernism offers a way of thinking that accepts conflicting notions, and in which loss of unity, fragmentation, and the recognition of cultural constructions are celebrated, or embraced, or at least investigated. Angela McRobbie, in “Feminism, postmodernism and the ‘real me’” (1985), suggests that “[p]ostmodernism is a concept for understanding social change” demonstrating a “respect for difference” and “a *rigorous* thinking through of what ‘living with difference’ might entail” (62, 63; emphasis added). This points to the shortcomings of tolerance discourse as it is practised and demarcated. Indeed, postmodernism is frequently defined but seldom fully understood, for its understanding in totality would be its downfall to some degree. That is precisely the frustration (for many people) of defining the somewhat undefinable, that which is willingly, purposefully, and recognizably uncertain.

The Void

Postmodernism, in its fluidity, liminality, hybridization, and subversion of ‘the mainstream’ as it valorizes, or validates, marginality, offers a perpetual reminder of, and continuous glimpses into, the ‘void’. The void may be described as humankind’s fundamental condition of lack, unknowing, foundational emptiness. Žižek points to one way to understand the concept of the void (though without naming it as such): “the most profound dimension of the

religious experience is not this idea of a good ol' guy God but simply a kind of – let's call it 'ontological uneasiness': you feel that you are not totally of this world, that there is something structurally wrong. And here comes my trick: this does not mean that there is another world, just this sense that we don't fully belong in this one" (qtd. in Jones).

Due to this 'ontological uneasiness', this perpetual uncertainty, the void produces "the temptation of meaning," as Žižek claims, and thus the emphasis is on language, narrative, discourse, and hegemony to point to objective truths (qtd. in *Examined Life*). Franz Fanon writes, "A man who has a language consequently *possesses* the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (18; emphasis added). (One could argue that Trump debunks this claim with his inane and seemingly insane utilization of language, but in a less literal meaning of the term, he speaks the 'language' of his followers, and in an anti-intellectualist context, the language of the people.) Language morphs into narrative and then into (potentially) dominant discourse which acts as normative and functions hegemonically. Discourse, often invisibly, and often insidiously, informs the supposed stability presumed of ideology that becomes reified through cultural practices and social performances which work to affirm, sustain, and reaffirm Truth. The void, on the other hand, produces and reveals uncertainty as it constitutes the unknowing, or the lack, that discourse and ideology are ultimately grounded in.

Many people, understandably, find it unsettling, impossible to imagine even, to exist in a state of metaphysical uncertainty, and thus they turn to seemingly cohesive, grand, all encompassing, supposedly axiomatic metanarratives regarding all matter of understanding: religion, gender, race, sexuality, technology, etc., all of which have the potential to become intertextualized. In doing, *meaning* often works fundamentally to produce, reiterate, and sustain,

subdivisions of humanity, and divisions of *belief*, that appear to be natural. Postmodernism and queer theory (the latter often rooted in postmodern discourse or considered a postmodern discourse) work to denaturalize these understandings. For instance, queer theory points to an understanding that the relationship between knowledge and ignorance is neither oppositional nor binary. Thus, ‘queerness’ must deliberately exist in a space of questioning, instability, fluidity, and ambiguity.

This is not to say that a lack of fixed identity is *mistaken* for freedom, as Terry Eagleton suggests in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, but that first and foremost one is not fixed from without, not fixed by discourse which projects onto oneself. Without concession to the notion of ‘human nature’—though clinical psychology and social sciences do attempt to qualify what is in our *nature* as human beings, to various degrees of accuracy—human beings, generally speaking, do exhibit a penchant for what Žižek describes as ‘the temptation of meaning’. The practice of ascribing meaning, especially metaphysical meaning, to life, death, the hereafter, our origins, Others, and that which never was or never will be, relies heavily simply on one’s belief that there is meaning, cosmic or otherwise, where meaninglessness is often all that can be found to resemble that which is absolute. Thus, we read ‘signs and wonders’—a beautiful sunset, a timely coincidence—with the significance of that which is metaphysically ordained.

Eagleton, an outspoken critic of postmodernism, suggests that it is a “style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation” (vii). First, I argue that it is metanarrative, in its fixity, that holds within it suspicion and fear of (certain forms of) progress, emancipation, and counternarratives. Secondly, does Eagleton’s estimation of postmodernism not, in part, demonstrate a stance that became

Galileo's downfall and humanity's gain? Being suspicious of 'classical notions of truth' and of 'identity' and 'objectivity', precisely *requires* reason and affords the individual *emancipation* in recognition, and in doing, points towards universal progress, moral and ethical progress, as postmodernism is the antithesis of essentialism and its ideological mate, fundamentalism.

Jameson argues that positive moral evaluations of postmodernism are "vulgar apologies for postmodernism," stating that there is little to no value in any "positive moral evaluation of postmodernism" (46). Yet, postmodernism's subversiveness is unrecognized, or out of hand dismissed, by criticisms like Jameson's and other trivializing cynical cultural analyses tied to binary oppositions: reductionist, frequently nostalgic lamentations of loss and anxiety over a new global society drowning in affect and hyper-capitalist-consumerism. As mentioned, postmodernism, in its simplest understanding, presents us with a relativist sociocultural realm. But its simplest understanding relieves it of its nuance, which many critics of postmodernism are guilty of doing, often presenting it in terms of loss, lack of meaning, chaos, constrained by binary oppositions.

Glimpses into 'the void' are precisely what often cause people to cling to what they may consider axiomatic understanding. Moreover, the daily pragmatic uncertainties and alienation induced by the logic of late capitalism, or neoliberalism, wherein exploitation is the necessary by-product of production—and which co-occurs with postmodernism though it is certainly not ideologically cohesive with postmodernism as Jameson suggests—may also coerce and convince people to turn to metanarrative understanding. Some critics of postmodernism suggest that it is a way of thinking that is only realistically available to those who can *afford* to engage. I maintain that postmodern discourse is educative, and if investigated as such, or accepted as such, or not simply negatively dismissed as 'superficiality', could, without liberating us entirely from the

pervasiveness of the logic of late capitalism, certainly offer us the freedom provided by broader recognition while within capitalism's constraints. However, many of the criticisms of postmodernism are quite weak and often rely upon wildly simplistic accounts of a rather vast body of theory and cultural criticism.

Jameson argues that the pervasive superficiality of the postmodern condition distracts and diverts us, disguising contradictions and resolving them in the "guise of various formal mystifications," while these formal mystifications, among other facets of postmodernity, work to disregard historicity, to overwhelm us with the disorienting "mysterious charge of affect" (49, 27). Although his argument is not entirely without merit, I suggest that the 'mystifications', as he terms them, frequently *embrace* contradictions rather than disguising them, and are less insidious, less divisive, and less *lethal* than adherence to supposedly deeper axiomatic meaning which, in many circumstances, laments that which is considered superficiality.

Superficiality works conceptually, as well as pragmatically, to problematize the notion of universal self-evident Reality. Indeed, Nietzsche (1886), laying groundwork for postmodern thought, argues,

Anyone who has looked deeply into the world will probably guess the wisdom that lies in human superficiality. [...] Entire millennia sink their teeth into a religious interpretation of existence, driven by a deep, suspicious fear of an incurable pessimism; this fear comes from an instinct which senses that we could get hold of the truth *too soon*, before people have become strong enough, hard enough, artistic enough...Seen in this light, piety – the 'life in God' – appears as the last and most subtle monstrosity produced by *fear* of the truth; it appears as [...] worship and intoxication before the most consistent of all

falsifications, as the will to invert the truth, the will to untruth at any price. (*Beyond Good and Evil* 53; original emphasis)

Insofar as knowledge is comprised of systems of thought which become powerfully coercive and controlling, socially legitimated and institutional, postmodernism provides the conditions for an understanding wherein it is often that which is beneath the surface that is lacking in depth, and an understanding that the underpinnings of metanarratives and metaculture are not as binding as they may seem. This is precisely what the built-in blind spots of dogma, of fundamentalism and essentialism, work to dispel.

Lyotard, who recognizes the importance of fluidity in postmodernity and the democratic and dialectical potential therein, identifies two controlling modes of metanarratives which have dominated human thought: the Mythic, and the Enlightenment with its narratives of liberty, equality, progression, and betterment, which carry totalitarian (and/or essentialist) impulses, as fundamentalist Americanism well demonstrates. Rather, “[p]ostmodern knowledge,” Lyotard writes, “is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (xxv).

The postmodern theoretical perspective provides a subversive understanding of the illusion of metanarrative, rather than Hebdige’s disparagingly reductionist claim that postmodernism undermines good and evil while “challenging the authority of any distinction which is not alert to its own partial and provincial status [and] impermanence” (Snipp-Walmsley 418). Indeed, that Hebdige even frames such an idea negatively demonstrates the shortcomings of much postmodern theoretical examination. Challenging the authority of that which is not alert to its own impermanence points to the validity of postmodernism. Furthermore, while Jameson considers positive moral evaluations of postmodernity to be ‘vulgar apologies for

postmodernism', again I suggest instead that postmodernism, as it pertains to uncertainty and potentially false perceptions of Reality, is effectively and affectively positively informative in that it points to the potential ethical progress that can be gained in the obliteration of axiomatic, binary understandings of reality. The same can be said of queer theory.

“Queer studies,” Halberstam suggests, “offer us one method for imagining, not some fantasy of elsewhere, but existing alternatives to hegemonic systems” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 89). She continues, “Heteronormative common-sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope” (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 89). I argue that here Halberstam would be more correct if she replaced ‘ethical conduct’ with ‘moral posturing’, ‘morality’, or ‘didactic reasoning’, because ethics must be differentiated from morality, and ‘morality’ rather than ethics is much more fitting to her argument.²⁸ Nevertheless, she continues, “Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common-sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive lifestyles, negativity, and critique” (Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* 89). Postmodernity, queer lives, and queer theory *fragment* moral-political fetishes of truth. Sedgwick writes, “Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either ‘true’ or ‘false’ under some other regime of truth—these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as particular regimes of truth” (25). Sedgwick demonstrates here the fluidity and instability not only inherent in the actualities of postmodernism and queer lives, but in individual realities as well.

²⁸ See footnote on page 3.

What I consider a paradox of postmodernism, then, is that its theoretical implications and the manner in which it unfolds in practice are frequently in conflict. This is due in no small part to the prevalence, in the first place, of capitalism and the logic of accumulation, because within postmodernism “subcultural activities are as likely to generate new forms of protest as they are to produce new commodities to be absorbed back into the logic of accumulation; and new sites of opposition or ‘geographies of resistance’ become available even as new modes of domination are formed” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 98). In other words, ironically, most ‘scenes’ or subcultural or countercultural happenings that are ‘successful’ to varying degrees *outside* of mainstream norms, eventually become a parody of themselves, as that which was considered original and belonging to a small community becomes coopted by the mainstream (again in varying degrees). The mainstream cooption of the hippie counterculture is a fine example in this regard, insofar as whatever politics existed in hippie culture were replaced in mainstream cooption by style over substance (not in a postmodernist manner per se but in terms of the actualities of the counterculture specifically). Therefore, the ‘originators’ may be left deflated by this cooption, as it signals the lack of the cohesiveness of the original community, and often leaves many participants longing for something else that can again feel distinct, something that is not within dominant discourse, or within dominant culture, but is liminal, impermanent yet competent, and potentially imprinting the culture lastingly.

This is why marginality is an imperative (indeed unavoidable) facet of queer theory. For marginality can often be coopted by normativity in manners that benefit normativity and yet leave the marginal negligible, ignorable, less than legitimate. Miguel A. Cabrera (2011), in his study of Joan W. Scott’s critical feminism points out that many historians “mask the ‘necessarily discursive character’ of experience” (38). This masking is undoubtedly an element of

essentialism and the effect is to make objective that which is narrative, which in turn is what creates metanarrative. I argue that the objective world and the narrative world can impress upon one another, but it is when the narrative world *becomes* objective that dogma (essentialism, fundamentalism) takes hold and people “fail to see that experience is not the result of reality’s direct impact on people’s subjectivity, but rather is the result of a discursive apprehension of reality” (Cabrera 38).

Cabrera adds what is essentially a synopsis of the underlying foundation of postmodernism and queer theory (and that which Butler effectively posits in *Gender Trouble*): “[F]or the explanation of identity and the conduct of historical actors, we should look to the historical constitution of categories such as class, worker, citizen, man or woman, homosexual or heterosexual, as well as the way those categories enter into social practice—and not the *allegedly* foundational experience” (39; emphasis added). Essentially, what Cabrera is pointing to is the difference between reality and actuality.

Reality / Actuality

When the authority of normative interpretations of reality, or of traditions, that work to moralize our actions are thrown into question, we can recognize that the ‘deeper reality’—the ideas, the promises, the Americanist narratives, for example—that informs these beliefs frequently pertains to the prevalence of reflexive, non-reflective axiomatic meaning. And these authoritative ‘truths’ are often sustained, in part, simply because of trusted endurance which over time is interpreted as common sense. In this regard, the work of Antonio Gramsci (*The Prison Notebooks*, 1948) regarding hegemony and cultural norms is of enduring importance, as is Chomsky’s thesis regarding propaganda in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988).

Each of these works point to the relations of power and normativities insofar as in every historical moment we are where we are culturally not by accident or because of fate, nor, in more Americanist terms, because of destiny. Both Gramsci and Chomsky demonstrate that societal and cultural norms become hegemonic for very specific reasons. That which lies outside of these norms is that which diverges from (oft essentialized) norms, and can thus be considered deviant, and by that logic, immoral. Therefore, it is the deviance, the ‘immorality’ of marginality, that provides us with the opportunity to bring social justice and ethical conduct into dominant discourse and therein dominant modes of morality and reality.

There is an inherent lag in shifting dominant discourse (in part because of the immorality thought of marginality), while accepted norms often thrive due to lack of questioning, due to repetition, and due to acquiescence to tradition and to canonical, reified universals. Howard Zinn’s, *A People’s History of the United States*, is a valuable contribution in these regards in terms of revealing the de-historization of the past and the present, the amnesiac backwards gaze, and the glossing over of paradox with platitudes, by demonstrating the ‘hidden’ history of the United States which belies metanarrative understanding.

Also important in terms of accepted norms and reified universals is Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) wherein they suggest, “An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously (independently of any recapitulation that may be made of it in a scientific or theoretical corpus)” (23). They argue, as well, that “[t]here is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality [...] and a field of representation [...] and a field of subjectivity” (23). I argue that this may be so, *generally*, but it is precisely the place of Cultural Studies and Critical Theory to examine potential distinctions regarding all matter of cultural

realities even if those distinctions are not necessarily, nor should be, *sharp* distinctions. Reality, representation, and subjectivity are intertwined, but that points to the importance of the intellectual exercise of not settling for the intertextual ideas of truth that lie within these symbolic fields as they each influence the other in order to create a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. All communication may be symbolic but that does not mean that symbolism *is* reality; it is how we communicate meaning, communicate reality, but it is not meaning or reality in and of itself nor is it indicative in definitive terms of actualities.

Indeed, in Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (1951), also a foundational text in regard to accepted norms and reified universals, he states that "knowledge comes to us through a network of prejudices, opinions, innervations, self-corrections, presuppositions and exaggerations, in short through the dense, firmly founded but by no means transparent medium of experience" (80). This is precisely why it is dangerous to presume that distinctions between reality, representation, and subjectivity cannot be made—although, as we see in the following paragraph, in regard to the 'Culture Industry', Adorno is capable of doing just that. Or, at least, the recognition of these prejudices, opinions, exaggerations, and such, should be (or attempted to be) recognized. Recognition of origins of meaning (or, again, the attempt thereof) is key. Perspective is key; the *investigation* of perspective is key. Where origin may be lacking deciphering, it is not unworthy of investigation. Quite the opposite: seeking is of the highest order, even when foundation is likely known to remain unknown.

Therefore, one of the distressingly problematic aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer's (in)famous "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), is the assertion that "[a]ll mass culture under monopoly is identical"

(“Culture Industry” 53). This is a deterministic idea and a provocation insofar as it is a far too encompassing statement of wholeness and the inevitable sameness and invalidity of the mixing of art and commerce. Granted, this was written before postmodernism made its mark. Moreover, there is little doubt that the standardization of culture does work to placate the masses. But their argument is quite similar to Jameson’s aforementioned proclamation that “every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today” (409). There is truth to be found *within* these statements but not a whole truth as the authors assert.

These statements are of the meta-variety—encompassing to the extent that they cannot be substantiated. Indeed, they are the type of statements that Cultural Studies scholars (such as themselves) should be entirely wary of, and to some extent their all-encompassing aspects invalidate the very insightfulness that they are supposedly invoking. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that culture “[infects] everything with sameness” of that which was once instead supported by (for example) religion (“Culture Industry” 53). They continue, “[T]he basis on which technology is gaining power over society is the power of those whose economic position in society is strongest. Technological rationality today is the rationality of domination” (Adorno and Horkheimer, “Culture Industry” 54). Again, this is by no means entirely incorrect, but these are rather deterministic viewpoints that are simply not as impregnable as they are perceived to be, or presented to be, by the authors, especially with statements such as “[e]ach branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together” (Adorno and Horkheimer, “Culture Industry” 53).

These arguments fall dangerously close to the same fundamentalist ideas that they claim have lost support, and are thus similar to the type of things defended with religious zealotry and totalizing and oppressive thought. Are the authors simply insisting that the masses have no ability to see what they see, to understand what they understand? Or are they insinuating that critical thought escapes all but them? I imagine that neither is the case. However, it is important to recognize that meta is not meta for all, sameness is not sameness for all, and placation can be resisted regardless of the ‘intentions’ of dominant discourse, or of invasive economic actualities, or traditional, axiomatic, supposed universal Truths.

Indeed, Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886 / 2002), argues that “[i]t is the mark of a higher culture to value the little unpretentious truths which have been discovered by means of rigorous method more highly than the errors handed down by metaphysical and artistic ages and men, which blind us and make us happy” (13). In this regard, Francis Mulhern’s rather definitive work, *Culture/Metaculture* (2000), nicely expands (knowingly or otherwise) on Nietzsche’s contention when Mulhern states, “Familiar modern understandings of the term [culture] persist, more or less strongly: culture as a storehouse of essentially human or essentially national values. But they persist now in more or less radical tension with the newer understanding of culture as the ordinary social, historical world of sense, of ‘symbolic’ or meaning-bearing activity in *all* its forms” (xiii; emphasis added). Therefore—and the previously mentioned arguments of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Jameson, though not at all entirely, do fall more in with this line of thought—if culture is a collection of values, its understanding has become more prominently understood in many circumstances—certainly in the United States—into that which Nietzsche describes as metaphysical, and Mulhern refers to as symbolic and ‘meaning-bearing’. Mulhern writes, if “‘metafiction’ designates a kind of fiction about fiction,

[then] [m]etacultural discourse [...] is that in which culture, however defined, *speaks of itself*' (xiv; emphasis added).

“Metaculture,” Mulhern continues, is discourse in the strong sense of that versatile term: a historically formed set of topics and procedures that both drives and regulates the utterance of the individuals who inhabit it, and assigns them definite positions in the field of meaning it delimits. The position of seeing and speaking and writing in metacultural discourse, the kind of subject any individual ‘becomes’ in practising it, is culture itself. (xiv)

Similar to metanarrative, then, which is essentially stories about stories, metaculture is culture about culture. In each case, the stories about...whatever they may be, carry more weight than the initial facts. Or, put another way, stories become mythologized while *symbols* become more real than the actualities, thereby leading the way for the ‘pretentious truths’ to become instead the Truth.

Neoliberalism, the Law, and the Importance of Representation Therein

In terms of understanding the origins and actualities of Americanisms that have developed into ‘mythological truisms’ (as contradictory or counterintuitive as the latter phrase may appear to be), the previously mentioned text from Howard Zinn, as well as Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) and James Truslow Adams’ *The Epic of America* (1931) are instrumental. Weber especially, demonstrates the compromising and at times difficult task of aligning seemingly disparate discourses into encompassing intertextualized truisms.

The concept of the Protestant Work Ethic in the work of Max Weber has persisted in linking wealth acquisition to a virtuous metaphysically-ordained process in discussions of

American capitalism.²⁹ Weber writes, “It is obvious how powerfully the exclusive search for the Kingdom of God only through the fulfillment of duty in the calling, and the strict asceticism which Church discipline naturally imposed, especially on the propertyless classes, was bound to affect the productivity of labour in the capitalistic sense of the word” (121). He continues, “The treatment of labour as a calling became as characteristic of the modern worker as the corresponding attitude toward acquisition of the business man” (Weber 121). Asceticism, capital gain, hard work, naturalism, greed, inequality, eternal calling: it is all there in a paradoxical intertextual melange that would be echoed in the future (current) juggernaut of neoliberalism that neoconservatism would help inaugurate.

Therefore, David Harvey’s (2005) examination of neoliberalism is an important work as it too demonstrates how paradoxical intertextualization can be, yet how effective it is as well, regardless of paradox. Harvey demonstrates how easily an ideal as ambiguous and abstract as freedom can be coopted to be viewed rather narrowly within the confines of the rugged individualism of American capitalism, thereby constructing consent for a neoliberal state that works against many of the very people who support it. The free-market, laissez-faire fundamentalism of neoliberalism’s globalization has been greatly enabled due to a pragmatic strategy of a neoconservative-neoliberal alliance of corporations and class elites that solidified in the 1980s, who “cautiously finessed” certain aspects of the postmodern condition, such as ideals of individual freedom, and turned them against interventionist and regulatory practices of the

²⁹ The Protestant Work Ethic that is alive within American capitalism is not as *simple* as the idea that the acquisition of wealth is a virtuous, metaphysically-ordained process. Yet, nevertheless, over time, and due to its (hallowed) Puritan foundations, the Dream of Americanism-proper in terms of the virtue and supposedly inherent freedom within capitalist ideology and practice has become culturally axiomatic and has not freed itself from its metaphysical foundations, despite the actuality of the greed and inequality that are counterintuitively, and paradoxically, incorporated within other supposedly virtuous American ideals.

state (Harvey, *A Brief History* 42). The neoconservative-neoliberal alliance also managed to convince many people that their agenda is just as much, or much more so, about culture than about economy.

The atrocities of neoliberal ideals are well documented in (along with some of the works already mentioned) Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, many of the works of Zygmunt Bauman, particularly *Liquid Modernity* (1999), and even contemporary sources such as *Rolling Stone* and *Adbusters*. Yet, what these works (save for Harvey's, in part) often fail to examine is how neoliberal ideals can be seen to be entirely *in keeping* with Americanist values rather than in conflict.

For instance, *Rolling Stone*'s political columnist Matt Taibbi decries that in the wake of Wall Street scandals, Real Estate disaster, and the Great Recession, the leaders of mighty and corrupt corporations manage to hold on to their millions while the less fortunate are ever more destitute and stranded ("Why Isn't Wall Street in Jail?"). The former, he argues, are "attacking the very definition of property – which, after all, depends in part on a legal system that defends everyone's claim of ownership equally. When that definition becomes tenuous or conditional – when the state simply gives up on the notion of justice – this whole American Dream thing recedes further from reality" (Taibbi, "Why Isn't Wall Street in Jail?" 51). But the illusion of meritocracy is built into 'this whole American Dream thing'; we can see this, for example, in the uneven rule of law in America which offers impunity to those whom in the 'eyes' of the Dream deserve it. Equality in law has always been a dubious yet fundamentalist American claim. Politics, socioeconomic circumstance, race, representation, and cultural policy have always disturbed the supposed sanctity of law in America.

For instance, Sister Helen Prejean, in *Dead Man Walking* (1993), demonstrates the uneven rule of law in America in her examination and condemnation of the death penalty in the United States. She writes (speaking specifically of Louisiana), “[P]rosecutors, judges, and juries, most of whom are white, are far more outraged when white people are murdered than when black people are. ‘White people identify more with white people’ (Prejean 48-49). She cites *McCleskey v. Kemp* (1987), a Supreme Court decision that concluded that there was “irrefutable evidence from an extensive study of two thousand capital cases in Georgia [admitting] that there exists in capital sentencing ‘a discrepancy that appears to correlate with race’ (Prejean 49). Yet, “[f]aced with similar empirical evidence of discrimination in housing and unemployment, the Court upheld legislative remedies, but in the arena of capital punishment they shrugged off disparities in sentencing as ‘an *inevitable* part of our criminal justice system’” (Prejean 49; original emphasis).

Because of the costs involved in a criminal case, there are obvious disadvantages for the poor, and that is why “‘you’re never going to find a rich person on death row’” (Prejean 49). Therefore, quite simply, when it comes to inequality and state-sanctioned violence, there are inevitable flaws within the supposedly sacred rule of law. Indeed, the stranglehold of ‘traditional American values’, the juggernaut of neoliberalism, and the many problematic paradoxical particularities of a fundamentalist faith that declares the rule of law sanctified in the U.S.A., and the faith in militarism and righteous violence, are all contributing factors to the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ movement fizzling out only a year after its birth.

Brian Massumi, in *Politics of Affect* (2015), argues that those trying to address concerns regarding *representation* and the increasing inequality of globalization and neoliberalism (such as ‘Occupy’), often resort to violence in order to get the attention of mass media, but in doing

they “spectacularly backfire as often as not [while] amplifying fear and converting it into group-pride or resolve” (27). In doing, he argues, this violence is “as divisive as the oppression it’s responding to, and it feeds right into the dominant state mechanisms” (Massumi, *Politics of Affect* 27). It should be mentioned that the violent parties that Massumi is referring to are almost exclusively the fringe elements of protests (yet are represented—in mass media and otherwise—as the status quo in such situations). As Zinn attests, regarding the Seattle protests of the World Trade Organization in the last months of 1999, “The press gave disproportionate attention to a small number of demonstrators who broke windows and created a ruckus, but the overwhelming majority in Seattle were nonviolent, and it was these that the police chose to attack with tear gas and then arrest” (672). Thus, we see the issue of the left criticizing the right in protest, while the right (including often through the media) is more effective at mobilising fear in affective ways. Massumi continues, “The traditional Left was really left behind by the culturalization or socialisation of capital and the new functioning of mass media” (*Politics of Affect* 28).

The culturalization of capital can be directly linked to the power of the punishing state, while various forms of media perform the task of framing reality for the masses. And one dominant narrative that media reproduces (intentionally or otherwise, but I tend to withhold the benefit of the doubt here, for the intentional is more likely, as it is commonly more expected and more compelling for the audience) is the privatization of criminality (different than the privatization of prisons). The privatization of criminality is the idea that the individual makes a rational choice to disobey the law, to deviate from societal expectations, and thus increased enforcement and punishment are the manner in which to treat criminality and potential criminality. Therefore, as ‘the media’ often pushes this narrative and as the narrative succumbs to meta-qualities, we can see a distinctly American approach to Law and Order that normalizes

the police state, the incarceration of marginalized populations, and mass incarceration for nonviolent crimes as *solutions* to societal problems.

Focusing primarily on solutions often causes the ‘problem’ to be something that needs to be eliminated at whatever cost, which is a highly problematic logic and/or strategy and has a tendency to bend toward utopian reasoning which in turn may influence rather dystopian results (i.e., a ‘War on Drugs’ that wishes to eviscerate ‘the drug problem’ at the cost of many lives and many dollars).³⁰ The ideology and moral posturing that has influenced the War on Drugs, and the manners in which both left and right politicians have managed the ‘war’ are incredibly similar. For both sides, facts, as well as pragmatic concerns such as money in a hyper-capitalist, tax-fearing society for that matter, seem to have had little influence on ideology. Moreover, the mainstream press and media have often been quite complicit in perpetuating the popular moralizing point of view that criminality, among other things, is privatized rather than potentially systemic.³¹

Judith Butler’s *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2009) deals with *morality* in a militarized society, wherein the rule of law stands within said morality, and therein that which compels America to “systematically [idealize] its own capacity for murder” (46). Butler argues that what determines *a life*, and therein what determines the precariousness of a life within this militarized, supposedly moral, sociocultural paradigm is a dichotomy of righteous destruction and unthinkable destructibility, and what she terms the ‘grievability’ that defines the legitimacy

³⁰ A solution-based approach can be like a Hegelian search for synthesis. It prioritizes starting with solutions as the goal rather than judiciously examining and/or exploring the problem one is facing.

³¹ At a curious angle here are the ‘neurological’ theories of crime which suggest biological determinants that free the individual of some responsibility, but they have the effect of repeating ideas of a criminal breed or race.

of life (*Frames of War*). Righteous destruction is apocalyptic, while unthinkable destruction is, in this context, utopian.

“Without grievability,” Butler argues, “there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life” (*Frames of War* 15). This nonlife, then becomes an *object*, disposable debris, interference, and as such, is not without substance but is not being recognized as a life. It may be ‘living’ as Butler suggests, despite not being accorded ontological significance, but to extinguish the living from the nonlife would be an act of redundancy, for extinguishing a life that is ungrievable is a vanquishing that would leave “either no public trace to grieve, or only a partial, mangled, and enigmatic trace” (Butler, *Frames of War* 75).³² Thus, ‘ethical’ militarized and ‘legal’ conduct, becomes constrained by essentialist binary oppositions of representation. It is important to note as well, that *representation* is one of the many intersections of militarization, the rule of law, and the American Dream within Americanism. And although these binaries of representation are not exclusive to militarization specifically, violence is frequently nevertheless at stake.

For instance, in terms of gender, sexuality, and representation during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Stuart Hall (1992) states, “In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not?” (285). “Making sense of AIDS,” echoes Paula A. Treichler in *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* (1999), “compels us to address questions of signification and representation” (4). War, HIV/AIDS, the rule of law, even neoliberal economics, are sites of violence, both within the

³² Moreover, when an individual is injured or dies and the story takes hold of the public’s attention due to media attention and other factors such as relatability and representation, it often holds a narrative stranglehold that is more potent than when a mass of (foreign, Other) people are affected by an act of terror, war, or a natural disaster.

body and without, wherein it is imperative that issues of signification and representation must be considered, including the framing mechanisms that form the apparatuses of normativities. It is not illogical then, to further conclude that signification and representation are imperative too when dealing with individual, national, religious, racial, and cultural identities which are discursively intertwined with one another as well as with tragic epidemics such as war, racism, and HIV/AIDS, as the latter two are linked by many to immorality, while in war, well, everyone has their god on their side.

Marginality and Violence

Just as the Christian credo of the separation of the ‘sheep’ and the ‘goats’ is an essentialist dichotomy of the righteous and the ungrievably wicked, there is a similar divisiveness of success, failure, virtue, and immorality within the framing mechanism of the dogma of the American Dream. In our current historical moment, the mass privatization and shrunken (and oft despised) social welfare of the Dream’s fundamentalist neoliberal arteries harden these distinctions, further linking perceived failure in various forms not simply with immorality or ‘un-Americanism’ but with criminality, thereby bringing more violence and precariousness to perceived Others within American borders. Henry Giroux, in many works including 2006’s *Beyond the Spectacle of Terrorism: Global Uncertainty and the Challenge of the New Media*, exposes the link between corporate power and the increasing violence needed to protect it, the link between the violence of the police state, race, and the economic barometer of the American Dream. Giroux writes,

Cities degenerate into besieged fortresses; people of color live with ongoing fear of incarceration; public schools are transformed into laboratories for police surveillance modeled after prisons; and the general public’s understandable desire for security, fanned

by an endless array of media-induced panics over the phantom threat of terrorism, becomes fodder for reactionary policies and violent acts by both state and nonstate terrorists alike, all aimed at drawing limits on or rolling back hard-won democratic freedoms. (*Beyond the Spectacle* 22-23)

While Giroux's commentary may seem to teeter on the brink of dystopian hyperbole, it is entirely accurate to acknowledge that (though Giroux does not use these terms specifically) the grievable/ungrievable dichotomy under the neoliberal regime pushes ever more people into extreme precariousness in exchange for the security of those living the Dream. Meanwhile, in a rather fundamentalist type of paradox, the rise of the punishing state is defended by ideals of freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

In terms of violence intersecting with marginality (and therein *ideas* of freedom), and discursive reality and actualities in America, Butler's *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020) is worthy of study. As Butler points out, what violence is, precisely, is debatable. Is violence only physical in nature or are language as well as systemic norms (potentially) violent as well? There is no doubt that there is semantic debate regarding the term 'violence', but as Butler suggests, "sometimes the physical strike to the head or the body is an expression of systemic violence, at which point one has to be able to understand the relationship of act to structure or system. To understand structural or systemic violence, one needs to move beyond positive accounts that limit our understanding of how violence works" (*The Force of Nonviolence* 2).

Referencing Chandan Reddy, Butler writes that "the form taken by liberal modernity in the United States posits the state as a guarantee of a freedom from violence that fundamentally depends on unleashing violence against racial minorities, and against all peoples characterized as irrational and outside the national norm" (*Force of Nonviolence* 3). "The state," she continues,

“is founded in racial violence and continues to inflict it against minorities in systemic ways. Thus, racial violence is understood to serve the state’s self-defense” (Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* 3).

Unbeknownst to Senator Ron Johnson (R) of Wisconsin, he confirms Butler’s point in the following quote regarding the March on the Capitol, while his subsequent defence of his statement was that it was *not at all* racially motivated or racist in content thereby further demonstrating systemic racism within Americanist metanarrative:

On January 6th I never felt threatened, because I didn’t. And mainly because even though those thousands of people that were marching the capitol were trying to pressure people like me to vote the way they wanted me to vote, I knew those were people that love this country, that truly respect law enforcement, that would never do anything to break a law, and so I wasn’t concerned. Now had the tables been turned [...] and President Trump won the election, and those were tens of thousands of Black Lives Matter and ANTIFA protestors, I might have been a little concerned. (“McConnell Flips Over Filibuster”)

Butler cites the many violent acts committed by police against unarmed “black and brown people” as both

curious and appalling to see how the defense of violence works under such conditions, for the target has to be figured as a threat, a vessel of real or actual violence, in order for lethal police action to appear as self-defense. If the person was not doing anything demonstratively violent, then perhaps the person is simply figured as violent, as a violent kind of person, or as pure violence embodied in and by that person. (*The Force of Nonviolence* 4).

What Butler is pointing out here, without explicitly stating it as such, is that essentialism (in this case regarding violence embodied in the colour of one's skin) is a factor in state violence while morality is often initiated by anxiety, or founded in fear. Furthermore, although racism may be more recognizable and prevalent on the right, they do not hold the patent. America was founded as institutionally racist. Therefore, while the argument may be construed that essentialism within fundamentalist Americanism is only an issue of the political and religious right in America, it is not. Fundamentalist Americanism is an issue of both left and right in America, rich and poor, black and white.

In terms of the latter and literature regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, Donna Hunter and Emily Polk (2016) point out that despite the similarities between Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, “the former received public and vocal academic support, [while] the latter has encountered a more complicated ambivalence” (“Academic Responses”). As Ernest B. McGowen and Kristen N. Wylie (2020) demonstrate, the difference in the recognition of each movement can very well be attributed to widespread racial views in the United States as well as narratives promoted by various forms of media and systemic racialized ideas and actualities in America. They write,

Widespread attention to, and mobilization against, police killings of unarmed African Americans shatter any lingering myths of a post-racial America. [...] We contend that stories about police killings will elicit distinct emotions from whites and African Americans. The experiment varies the race of a victim of a police-involved shooting as well as whether the victim was suspected of criminality. We find that the majority of respondents express disappointment without regard to condition and that African Americans are more likely than whites to express anger as an emotional response. We see

in-group/out-group psychological tendencies, with whites who read about a white victim (regardless of criminality) more likely to recommend criminal charges for the officer versus those who received a black victim. The findings highlight how identity moderates the connection between emotions and politics while also contributing to our understanding of race relations today. (McGowan and Wylie)

The findings of McGowen and Wylie demonstrate that “[a]lthough more recent data suggest increasing awareness of racial inequality among white respondents, the racial divide in the lived experiences and perceptions of white and nonwhite Americans remains entrenched.”

These findings should come as no shock to anyone who is paying attention, yet it can be difficult to see when media portrayals are as skewed as they often are and when politicians speak endlessly of equality, law and order, and American values. Thus, the authors’ findings “highlight how identity moderates the connection between emotions and politics while also contributing to our understanding of race relations today” (McGowen and Wylie).

What the BLM movement or Occupy for that matter, demonstrate, in short, is that monetary worth as a human being matters, marginality matters, race matters. The latter is a social construct, but one that nevertheless *exists* socially, in actuality, and in reality, to the degree that it is important to subsequently point out that black lives matter in terms of identity, politics, and national identity as it pertains to who is more or less visible in the idealized version of the American citizen. As this dissertation addresses issues of essentialism and fundamentalism as they pertain to American identity and American values, it is important to recognize where this may be indirectly addressed in some of the existing literature, but also where the literature falls short in recognizing the importance of illusion in American values. Race and class are certainly of the utmost importance in ciphering through the American ideal.

Power and Normalcy

Central to American democracy is control and consolidation of power under the (dis)guise of free choice. The rhetorical refrains of freedom from the ruling class and the long tradition of faith in American values works society-wide to placate the citizenry who are often in fact prone to marginalization and relegated to passivity. In this regard, the importance of the work of Noam Chomsky must be recognized. As Chomsky argues, if the public were to truly escape these constraints there would in fact be a crisis of American democracy (*Hegemony*). He states, “Recognition that control of opinion is the foundation of government [...] is far more important in free societies, where obedience cannot be maintained by the lash” (Chomsky *Hegemony* 7). Chomsky is not wrong. However, he misjudges, or undervalues just how convenient the lash, the punishing state, is in American society.

Chomsky points out that James Madison “held that power must be delegated to ‘the wealth of the nation’ [...] who understand that the role of government is ‘to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority’” (*Hegemony* 7). The majority, then, needs to be controlled and in some fashion subordinated. The lash is effective, but the majority who escape the lash of the law are nevertheless often capable of subordinating themselves. Walter Lippman states that “responsible men [must] live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd [of] ignorant and meddling outsiders’ [that] are to be ‘spectators’ not ‘participants’” (qtd. in Chomsky, *Hegemony* 6). Chomsky responds, “The herd does have a ‘function’: to trample periodically in support of one or another element of the leadership class in an election. Unstated is that the responsible men gain their status not by virtue of any special talent or knowledge but by *willing* subordination to the systems of actual power and loyalty to their operative principles” (*Hegemony* 6; emphasis added).

Many American citizens do much to self-subordinate by adhering to hegemonic ideology and therein traditional American values. They have been told for so long that they are free, that the idea of questioning the notion in any manner often meets with incredulity, unless it is their ideals of freedom that are being encroached upon and/or when Others' freedom makes them uncomfortable. Herbert Marcuse (1972) states,

Where and when today's ruling class still adheres to the traditional cultural values, it is with the ritual cynicism with which one speaks of defending the Free World, private enterprise, civil rights, individualism. Cynicism: because no ideology can possibly conceal the fact that this ruling class is no longer developing the productive forces once contained in these institutions but is arresting and abusing them. The ideology retreats from the superstructure (where it is replaced by a system of blatant lies and non-sense) and becomes incorporated in the goods and services of the consumer society; they sustain the false consciousness of the good life. (85)

This is not incorrect, especially the latter regarding the consumer society that capitalism produces, sustains, intensifies, and cannot exist without. However, when Marcuse suggests that 'ideology retreats', he vastly underestimates the malleable nature of ideology, and the willingness to stand by it in the face of contradiction, as 'blatant lies' and 'nonsense' are made to fit in quite easily especially when ideological inclinations develop into fundamentalist form. This is precisely the paradox of fundamentalism and orthodox ideology. Specifically, in the context of Marcuse's quote, 'concealing facts'—including that the ruling class 'arrests' and 'abuses productive forces'—is a function of ideology. This, again, is the blind spots of dogma at work. And the rules are different for those on the 'winning' side of the Dream.

Moreover, *losing and calling it winning* has a long and privileged, fantastical, and grotesque history in America—see Charlie Sheen or Reality Television wherein “[u]nder phantasmagoric capitalism, notoriety and recognition serve as ‘proxy indicators’ of personal ability” (Hearne 622). More potently, consider the former Reality TV Star, Donald Trump, especially regarding his presidency and the casualties therein, including the firings, resignations, and incarcerations of many of his once loyal cronies. Indeed, in terms of losing and calling it winning, Trump deserves the national title. And of course, his crowning achievement is that when he lost the 2020 election, he simply refused to concede claiming instead that he won. Once again, blind spots are effectively the objective rules of dogma: the false consciousness of the good life.

In the sociocultural and economic scenario that Marcuse speaks of, the absence of illusion is cynical. It should be remembered that Detroit was once considered the emblematic epitome of the American Dream. And it should remain a consideration, that currently and for the past many years, in its oft-described near-dystopian state, Detroit *is* what the American Dream frequently actually looks like. The false consciousness of the good life is a mainstay of capitalism and certainly its neoliberal manifestation.

Jürgen Moltmann (2002)—though he underestimates the intertextualization of Christian and secular ideas by pointing out their similarities, yet making a strong distinction between Christian apocalyptic ideas and secular apocalypse—states, “Modern faith in progress and globalization is a secularized form of the religious salvation-history millenarianism” (180). Moltmann is in part correct in making the connection of the dangers of neoliberalism adding that “modern fears about the end of the world and about its annihilation are secularizations of the apocalypse of old” (180). He continues,

As we know, history is always a struggle for power. People who have power have an interest in the progress of history and the globalization of their power. They understand future as continuation of their own present. People who are oppressed and powerless, set back and insulted, cut down and assaulted, have little interest in the progress and continuation of their history of suffering. They are only interested in a speedy end of this world condition and in an alternative future. So we must confront the different ideas about the goal or end of history with the critical question: *Cui bono?* Whom does it serve? (Moltmann 180; original emphasis).

The latter is a critical question, but also a dangerous and precarious one. Who benefits from the Christian apocalypse if not the righteous which leaves the 'wicked' in a rather unfortunate (eternal) position? Who benefits from a neoliberal reality is less a question of the righteous and the wicked but of the powerful and the 'weak', though it certainly takes on connotations of righteous and wicked, virtue and failure.

As such, Wendy Brown's (2006) contribution, "Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization," is instrumental in demonstrating the intertextualities between neoliberalism and neoconservatism of righteousness and wickedness, of powerful and weak, and thus too the precarious line that is crossed when the connections and connotations between the two seemingly disparate ideologies of neoliberalism and neoconservatism join forces in rather paradoxical manners. Brown asks, "How does a rationality that is expressively amoral at the level of both ends and means (neoliberalism) intersect with one that is expressly moral and regulatory (neoconservatism)?" ("Neoliberalism" 692). Importantly, she adds that "the search here is not for a single or coherent logic" ("Neoliberalism" 693). This is because there is not one.

Essentially what we have then, is a work by Brown that investigates intertextuality without ever naming it as such. The result demonstrates how intertextualization may be quite illogical, but that nevertheless different discourses absolutely work to uphold each other as a truth greater than the sum of its parts. Brown states, “[W]hile neoliberal rationality is based on a certain conception of the market, its organization of governance and the social is not the result of leakage from the economic to other spheres but rather of the explicit imposition of a particular form of market rationality on these spheres” (“Neoliberalism” 693). Therefore, like Harvey, she points out that there is nothing ‘natural’ about neoconservatism and neoliberalism being socially, politically, and economically linked, but instead that this linkage follows some of Chomsky’s ideas regarding the *manufacture* of consent.

Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho (2004), in *Marx’s Capital*, share the same sentiment as Brown and Harvey and all others who recognize that neoliberalism is not simply an economic element of society. They write, “Crucially, [...] the pace and rhythm of the restructuring of capital is largely dependent upon agencies other than the industrial capitalists themselves, especially state policies and the working class, and the restructuring of other capitals in competing markets and in finance, as well as through a more general restructuring of economic and social life” (Fine and Saad-Filho 167).

Therefore, for all of the literature dedicated to ideals of small government and free market free-for-all, whether it is lack of regulation or regulation, an obvious point seems to be often missed: government is necessary in order to facilitate economic policy and therein, in this case, neoliberalism. Brown writes, “Part of what makes neoliberalism “neo” is that it depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as *achieved and normative*, as promulgated through law and through social and economic policy—not simply as occurring by dint of nature”

(“Neoliberalism” 694; original emphasis). This is hardly a description of the workings of small government though it is precisely that which is situated under the guise of small government. Deregulation in order to propagate certain capitalist interests is *not* ‘small government’ (nor for that matter is regulating morality). Moreover, if an example of the actual workings in hands and minds of Republican small government is necessary, including the idea that the free market will meet healthcare needs, the Trump administration demonstrated this fallacy wonderfully and tragically, with their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Brown continues,

[N]eoliberalism casts the political and social spheres both as appropriately dominated by market concerns and as themselves organized by market rationality. That is, more than simply facilitating the economy, the state must construct and construe itself in market terms, as well as develop policies and promulgate a political culture that figures citizens exhaustively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life. (“Neoliberalism” 694)

This is not the work of small government, though post-coercion the expectation is that *implicit* cultural policy will take care of the rest.

Jeremy Ahearne (2009) distinguishes between cultural policy proper and implicit cultural policy, describing the latter as “policies that are not labelled manifestly as ‘cultural’, but that work to prescribe or shape cultural attitudes and habits over given territories” (141). Implicit policy is especially effective in gaining the acquiescence of the citizenry to America’s vast global military footprint and to economic policies pertaining to neoliberalism, or simply the ‘good’ and ‘truth’ of capitalism, by affectively shaping attitudes towards—whilst intertextualizing—militarism, hero narratives, patriotism, national superiority, morality, inclusion, exclusion, tolerance, and intolerance. This intertextualization may take place through collective exercises and public panoplies such as the Super Bowl, for example, a phenomenon

that has become a naturalized, expected, and ever-escalating affective celebration of militarism, patriotism, masculinism, commercialism, and much, much more.

Intertextuality is key whether coerced or (eventually) a product of implicit cultural policy, ‘organic law’ as Marx calls it, wherein a cultural ethos may dictate and keep in line the ‘wishes’ of the citizenry for better or just as likely for worse. While it is perceived as social liberty and uncoerced freedom, neoliberalism (and deregulation therein) is very much a government sponsored economic policy aided by coerced socioeconomic and sociocultural policy, implicit and otherwise. As Fine and Saad-Filho state,

[The] impact [of each of these elements stated above] is contingent upon the shifting configurations and conflicts of economic, political and ideological interests within the bounds set by their location in the system of accumulation as a whole. In particular, the role of the state as agent of restructuring is paramount across all of these constituent factors, including economic policy deployed in conjunction with the exercise of force, and state-sponsored arguments for the legitimacy of the dysfunctions, inequities and iniquities of capitalism. (167)

Again, not only are the ideals of small government a lie in many respects, insofar as ‘big’ government or ‘small’, deregulation is regulation in itself, but intertextuality is key in gaining consent of the masses and becoming a matter of implicit cultural policy, such as the American Dream.

Accordingly, the rather quantitative work of Jennifer L. Hochschild’s *Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (1995) is an important study that correctly argues that the pursuit of success in accordance with the American Dream warrants so much fervour because it is ‘associated with’ *virtue* (rather than vengefulness, greed, or bigotry,

for example). In this regard Hochschild writes, “‘Associated with’ means at least four things: virtue leads to success, success makes a person virtuous, success indicates virtue, or apparent success is not real success unless one is virtuous” (23). However, her fourth point here I reject, insofar as the dogma of the Dream has become such that the means are considerably quieted by the ends. Virtue is intrinsically and rhetorically tied to the ‘level playing field’ which all who do well to enjoy the nation’s offering of individual liberty are free to take advantage of, or simply exploit. As the Dream has been dogmatized in America, the myth of the virtue of the privileged has also become a rather fundamental truth. Moreover, this virtue is linked to the prosperity of the nation as a whole and the romance of a country built up and maintained by the myth of the ‘self-made man’. Indeed, in what other country would the narrative of Trump being self-made, exemplary of the Dream, even take hold?

The focus on American values, encourages issues of piety which tend towards affective and emotional inclinations over intellect and logic—which is not to say that there is a complete doing away with reason. But when reaching towards ideals that are supposedly inherent, or essentialized, *affectivity*, emotion, and comfortability, gain the upper hand. It is rather obvious that Trump achieved ‘success’ in politics by emphasizing, by submersing, his rhetoric in mood rather than logic, emotion over intellect, and simplicity over complexity. Brian Massumi argues, in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002),

Discursive and institutional practices manage a certain regularity and predictability in the passage from context to context. *This contextual continuity is in a different mode from the affective*. It pertains to nominal identity. Identified subjects and objects are considered, in principle, to cross the affective gap between contexts essentially unchanged. It is admitted that they appear in the successive contexts in which they figure under continual

modification, but the change is understood as occurring within acceptable bounds of recognisability and predictability. (218; original emphasis)

The nominal and contextual continuity are certainly what keep many people within their ideological comfort zone—as Massumi indicates, they allow one to escape affect unchanged. But this can also take place precisely for affective reasons.

Massumi defines ‘affect’ as pertaining to intensity and movement, rather than simply being equated with emotion. Furthermore, insofar as we all have the capacity to affect one another, and in doing so may be affected ourselves, the affective pertains to the (potential) crossing of a threshold, the space of liminality and change, conscious or otherwise. I argue, not that his defining terms are incorrect, but that if we have the capacity to be affective to another person, then we too have the capacity to do it in a manner which consciously refuses to be affected ourselves. In other words, Massumi’s defining terms carry an element of hope and change, and, again, while not incorrect, affectiveness can be entirely other-reaching and entirely non-self-reflective, and as well, stubbornly refusing of even the *idea* of liminality. Moreover, affect can certainly carry with it obstinacy, which can in turn affectively reinforce one’s ideology. Where there is hope and change, there is also, always, room for obstinate denial. We can see this in anti-intellectualism, in actions along political party lines, the left versus the right, as well as within the anti-vaxx community, where the refusal to cooperate is often less pragmatic than it is ideological, individually moralistic rather than ethical.

Anti-Intellectualism in Americanist Ideals

Regardless of the vast differences between the left and the right in America, the religious and the secular, and despite the Republican’s historical dominance in regard to ‘rallying the base’ (the left is oft times “more effective in creating a new moral atmosphere than in realizing

[...] new administrative regime[s]”), they often operate politically in similar and paradoxical manners especially pertaining to the draw of illusion, the morality of American values, and the draw of fundamentalist rhetoric and ideals (Hofstadter 198). Susan Jacoby (2009), Allan Bloom (1987), Russell Jacoby (1989), and Henry Giroux (2007), to name a few, have all made valuable contributions to the topic of anti-intellectualism in America, *pertaining* to fundamentalist Americanism though not explicitly examined, or named, as such. But Richard Hofstadter provides the foundational text: *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963).

Hofstadter’s work, inspired by the political and intellectual conditions of American life in the 1950s, including McCarthyism, examines widespread anti-intellectual attitudes, involving fundamentalist Christianity and fundamentalist Americanism. Hofstadter aptly demonstrates the negative sociocultural consequences that occur when the critical, creative, contemplative side of the mind is silenced in favour of the presumed certainty provided by zealotry and “excessively rigid” piety, even as these are sometimes characteristics of intellectuals (30). Importantly, he argues that “[t]he meaning of [...] intellectual life lies not in the possession of truth but in the quest for new uncertainties” (Hofstadter 30).

Dane S. Claussen, in *Anti-intellectualism in American Media: Magazines & Higher Education* (2004), demonstrates that mass media primarily portrays higher learning as a time and place for sports, dating, excess (drink and drugs), protest, fraternities and sororities, escape from parental control, spring break, and a time to network and find a job—many things that do not consist of researching, studying, writing, thinking, questioning, debating, expanding one’s knowledge base, expanding one’s mindset, increasing the potential for a fuller life. University as ‘career training’ is a corporatized logic that is especially reified under the regime of neoliberalism, and counterintuitively, or paradoxically, brings anti-intellectualism *into* the

university. Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals* (1987), Henry Giroux's *The University in Chains* (2007), Stanley Aronowitz's *The Knowledge Factory* (2000), and Chris Hedges' *Empire of Illusion* (2009), all do well to examine issues of higher learning and anti-intellectualism in the age of the neoliberal juggernaut. Unintentionally or otherwise, however, these texts often demonstrate that the anti-intellectualism that has invaded the university and the corporatized logic of the university is not at odds with American values, but in many ways is a logical outcome of the insistence in the inherently unquestionable virtue of American values such as the economic liberties accorded by the American Dream and the ubiquity of capitalism.

Due to a predominant social historical viewpoint steeped in the romance and mythology prompted by the utopian vision of the founding Puritans and their subsequently 'righteous' endeavours, the apocalyptic subtext of America's New World 'Beacon on the Hill' ambitions produces more than a penchant for framing Americanisms in anti-intellectual fundamentalist terms, often provoking subsequently far-reaching American military action. Andrew Bacevich (2005), Chris Hedges (2002), Noam Chomsky (2005), and Judith Butler (2010) provide valuable recent (post 9/11) examinations of America's vast global military footprint, including contributing psychological factors and cultural normativities that intensify the perpetuity of American militarized activity.

Specifically, Bacevich terms America's military ambition as that which keeps the nation in a state of 'permanent war', while Hedges argues that education as a form of *management* aimed at financial success (achieving the Dream), stifles critical thought and creates a politically illiterate population that finds war a force that gives them meaning. Thus, he points to systemic actualities that produce and sustain metaculture and implicit cultural policy. Chomsky simply summates America's selective memory and self-righteous violence in the following manner:

“When enemies commit crimes, they’re crimes. In fact, we can exaggerate and lie about them with complete impunity. When we commit crimes, they didn’t happen” (*Imperial Ambitions* 93).

‘Our’ utopia is ‘their’ apocalypse.

Conclusion

The lack of recognition of certain sociocultural actualities demonstrates the shortcomings of much of the literature on Americanism, while the importance of this dissertation is also in bringing the theoretical perspectives of many of the authors mentioned in the above pages to the subject of fundamentalist Americanism and to the cooption of ethics therein. For instance, Harvey presents us with the question as to whether it is a sign of strength or weakness that post-9/11 the U.S. has suddenly shifted from a politics of consensus to one of coercion (*A Brief History*). *What sudden shift?* Harvey’s question exists within the lie of American democracy, and therein within the *faith* in American democracy. Where are the politics of consensus in Vietnam, for instance, or the lack of coercion during the Cold War, McCarthyism, or within the dogma of the American Dream and its neoliberal actualities? What does meaningful resistance against the state within democracy look like when *belief* in the politics of consensus (recent refusal to acknowledge election results notwithstanding) supersedes the politics of coercion in national ethos and in actuality?

When metanarrative, metaculture, and fundamentalism and essentialism therein are under-represented in analytic academic literature regarding Americanism, as this review of the literature demonstrates, it is not only problematic in general, but it serves to reinforce the pervasiveness and the perpetuality of the existence of metanarrative, metaculture, anti-intellectualism, essentialism, and particularly fundamentalist Americanism. Essentialism and fundamentalism have had ample study, though certainly not always accurately. For example,

associating fundamentalism only with religion, most commonly because of the origin of the term, is decidedly a shortcoming. As well, essentialism, has become so axiomatic as a problematic logic in academia that it has in many cases become a passé term, as though the Humanities undergrads have all been required to read Edward Said's *Orientalism* and the discussion ends there: essentialism is bad and we all know that.

Yet the recognition of essentialism is paramount in importantly pragmatic ways. For instance, the argument can be made that an essentialist viewpoint might be that all Muslims are terrorists, or, also very problematically, that the term 'terrorism' applies specifically to Muslim acts of terror and therefore all terrorists are Muslim. Or, the logic may be, regarding Islam and acts of terror, that this is a racial issue (as it is often framed) rather than a religious issue (as it should be considered). These may be arguments from essentialist points of view but they are misguided from an essentialist point of view. In other words, those who promote these essentialist arguments cannot even get their essentialism straight.

Studying essentialism within fundamentalist Americanism and providing academic literature to the subject can reveal, for instance, that America, it seems, more *recognizably* for many Americans, is actually *losing*, on many sides and in various manners pertaining to the long-standing battle over whose American values are the purest manifestation of American values. America is losing in a public relations sense within its own borders, as many on both the left and the right are faced with the lack of credibility regarding America's greatness, and must find ways in which Americanist self-respect can be maintained. Fundamentalist, obstinate, denial regarding the credibility issue works for many people.

Yet, most prominently, we see instead the traditional contest over American values, the cynicism that accompanies contestation, and the embrace of illusion. In other words, essentialism

and fundamentalist Americanism are going nowhere and this needs to be recognized and addressed in literature regarding the moral and ethical implications particularly of fundamentalist Americanism specifically.

Chapter Three

The Absence of Illusion as Cynical and the Absence of Violence as Immoral: Populist Essentialism, Utopian Expectations, and Apocalyptic Consequences

Introduction

This chapter examines many aspects pertaining to fundamentalist Americanism beginning with essentialism and moving forward to understandings of utopia and apocalypse that can be traced back to the founding Puritans and the foundations of the mythologies regarding community and essentialism which laid the groundwork for the inconsistencies that come about from sacralizing rhetoric and certain ideals. Americanism and Christianity and the paradoxes therein are the concepts underlying the entire chapter, while all links back (overtly or otherwise) to the absence of illusion and the immorality in the absence of violence found especially in fundamentalist, essentialist Americanism, including racialized situations and LGBTQ+ sociocultural issues. In the end, this chapter demonstrates further that while the left and the right often have wildly different ideas of what constitutes a proper American society, the manners in which they express their ideas are quite often remarkably similar.

The importance of recognizing essentialism and fundamentalism beyond popular strict associations, is in recognizing the blind spots *and* misrecognitions of dogmatic ideology. The Puritans, for example, were extremely stringent yet selective in their interpretation of scripture. Selectivity tethered to essentialist thought can lead to, as it did in the case of the Puritans, ideals of community that are inevitably exclusionary, especially when utopian vision is employed because of the sacralization of certain strains of thought and rhetoric thereby often leading to the effacing of history in order to keep essentialist logics supposedly intact.

Utopian vision invades many ideals of Americanism, and apocalyptic realities follow utopian standards. Indeed, the Puritans started America on a path of paradoxical ethos wherein God, Country, and Capitalism became intertextualized in a manner that is reconciled by the faithful but cannot be properly substantiated without utilizing the blind spots of dogma which essentialists and fundamentalists refuse to admit even exist. Therefore, we can see a direct correlation from Puritan thought to Trump's inauguration, despite the inconsistencies, *and because* of the inconsistencies, therein.

The repetition of 'American values' and the reification that takes place because of incessant repetition becomes so convoluted that when Trump employs the nostalgic backward gaze of Make America Great Again, he taps into the very essentialist ideals upon which the Puritans 'founded' the nation. The left and the right are both guilty of employing this backward gaze of what America should be, but with distinct approaches. However, because their essentialist and/or fundamentalist *reasoning* is not particularly different a uniquely American penchant for illusion is created. The left and the right may want different things, but their argument is often interchangeable—American Values, God, Country, Community—and each side is willing to use violence as a means to an end, though the end never seems to come into the equation when it comes to American violence. When essentialism infiltrates each side of an argument, what needs to be interpreted selectively by the beholder, or the essentialist onlooker, is which side holds the essentialist Truth. Therein lies the intensely problematic logic of essentialism.

Essentialism

Essentialism, in short, is the fundamentally presumptive idea—explicitly, consciously recognized by the individual or otherwise—that essence precedes existence. An essence “is an

attribute of something that defines its identity and explains all or most of the attributes and/or capacities that its possessor has” (Khawaja 692). For example, in this context, if one is an ‘American’ then that speaks to the essence, the innateness, of one’s character. Therefore, simply being American defines who one is, at least in part, while who one is, is also essentially American. Or it could be understood that there is an essence to what it is to be an American, and thus, unless one portrays, performs, and embodies the essence of Americanism, then they are not a true American, and are thus un-American, which often equates to being anti-American.

Ideas regarding what proper Americanism is exactly, are variously defined in different contexts by different individuals and different groups. There is no proper version of Americanism; it is ambiguous. There is only ideology and interpretation, and thus much like religion, each version is assumed to be entirely proper in the eyes of the beholder. Indeed, those on the political left, the center, and the right may all claim that their definition of American values, and indeed their *rendition* of American values, are *the* properly interpreted and enacted version of Americanism. Moreover, across the political spectrum, dogma is prevalent. Being *undefinable* as a nation, undefined as an individual, or unable to be slotted into easily identifiable categorical definitions, is often considered blasphemous, treasonous, and can be deadly in the context of views of Americanism proper.

For instance, there is (quite obviously) still the issue of race when it comes to being considered American. Published 1925 in *The New Negro* anthology, Alain Locke writes,

The Negro mind reaches out as yet to nothing but American wants, American ideas. But this forced attempt to build his Americanism on race values is a unique social experiment, and its ultimate success is impossible except through the fullest sharing of American cultural and institutions. There should be no delusions about this. American

nerves in sections unstrung with race hysteria are often fed the opiate that the trend of Negro advance is wholly separatist, and that the effect of its operation will be to encyst the Negro as a benign foreign body in the body politic. This cannot be—even if it were desirable. [...] So the choice is not between one way for the Negro and another way for the rest, but between American institutions frustrated on the one hand and American ideals progressively fulfilled and realized on the other. (11-12)

There is still poignant relevancy to Locke's estimation of the importance of the integration of race relations and Americanism. If there were not, we would not have Trump calling neo-Nazis 'fine people'. He would not be calling BLM protesters the scourge of American democracy. In each case one might be correct in assuming that Trump did so in complete alignment with what he feels are acceptable American sentiments, what he assumes are popular American sentiments, or what he wants people to think are acceptable. Locke continues, "[O]nly a relatively few enlightened minds have been able as the phrase puts it 'to rise above' prejudice" (13). This, I argue, is still unfortunately also a relevant statement, due to, in part, the essentialism prevalent in both Americanism and racism and the two intertwined.

America, a nation built upon both antinomian (the Puritan's rebellious exodus from Europe because of the desire to reject previously established orders) and conformist roots (the Puritan's insistence on the sameness of belief in their newly established community), has not eluded Jacques Lacan's 'social mirror' wherein he determines the structure of subjectivity by the existence of the myth of recognition and therein the productive nature of recognition. The 'mirror stage', according to Lacan's analysis (which he later admitted was not only a 'stage' but a lifelong process), is a *repeated* moment of misrecognition as well as recognition, a moment of integration, indeed formative or constitutive recognition, while also somehow being fantastical, a

mirage of wholeness. This mixture of myth, fantasy, and mirage is an (unrecognized by the essentialist) element of essentialism.

Essentialism is a package of characteristics, varied but predetermined. Essence is imposed (often from without) rather than developed. It is also culturally and politically defined. It is culturally mediated and is culturally and politically imposed. Essentialism ignores the aspect of humanity that “[w]e are all cultural constructions created by an invisible network of discourses which both position and subject us” (Snipp-Walmsley 410). Instead, essentialism implies a natural reality.

For instance, Foucault pinpoints the time in history when it was determined that “[h]omosexuality was now a species,” as sexuality became viewed as a principal truth grounded in an essentialist discourse which privileged essentialized heterosexual object choice (*History of Sexuality* 43). Foucault argues that a new persecution of peripheral sexualities came to fruition when homosexuality was transformed from an act to an identity, from a “habitual sin” to a “singular nature” at the root of all the actions of the homosexual (*History of Sexuality* 43). This is precisely essentialization in action—the essentializing of sexuality. Much like white supremacy in America, Sedgwick argues that heterosexuality has been “permitted to masquerade so fully as History itself”—which is metanarrative at work (11). Regarding gender, Cabrera writes,

[W]hen operating within a notion of *women’s experience*, women’s experience gets naturalized and projected transhistorically, that is, beyond any one historical period. On these grounds, [...] the idea that women acquire an identity for themselves through an experience that is unmediated by cultural concepts [must be criticized], because that view will always ‘end up in essentialism’ by turning the body into the common element of shared womanhood. (39; original emphasis)

‘Shared’ here implies an embodiment that is an outcome of naturalization which is essentialized. Nationalism, Americanism, often function similarly.

In terms of *embodying* the essence of Americanism, it is not that altogether different than the doctrine of predestination in some interpretations of Christian theology (found predominantly in Calvinist branches of faith). The doctrine of predestination dictates that God hand-picks, prior to birth, the souls who are ‘saved’ and those who are to be damned for all eternity, in which case the only way for an individual to feel secure in their salvation is to embody, to *act out*, the ‘essence’ of one who is saved, as their own essence, in this case their *soul*, is preordained. Thus, piety becomes a signifier of God’s indwelling grace.

America has a piety all its own as what it means to be an American contains both divisive and difference-neutralizing ideas. The essence of Americanism in different contexts, variously defined, is perpetually argued about or fervently agreed upon, as well as individually justified and wrestled with *within* the individual, with a religious-type fervour (and often intertwined with specific religious understandings) especially when one believes that nationalism, and national ethos, are defined in essentialist terms. Very much like religious belief, wherein morality is defined in accordance with faith, and ethics are deciphered in accordance with dogma, what is considered right or wrong for many Americans is defined through the (essentialist) lens of (their idea of) Americanism. We hear it in rhetoric and see it on bumper stickers: ‘Real Americans Support Our Troops’; ‘Real Americans Support Hobby Lobby’; ‘Real Americans Defend Israel’; ‘Real Americans Support Choice’.

Nations, in general, are oft thought of as a geographical location wherein a community and a culture share a moral code for those abiding within it. Or, more specifically, a nation is often thought to share a moral code by all those people who *properly situate* themselves within

the social contract of which said moral agreement resides. Because of America's cultural capital, and thus the influence that America has in this world, and their own moral stance which could often be described as pertaining to righteousness, it is important to examine the internal conflicts and paradoxes within this national posturing as well as the reasons why America often treats itself, rhetorically and otherwise, as being simply better than (all) other nations.

The capacity to contest the idea of essentialism, specifically, though not exclusively, as it pertains to national, cultural, and individual identity, may be greater and more commonplace now in public consciousness than typically in days past. Yet, in the United States, where the 'character' of the quintessential citizen is linked to the moral barometer of the American Dream (a divisive *and* difference-neutralizing dogma wherein economic success is linked to virtue and lack of success is oft thought, or is treated as, akin to immorality), and national ethos is firmly rooted in a rather dehistoricized, militarized mythology, interwoven, subtly and otherwise, with religiously inflected narratives (and specifically with Christian theology), essentialism is still a prevalent characteristic of language, narrative, and discourse regarding individual and national identity. Essentialism's attractiveness, in part, is that it provides individuals with ideological certainty, specifically of a *natural* reality.

Essentialist Americanist ideas, in many instances, may be described as fundamentalist Americanism insofar as these ideas demonstrate strict adherence to ideological doctrine(s) regardless of the actual instability of dogma, and are grounded in tradition(s) considered entirely sacred regardless of how dogma and tradition are, or are not, enacted in practice. Essentialist ideology follows the logic of fundamentalisms, and fundamentalist logic dispels its flaws by simply obstinately denying that the flaws exist at all—i.e. 'literalists' who claim that the Bible is an infallible text, despite much evidence to the contrary, and regardless of, for instance, proper

historical contextualization. Indeed, the same applies to second amendment loyalists who do not recognize or properly historically contextualize the actuality that semi-automatic weapons were not available at the time the document was written. Again, blind spots are built into the objective rules of fundamentalist dogma. To a great extent, blind spots *are* the objective rules of dogma. Yet, underlying the supposed stability of fundamentalist belief is a perpetual crisis of fear, desire, uncertainty, and lack—a *void* that the system of belief works to fill.

For instance, there is a fervent emphasis on *choice* in a ‘free’, democratic, and capitalist America. Yet the coerced conditions that produce, or attempt to produce the *right* choices from individuals, the American Values choices, and yes, even in our current historical moment often the (supposedly) *Christian* choices, demonstrate the consequential paradox between endless pronouncements of liberalism and freedom and the intense nationalistic loyalty to militarism and the addictiveness of capital.

Due to America’s vast global footprint, its global military footprint, and its prolific dissemination of culture and the cultural capital therein, it is important to be made aware of the prevalence of essentialist Americanist ideals and fundamentalist Americanist rhetoric in dominant American discourse, and also of the actualities of the atrocities and injustices carried out under the supposed moral guidance and subsequent obedience to this rhetoric and these ideals which are oriented towards cultural supremacy. Obviously, there are distinctions to be made between left and right political tendencies,³³ as does it (accordingly) need to be made clear that I am not imposing a description of the perspective of every American citizen. This

³³ Of course, ‘left’ and ‘right’ are not always helpful demarcations, though ‘red’ and ‘blue’ indeed are, insofar as the overwhelmingly popular tendency in American politics is to pick a ‘team’ and stick with it, rather than privileging ideas and individual policies over strict allegiance to party. But as I proceed, I will utilize the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ to indicate political leanings as there is an ambiguity that I think is necessary in those terms, while at the same time they do point to the likely associated strict categories of red and blue.

discussion is not about unanimous national sentiment—quite the opposite—it is about (among other things) the varied, yet often essentialist, ideas of Americanism.

Moral Theory

Most Americans, born in country or otherwise—and both the former and the latter matter plenty when ‘naturalized citizenship’ is in the language of the hallowed constitution—must deal with the prominence of certain narratives of American national ethos, which are deeply culturally embedded and shape national policy implicitly and otherwise. Many people worldwide who are not American, deal with the prominence of Americanist narratives and lived out (or not lived out) actualities as well.

Much like a religious basis for individual morality, what it means to be an American is for many people a *moral* question, and one that then guides what constitutes supposedly ethical or unethical action, inaction, and reaction. Thus, the earlier referred to ‘variously defined’ American values factors become tremendously important, because much like the long history of a persecution complex in Christianity—still very prevalent in many currents of Christian thought in America wherein Christianity is perpetually perceived as being ‘under attack’, despite the fact that Christianity has long been, and is still, privileged in the United States—American values are also often thought by both the left and the right to be perpetually under attack.

Yet, Tony Judt argues, “What [Americans] lack is a moral narrative: an internally coherent account that ascribes purpose to our actions in a way that transcends them” (183). I argue that this is quite incorrect, misguided, and indeed is at the core of the main issue that this dissertation addresses. The imperative of a coherent moral narrative is what has allowed the ‘purpose to our actions’ to attach morality to American violence and create a sociocultural scenario wherein illusion becomes necessary.

In other words, ‘coherence’ is represented symbolically in the embodiment of Americanism proper—the idea that ‘we are all Americans’ and thus we share a moral code: God, equality, freedom, etc., represented by monuments, the flag, the anthem, etc. But perpetually arguing over what constitutes American morality (especially in moments when symbolism is less present), in pursuit of coherence, and in the belief that there must be, as Judt claims, internal coherence, is terribly problematic and inevitably leads to irreconcilable ethical quandaries. In fact, it creates the inevitable divisions that occur when pursuing ‘internal coherence’ in a nation of millions.

The belief and pursuit of shared American morality is comparable to the internal coherence supposed of the idea (and agreement) of the prominence and righteousness of Judeo-Christian values. Richard Bulliet writes,

The unquestioned acceptance of ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’ as a synonym for ‘Western Civilization’ makes it clear that history is not destiny. No one with the least knowledge of the past two thousand years of relations between Christians and Jews can possibly miss the irony of linking in a single term two faith communities that did not get along during most of that period. (qtd. in Shehabuddin 120)

There are various ‘faith’ communities within the context of Americanism, and to try fervently to act as though ‘we should all just get along’ because there is supposed to exist an inherent moral code is to ignore history and mistake illusion for reality. It is an idea that leads the nation to feel united in militarism: again, war is, as Hedges suggests, a force that provides Americans with communal meaning.

Many people like to think, and to espouse, that the states of America are united, and that Christ(ianity) unites as well. But Christianity divides people in many manners, including the

bottom line—heaven and hell, the sheep and the goats. Likewise, it is necessary to recognize that the United States are not all that united in many instances. And moreover, *they do not need to be*, for holding on to that notion causes immense sociocultural damage whilst denying a prominent facet of democracy: an exchange of differences. As Judt correctly states, “Collective purposes may contain competing objectives. Indeed, any truly open society will want to embrace them” (183). Thus, when the sentiment is espoused that ‘if you don’t like it here, you can leave’, those expressing such ideas are not only ignoring (or are simply unaware of) the fact that that type of mobility is often reserved for the privileged, but they are also forgetting that this is simply not how democracy works.

For instance, Republican Senator Marco Rubio states (rather incongruously, especially in the first instance) that “the moral well-being of our people is directly linked to [...] economic well-being” and that “we can’t stop talking about the importance of our values and our culture [because] today we see a rising tide of intolerance in America, intolerance towards those who cherish these values” (“Rubio Delivers Remarks at Values Voter Summit”). He subsequently questions who could possibly be harmed by American values such as “hard work, responsibility,” and the entirely loaded term, “self-control” (“Rubio Delivers Remarks at Values Voter Summit”). Rubio’s rhetoric here exemplifies both the essence of American metanarrative and self-ordained morality which often cannot stand up to ethical analysis. This type of rhetoric takes for granted that American values and American culture have some sort of patent on purity (if deciphered correctly, which is widely considered imperative), while who the collective ‘our’ are, is taken for granted as well, or is supposed to be entirely self-explanatory.

Here is a common refrain: “One of the best qualities of America has always been the celebration of our differences. We are a melting pot, almost all of us tracing our roots to

somewhere else, and those distinct cultures, traditions and histories only served to enrich our shared experiences” (Armour, Nancy). First of all, ‘melting pot’ and ‘celebrating differences’ are at odds both semantically and ideologically. It is a nice metacultural idea, but it is a lie in terms of American actualities and ethos in many cases.

The ‘our’ are those who are with ‘us’ and are not ‘them’. It is binary logic, and the same type of rhetoric that was utilized after 9/11 (for example): ‘If you are not with us, you are with the terrorists’. America, alleged President W. Bush at the time, was the target of terrorists because America stands for democracy, freedom, and human rights. Rather, as others have correctly pointed out, in much of the world, America “stands for dictatorship, bondage, and human exploitation” and has done many “hateful things” for strategic purpose, due to ideological influence, economic interests, or otherwise (Bowman). Subsequent to 9/11, the U.S. government, with the support of much of the citizenry, did indeed respond to the attacks by in turn terrorizing democracy, freedom, and human rights, though certainly not for the first time.

Rubio’s rhetoric reflects entirely common, pervasive types of rhetorical refrains echoed throughout the political spectrum—albeit the content, the intention, and who and what values are being attacked, varies greatly. Yet, many of the defining characteristics of American values are quite similar—if logistically and strategically deciphered differently—for both the left and the right: i.e. the ‘religious’ signification of the constitution and the founding fathers, freedom, bravery, democracy, loyalty to country, and the importance of ‘hard work’ which is generally regarded as a responsibility linked to virtue within the confines of capitalist understandings. Never mind that hard work and prosperity are not inextricably linked, despite the promise of the American Dream. Regarding the latter, much of the former (belief in the dogmatic nature of American values in general) can act as a balm for those on the underbelly of the American

Dream. Similarly, religious dogma brings great comfort to many people when faith, morality, or logic is tested. When one is tested in these manners, dogma is always available to provide (re)assurance.

Christianity and Americanism, Utopia and Apocalypse

A primary problematic aspect of dogma, as mentioned, is its blind spots. Dogma, such as that which is based in religious scripture or in national ethos or both or neither, usually has some gaping loopholes in terms of logic. For instance, (scriptural) dogma can and has been/is used to justify both slavery *and* abolition, bigotry *and* freedom, as well as utopia and apocalypse. It can be utilized to incarcerate, execute, *and* provide mercy, be the basis for the acceptance of poor, tired, huddled masses *and* the exclusion of all but the best and the brightest, provide a space for individuality *and* exclusivity, and justification for inclusion *and* xenophobia.

In terms of logistical and logical loopholes, in his introduction to his translation of the Qur'an, M.A.S. Abdel Haleem argues that the holy book has been *misinterpreted* because while it does sanction violence in certain circumstances, its "prevalent message" is one of "peace and love" (xxiii). His basic argument then is that the scriptures are often misinterpreted because in various verses while the Qur'an does say one thing, it also states other things, different things, contradictory things in other verses. However, this is not misinterpretation; it is picking and choosing what relates to an individual's moral conviction and what does not, thereby influencing (un)ethical conduct one way or another according to which direction from the scriptures one chooses to follow.

The same can be said of the Christian Bible. There are many different translations and therefore different versions of the Bible, and thus different interpretations of scripture, but different interpretations of scripture are certainly not dependent on varying versions of scripture.

In other words, for example, while one may choose scripture as a basis for their homophobia, they may still eat forbidden foods or work on the sabbath based on their selection of obligations to scripture. As Sister Helen points out, proponents of capital punishment, should they choose to do so, can utilize Christian scripture in order to make their case. Nevertheless, she correctly asserts, we rarely hear of other ‘crimes’ for which the Bible also “prescribes death as punishment: contempt of parents [...], trespass[ing] on sacred ground [...], sorcery [...], bestiality [...], sacrifice to foreign gods [...], profaning on the sabbath [...], adultery [...], incest [...], homosexuality [...], and prostitution” (Prejean 194-195). Interpretation *is* an issue of scripture that causes divides within the broad umbrella term ‘Christianity’, but in many cases the issue is not interpretation but *selection*. The same should be said of Americanism. And Americanism gains dogmatic value when coupled with the religion of Christianity, for one reason or another (for those who choose to utilize the intertextual logic(s) therein), as Christianity has long been a staple of Americanist rhetoric and a guiding force in Americanist action.

Despite the supposed shift in (Western) modernity from religious authority to a more progressive secular authority, the United States of America “remains today, as it has always been, a deeply, even incorrigibly, Christian nation” (Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* 122). Americans, Ronald Reagan states, “must seek Divine guidance in the policies of their government and the promulgation of their laws” (qtd. in Espinosa 361). Reagan was certainly not alone in this type of (intertextualized) thinking and rhetoric. He was also not alone in thinking that the values of politics, policies, and the divine were under constant attack.

It should be stated, regarding the persecution, ‘under attack’ type of thinking, and/or the idea that American values are corroding, that this is currently, and has frequently in the past been

a staple of the political right in the United States. And the attackers, the corroding factors, come from all sides both within and without the borders. Reagan’s ‘start Americans dreaming again’ rhetoric, and Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ are not that altogether different; each slogan harkens back to a supposedly utopian, Eden-like time which was in actuality a less than idyllic time in terms of civil rights, human rights, and in terms of the viewpoint of what was then the Other within and without American borders. Yet, in each circumstance what is being implied, inferred, or at other times specifically stated, is that American values are currently under attack. A backward gaze is then employed to engage in, or activate, utopian longing in the face of a supposedly dystopian present. Here is an excerpt from Trump crony the ‘My Pillow Guy’ Mike Lindell speaking at the funeral of a Trump ‘fan’: “You are looking down from heaven, and you’re giving us courage to keep going in this spiritual battle of biblical proportions to save our country and move, and move forward in the greatest *revival* for Jesus Christ in history (“Trump Gives TRUMPIEST Performance;” emphasis added). Americanism, apocalypse, and utopia—its all there emotionally, succinctly, and expectedly.

Utopian promises in the face of a dystopian present are a cornerstone of ‘Trump-speak’ to such an extent that they were a feature of his inauguration address:

Americans want great schools for their children, safe neighborhoods for their families and good jobs for themselves. These are just and reasonable demands of *righteous* people and a *righteous* public, but for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists.

Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities, rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation. An education system flush with cash but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge. And the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country

of so much unrealized potential. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now. (“Donald Trump’s full inauguration;” emphasis added)

That which is perceived as dystopian, and/or rhetorically wielded as such, is usually entirely subjective and is frequently not that which could more factually be described as dystopian. Trump’s dystopian rhetoric, for instance, is frequently xenophobic and lacking factual credibility (as when he stated that America has the highest murder rate in forty-seven years, which was entirely untrue), while his ‘America First’ utopian rhetoric is not only myopic, but dangerous for the lives of many. “Abstract utopia,” Adorno states, “is all too compatible with the most insidious tendencies of society” (*Minima Moralia* 102).

Much like the biblical narrative in the Book of Revelation, utopia often comes with an apocalyptic price, and at the very least, comes coupled with the Others’ dystopia and at the expense of vast exclusion. American history, in many instances, attests to this assertion, as does our current historical moment—at least insofar as what Trump promised, and what many of his followers (despite the fact that as of 2023 he is no longer in office) seem to desire, regarding, for instance, the repulsion of the Other, and regarding the loathing of America’s current supposedly dystopian state: hence, Make America Great Again, which Trump has at times altered to ‘Save America’. Indeed, Evangelical preacher Robert Jeffress, whilst supporting Trump, proclaimed rather apocalyptically that “this election is not a battle between Republicans and Democrats. It’s a battle between good and evil, light and darkness, righteousness and unrighteousness.... This is the last chance we have, I’m convinced, as a country to turn this country around” (qtd. in Morris “False idol,” 69). One could quite easily read into this statement that ‘turn this country around’ literally means we need to look backwards, nostalgically, towards the future.

Nostalgia taints the present by precluding the recognition of certain actualities with prejudicial longing, and frequently binds community in staunchly exclusive manners, while moral progress is difficult, deteriorates, progresses regressively (counterintuitively), or is made impossible when framed within the backward gaze, or bound by backward longing. “Nostalgia,” John Lennon once said, “is fine on Sundays, but not every day of the week” (qtd. in Robinson 371). Those are an interesting choice of words considering the religious connotations. Nostalgia carries with it utopian longing. Utopianism drags with it, apocalypse, and biblically speaking, the reverse is true as well.

The utopian longing of the ‘founding’ Puritans who left their homeland for the promise of a likeminded community in the New World certainly came with an apocalyptic price for the Others they encountered. William Bradford writes this of the massacre of the Pequot Natives:

[A]ll was quickly on a flame, and thereby more were burnt to death than was otherwise slain. [...] Those that escaped the fire were slain with the sword; some hewed to pieces, others run through with their rapiers, so as they were quickly dispatched, and very few escaped. It was conceived they thus destroyed about four hundred at this time. It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire, and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God, who had wrought so wonderfully for them, thus to enclose their enemies in their hands, and give them so speedy a victory over so proud and insulting an enemy. (135)

When reading the signs of God’s favour, or destiny, or Exceptionalism for that matter, it is paramount to do so selectively. This is precisely why the blind spots of dogma are necessary.

For instance, how many of God's good, favoured, chosen and therefore 'elect' creatures even endured the first few months in the New World? "[Of] one hundred and odd persons, scarce fifty remained," Bradford informs us, half of his company infected with "scurvy and other diseases" (121-122). Yet, he makes no comment on the deservedness of their fate as he does with the Pequot natives, or of a "proud and very profane" sailor whom "it pleased God [...] to smite [with] a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner, and so was himself the first that was thrown overboard" (Bradford 114). This type of selectivity, which finds its signs, wonders, and truth where it wishes, effaces history in favour of mythologized narratives.

Puritan Foundations: Signifiers, Signified

The Puritans arrived in the New World after a biblical-like Exodus from Europe in order to establish a utopian project of religious imperative. Though the Puritan perspective regarding pleasure and cultural goods was one of limitation and asceticism, the paradoxical glitch, as it were, was that good fortune was also a sign of God's indwelling grace, and thus a signifier of individual and community virtue.

The Puritans subscribed to the doctrine of predestination wherein, as indicated earlier, God decides before one's birth which souls are bound for eternal bliss or eternal damnation. Thus, their eternal future after death is predetermined. One's essence then, specifically their *soul* in this case, precedes earthly existence. As such, one's individual security of salvation may be found, or seemingly secured, by the individual in piety. The soul can be thought to be secure by the individual in their heart, so to speak, found through proper determination of scripture and doctrine. But the anxiety regarding the afterlife and God's favour or rejection are also quelled by outward signifiers of God's indwelling grace.

What must be deciphered in order to suppress anxiety in such a context, is God's will. Wealth and poverty, success and failure, were viewed as demonstrations of God's will, while the elect were predetermined according to the Puritans, worthy and ultimately bound for heaven. "God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence," John Winthrop writes, "hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection, [...] ordering all these differences for the preservation and the good of the whole. [...] All men [are] thus (by divine providence) ranked into two sorts, rich and poor" (147-148). What needs to be balanced in such a worldview, which is a totalizing, fundamentalist worldview that subscribes to the wholeness of God's will thereby amalgamating various often inconsistent ideas, are, among other things, vanity, asceticism, fortune, modesty, success, failure, and excess. It is a totalizing worldview that paradoxically requires malleability, allowing for facts to be minimized or ignored in favour of scripture, while Christ's reported peacefulness and compassion exists alongside his 'father's' God-ordained violence, thereby leaving a space in dogma for acceptable torture and murder. This is ideology that works to mythologize both the present and the past.

In a more contemporary setting, Michelle Goldberg, in *Kingdom Coming*, an examination of fundamentalist Christian Evangelical ideology in America, describes a Christian marketplace where she finds—among science videos claiming to debunk evolution and astronomy textbooks explaining that the universe was created six thousand years ago with 'the appearance of age'—a "CD lecture [which] lauded the Christian kindness the Puritans showed to the Native Americans" (5). Both utopianism and apocalypse are frequently, it could be argued are *intrinsically*, careless with the past. Zinn asks,

Was all this bloodshed and deceit—from Columbus to Cortes, Pizarro, the Puritans—a necessity for the human race to progress from savagery to civilization? [...] Perhaps a persuasive argument can be made—as it was made by Stalin when he killed peasants for industrial progress in the Soviet Union, as it was made by Churchill explaining the bombings of Dresden and Hamburg, and Truman explaining Hiroshima. But how can the judgement be made if the benefits and losses cannot be balanced because the losses are either unmentioned or mentioned quickly? (17)

As Halberstam suggests, “[L]osers leave no records while winners cannot stop talking about it, and so the record of failure [in America] is a ‘hidden history of pessimism in a culture of optimism’” (*Queer Art of Failure* 88). Therefore, the lack of illusion is cynical while wholeness is an illusory utopian aspect of a culture of optimism.

American Populism, Dystopia, and Utopianism Continued...

Utopian longing in the face of a supposedly dystopian present, when it comes to American ideals and American national identity, and the longing for a singular community of likeminded red-white-and-blue-blooded Americans, is often a facet of the discomfort, realization, repulsion, rejection, and genuine disbelief that partiality is not in fact wholeness, or, indeed, the populist overcalculation wherein the *part*—naively or entirely purposely—identifies itself as the *whole*. Ernesto Laclau writes that in the case of populism, “a frontier of exclusion divides society into two camps. The ‘people’, in that case, is something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality” (*On Populist Reason* 81).

The fear mongering that the political right often engages in, in terms of America’s seemingly perpetual state of dystopian emergency when Democrats are in power—i.e. the ever-

fashionable crisis keywords such as crime, jobs, immigrants, American values, and the Trump administration’s conflation of refugees, asylum seekers, and terrorists—sustains the populist logic of the political right which speaks to, and is sustained, by “frustrated exasperation” with that which impedes upon righteous Americanism: “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’ve had enough of it! It cannot go on! It must stop!” (Žižek, *First as Tragedy* 61). As Žižek argues, such thinking demonstrates a “refusal to understand or engage with the complexity of [a] situation, [giving] rise to the conviction that there must be somebody responsible for the mess” (*First as Tragedy* 61).

This type of logic privatizes the issues, often driving attention away from historicity, accurate contextualization, *systemic* problems, and thus the actuality of circumstance, thereby “bypassing the clumsy detour through reality”³⁴ (Žižek, *First as Tragedy* 53). Populism is “partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community,” a *part* which identifies as a whole, or as *the* whole, or deserving to be the whole, and thus is an oversimplification often realized by encounters with difference, disagreement, or change (Laclau, *On Populist Reason* 81). Populism thrives on the presence of metanarrative; it is a function of metanarrative. It is a result of metanarrative that in turn produces metanarrative.

Populism, as Žižek argues, is *re-active*, “a version of the politics of fear: it mobilizes the crowd by stoking up fear of the corrupt external agent” (*First as Tragedy* 61). Certainly, this is precisely the part that Trump (though certainly other—if not all—presidents are entirely guilty of this as well) played during his campaign and during his presidency. In terms of Trump’s speeches, and the behaviour of the crowds at his rallies, Gustave Le Bon’s thesis is well demonstrated insofar as when a certain number of individuals “are gathered together in a crowd

³⁴ Rather than ‘reality’, the term ‘actualities’ would be more apt here.

for purposes of action, observation proves that, from the mere fact of their being assembled, there result certain new psychological characteristics, which are added to [individual] characteristics and differ from them at times to a very considerable degree” (3). Granted, Trump is/was rather enthusiastic in tapping into, or even producing, the rage and racism in his attendees, giving them a forum to express that which they could not, or would not, otherwise express in certain company.

Nevertheless, in many ways, mere observation of crowds in general would demonstrate Le Bon’s thesis to be rather easily substantiated. (Witness a protest or a riot, even a celebration such as a sporting victory, wherein those who are participating violently, destructively, would at other times, under any other circumstance, not behave in that manner.) Yet, I argue that this phenomenon is not restricted to crowds that are physically assembled together, but to individuals when they strongly associate with certain groups. For example, there are many people who will vote against their own best interests because they identify as being part of a certain group, a certain political party, and those whose actions and ideologies are tainted by lack of self-reflection and/or tainted by the fear of external agents who supposedly attempt to corrupt the perceived righteousness of their group’s intentions and ideals. (Trump, as an ‘exception that proves the rule’, was a lifelong Democrat until it served his interests to identify otherwise; perhaps few Republicans, or populist Republicans would ever do something similar. Conceivably, he is a ‘victim’ of populism as well.)

Echoing Le Bon, Wendy Brown states, “Man in a group ceases to be directed by his own deliberation and conscience. He ceases to be organized by free will and rationality, those two

crucial features of the individuated liberal subject” (*Regulating Aversion* 158).³⁵ For instance, as indicated above, there are many who have and will vote in favour of what they feel is personally chosen ideology, party ideology, party affiliation, proper belief, and loyalty to country, to their god, and to (supposedly divinely ordained) American Values, whilst then voluntarily sacrificing, for instance, social security in order to provide for military spending: ideology over pragmatism, militarism over provisions for the poor. For many people this is precisely just, correct, and ultimately *American* even if works against them. It is, however, decidedly not utopian thinking, though it is often cloaked in utopian rhetoric and ideals of community and the greater good.

Utopia is generally an anti-establishment view: “an intention to change—to shatter—the present order” (Taylor in Ricœur xxi). Certainly, utopia, in many cases, is conceived as emancipation from capitalism associated with leftist politics and with revolution, which for many is an entirely anti-American sentiment. Yet, America began as a utopian, anti-establishment project in the minds of the Puritans, and over time its hegemonic norms evolved from the Protestant Work Ethic to the solidified ‘Truth’ of capitalism and also to the dogma of the land of the American Dream and its hyper-realization in neoliberalism, an economic system of mass deregulation, privatization, and “withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (Harvey, *A Brief History* 3). Thus, in America, utopian ideals generally begin with a “sanitized version of American history,” and a “future based on elite technological dominance and capitalist acquisitiveness,” including rugged individualism and also, paradoxically, the essentialist desire or belief in monolithic unity (Giroux and Pollack 32). America’s utopian longing is most often a future based in the (mythologized) past. Trump’s insistence on the importance of coal and the

³⁵ This is not an airtight thesis as it overstates matters, but there is much here to consider when examining group affiliation and its influence on the subject.

imperative of sustaining its industry is an interesting example of backwards, or backward-looking ideas and ideals, in these regards, as he persuades, or affirms to his followers the importance of a dirty, dated industry that nevertheless taps into ideals of true, noble, and proper, hard American work.³⁶

American utopianism is commonly rooted in a space where “family, community, the marketplace and civil society thrive” (Ryan 144). This sentiment suggested by Paul Ryan may seem entirely reasonable, plausible, and sensible. But anyone may have their own definitions of his defining terms, while the metaphorical (and literal) white picket fences surrounding this ideal, protecting it, and providing inclusion for it, sustain, produce, and reproduce overt bias. Many Republican platforms that espouse the provision of prosperity to family and community in fact tear at the very fabric of those ideals, whether Reagan’s battles with unions, Mitt Romney’s illicit, though perhaps not technically illegal, financial dealings, or Trump’s divisive identity politics.

Wealth and prosperity are not synonymous, nor as inextricably linked as they are often treated in the land of the Dream and are at times bitterly binary oppositions. Moreover, progress and nostalgia are not as binary as they may seem definitionally, as, counterintuitively, *cultural* progress in America is often seen as a return to something purer, more idyllic, more black and

³⁶ If utopia may be thought of as an imagined community with highly desirable or near perfect qualities, then America often finds many of its utopian ideals firmly placed in an exclusive community bounded by technological progression (though as the coal example demonstrates there are at times ideological stumbling blocks in terms of technological progression), and (unrecognized) moral regression in terms of a perpetually backward gaze not oriented towards historical accuracy but toward America’s mythologized past. The latter is not terribly different than the story of the Garden in biblical mythology, nor the grandiose escapades that followed Adam and Eve’s fall from grace—which, again, hinder moral progress. America’s utopian ideals are also strongly rooted in nostalgia with more than a penchant for mythologizing history, thereby clouding nostalgia with partial truths and untruth. Clouding the past with partial truth and un-truth is precisely a feature of nostalgia.

white—a future based in the mythologized past. For this reason, and others, cultural change is also not synonymous with progress. Progress, in an intertextual postmodern world, is an advancement, an evolution, in terms of ethics rather than technology, for instance, of equality rather than capitalist advantages, intellectualism rather than closed-minded self-reflexivity. Progress is an advancement towards critically recognizing intertextuality and acting accordingly, purposefully. Progress is not the journey towards utopian rewards but to thoughtful, informed, civil, democratic disagreements.

Mythologizing America: Community and Exclusion and Essentialism Therein

Without utilizing the (seemingly) binary terms ‘utopia’ or ‘dystopia’ explicitly, Ryan speaks at length in *The Way Forward: Renewing the American Idea*, as to why his hometown of Janesville, Wisconsin embodies a place of hope, of “the great renewal of the American idea,” and is representative of the idyllic “great American turnaround” towards the ‘inclusive’ American values that embody a “we-are-in-it-together spirit” (249). This *is* a utopian ideal, insofar as “utopia is a dream that wants to be realized,” and is an intentional community that is currently non-existent—at least non-existent in the encompassing manner that it wishes to be (Taylor in Ricœur xxi).

Ryan’s hometown represents for him an idyllic community separate from a wider reality, and this community is for him representative of what the wider reality could and should be. Yet, Janesville is a town of between sixty and seventy thousand people that is over 90% white and less than 3% black (Fact Finder). (And those numbers are from 2010, never mind when Ryan was growing up there.) This is the place that shaped Ryan’s “values and [,,] worldview” and taught him the importance of “family and the meaning of community” (13). Yet, if this place is

what shaped his *worldview*, then it is not unreasonable to suggest that his ideal of family and community may not congruently apply, or fit within, an inclusive worldview.

Community includes, as Laclau suggests, “radical exclusion” even within its ‘gates’ (*On Populist Reason* 82). Paul Ricœur states,

If we [...] emphasize that utopia is what shatters order and ideology is what preserves order (sometimes by distortion but sometimes also by a legitimate process), then the criterion of realizability is not a good way to distinguish the two. To begin with, the criterion may be applied only to the past. [...] Second, it also sacralizes success, and it is not simply because an idea succeeds that it is either good or for the good. (179)

Alternatively, Ryan writes,

To this day America is exceptional in part because it was the first country explicitly founded on the ideas of natural rights, human equality, and self-governance. It was the first to take these articles of faith and write them into law. It was the first to tell the world—and to prove by its example—that the best government rests on the consent of the governed. (143-144)

This is a fairly common understanding for Americans regarding America and American democracy, and it is rosy, hypocritical, and tainted by actual history. It sacralizes Ryan’s (and a good many others’) perception of America’s success. It is a utopian understanding insofar as it claims that what America is, is what some want America to be according to their own defining terms, which inevitably means exclusion for those who do not apply. Furthermore, this type of thinking presumes that despite those who attack or corrode American values, this is America’s reality: natural rights, human equality—a success story of the highest measure.

Rather than understanding America as a precarious and deeply flawed democratic experiment whose history betrays much of this type of sentiment, Ryan's belief, as well as legions of others who express or subscribe to the same ideas, insists unwaveringly that regardless of its imperfections, their ideals are American truisms, yet nevertheless, truisms that need to be *returned* to in true form as though perfection, utopia, is, for instance, only a few unruly (un)Americans away.

On the other hand, commenting on America's national ethos and selective historical amnesia while affirming the prevalence of certain ideas of what America is and should ever be, Chomsky cites a conversation between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. In this conversation, Nixon states that he wants to launch a major assault on Cambodia under the pretense of airlifting supplies. The bombing campaign did indeed subsequently take place under said pretence to which Chomsky responds, "We cannot be people who openly and publicly call for genocide and then carry it out. That can't be. So therefore it didn't happen. And therefore it doesn't even have to be wiped out of history, because it will never enter history" (*Imperial Ambition* 100).

History, while it may be kept hidden, and kept out of idealistic narratives, does not disappear completely. This is precisely where (essentialist) ideals of national ethos dominant in public consciousness take precedence. Therein any 'imperfections' of Americanism are still the result of rightful intention, or at least righteous intention, as it is generally accepted as a central facet of national ethos that American military power manifests "a commitment to global leadership," and this coupling of military power and leadership expresses and affirms "the nation's enduring devotion to its founding ideals" (Bacevich, *Washington Rules* 7).

History Effaced: Sacralizing (Fundamentalist, Americanist) Rhetoric

“American power, policies, and purpose” are often thought to be, and are oft rhetorically wielded as being, “bound together in a neat, internally consistent package” (counter to Judt’s earlier stated assertion that America lacks a ‘moral narrative’), while reflectivity regarding past actualities is subordinated, suppressed, and often, as Chomsky suggests, entirely muted (*Imperial Ambition* 7). Or worse, atrocities are celebrated (quietly and otherwise) as an inevitability of America’s utopian, righteous, beacon of light ambition, its Manifest Destiny. For example, when announcing the atomic bombing of Hiroshima to the American people (and to the world), Harry Truman unabashedly proclaimed, “We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications” (qtd. in Moser 147). Similarly, during the George W. Bush administration, as Chomsky points out, the “National Security Strategy declared that the United States—alone—has the right to carry out ‘preventive war’: preventive, not preemptive, using military force to eliminate a perceived threat, even if invented or imagined. Preventive war is, very simply, the ‘supreme crime’ condemned at Nuremburg” (*Interventions* 36).

Yet, common Americanist rhetoric perpetually whitewashes American history. For instance, Barack Obama states, “Throughout our history the United States of America has done more than any other nation to stand up for freedom, democracy, and the inherent dignity and human rights of people around the world. [...] No nation is perfect. But one of the strengths that makes America exceptional is our willingness to openly confront our past, face our imperfections, make changes and do better” (“Statement by the President Report”). This type of rhetoric works to dismiss doubts of piety whilst affirming righteousness with broad rhetorical

strokes. Despite its claim, it does little, if anything, to confront the past. Indeed, it allows for further ‘imperfections’ and imperialist actions that are framed (or presented) as altruistic rather than imperialistic. This type of entirely common rhetoric *sacralizes* America and American values. “Sacralization,” as Tzvetan Todorov states, “obstructs the drawing of generally valid lessons from particular cases, and so the communication between the past and the present” (qtd. in Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance* 94).

Although Obama insists that the communication between the past and the present is one of America’s exceptional qualities, exceptionalism itself, sacralized in national ethos, dictates differently. Sacralization causes individual cases to lose that “enlightening potency that rests in their particularity,” thereby leaving idealized narratives (such as Exceptionalism) unchallenged (Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance* 95). Utopian vision, and repeated rhetorical tropes regarding exceptionalism and the like, trivialize ‘wrong doing’ even as they *enable* it. For example, in the biblical myth of the apocalypse, the destruction of the earth is not a sad event per se, for it ushers in the Kingdom of God, and for believers, eternal utopia. Therefore, currently, climate change, for example—and not coincidentally for many American Evangelicals on the political right—is not (assuming it is accepted as actually happening) a crisis but an indication of the beginning of the end and is thus the beginning of the idyllic forever.

In the context of Americanism, perpetually repeating idealistic, idyllic sentiment does not simply expunge history but reinforces the righteousness of American acts, wherein too often might is right, in turn enabling further violence and enthusiasm for imperialistic activity. W.J. Rorabaugh writes, “[T]he Cold War put the country on a permanent war footing, gave the military-industrial complex unprecedented influence, and shaped almost everything else in American society” (24). Without belittling the significance of the role of the Cold War, Cold

War or otherwise, violence has certainly shaped American society and imperialistic activity. A significant part of the problem in these regards, as Bacevich argues in *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*, is that international problems are perpetually viewed as military problems in America and are usually accompanied by utopian expectations as to what can be achieved by military means.

Utopia and Apocalypse within a Capitalist America

Despite perhaps seeming counterintuitive, utopia and apocalypse are not terms that are exclusive of one another. The Christian myth of the apocalypse entails tribulation *and* triumph, chaos *and* order. In most biblical, or biblically related contexts, damnation and redemption, heaven and hell, and apocalypse and utopia *must* co-exist, the latter pairing as one entity much like the father, son, and holy ghost—the sacred trinity, distinct from one another, but coexisting within one entity. Lois Zamora argues that it is this “creative tension, the dialectic, between these opposites that explains, in part, the myth’s enduring relevance (4). The myth of the apocalypse emerges in forms beyond strictly biblical. As Zamora asserts, “apocalypse, one of our most basic yet least understood myths, has always been essential to America’s conception of itself” (4). It was essential to the Puritans as well, as America was invented by the Europeans as a utopia.

Utopia and apocalypse are distinguishable from one another in some fairly obvious ways including that the latter “is impelled by the historical dialectic between good and evil, and confronts the violence of the present,” while the former focuses on a “future, perfect world” (Zamora 17). However, this distinction does not rescue utopian vision from an apocalyptic present. Indeed, utopian vision often trivializes apocalyptic aspirations, or apocalyptic actualities, thereby also enabling their enacting. We can recognize this by much of the Christian Right’s (non)response to climate change, and certainly in George H.W. Bush’s assertion that whatever

the environmental situation, “the American way of life [is] not negotiable,” a statement of incredible hubris and apocalyptic consequence to which Richard Falk responds, “[s]uch moral and political decadence with respect to human destiny has rarely been so openly embraced” (57). (Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, the Trump administration’s view aligned with George H.W. Bush’s arrogant impulses regarding the American—capitalist at all costs—way of life, the world be damned, as mass deregulation fits the agenda of his many corporate cronies.) Free market capitalism climate-be-damned is not only utopian-apocalyptic in its very stance but is quite inviting of violence in some very Christian-Americanist manners as the violence is disregarded and/or disguised as destiny. As Hofstadter writes, “issues of the actual world are [...] transformed into a spiritual Armageddon, an ultimate reality, in which any reference to day-by-day actualities has the character of an allegorical illustration, and not of the empirical evidence that ordinary men offer for ordinary conclusions” (135).

As Ryan’s aforementioned statements regarding Americanism suggest, America’s ‘common’ utopian vision, on the political right, especially but not exclusively, is rooted in the ‘pure’ intentional rationality of the market. Indeed, although Adam Smith did express reservations about capitalism’s long-term survival, I argue that Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ thesis regarding the free market—at least as it is commonly *interpreted* (Smith rarely used the term)—is utopian insofar as it regards capitalism as a “*benevolent* socioeconomic structuring that will free humankind from the shackles of feudal class relations bringing the benefits of modernism to *all*” (Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 27; emphasis added).

When this idea of market rationality is tied to the religious dogma(s) of many of the political right in America, linked therefore to Divine interest, free market capitalism is a pecuniary model wherein spiritual ideals are linked to economic ideas; each is made (seemingly)

more morally sound when intertwined with the other. “[America] was the first [nation] to proclaim that our rights come not from rulers, but from God,” Ryan states emphatically whilst expressing the inherent morality of the ‘American idea’ which encompasses the “opportunity to rise, [...] the American Dream,” and a free American society that “requires a virtuous citizenry” (144, 143). Televangelist (and successful capitalist) Pat Robertson declares, “free enterprise is the economic system most nearly meeting humanity’s God-given need for freedom.... Capitalism satisfies the freedom-loving side of humanity” (qtd. in Geyer 45). This type of thinking continues from where the Protestant Work Ethic begins, with prosperity, economic success, being signifiers of God’s indwelling grace. Or, in a more secular understanding, success signifies virtue—a notion that works on an individual level, on the level of community, and thus, by extension, especially works when national ethos is tethered to community and individual identity for an entire nation.

God, Country, and Capital

Granted, the straight line of logic wherein economic success is a signifier of God’s favour is not, as it were, an entirely straight line, as Max Weber aptly points out in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Suffice to say that reading supposedly metaphysical truths mixed with worldly actualities can be a messy exercise, especially when, for instance, both the successful capitalist, and the loyal worker who seeks not acquisition of wealth, can be considered to be doing the work of God and therefore they are blessed. Such an understanding depends on how one chooses to interpret scripture, or have their scripture interpreted for them, or simply, and often quite paradoxically, it depends on how one perceives *reconciliation* when two noncorresponding ideas are considered true at the same time. Weber states,

Now naturally the whole ascetic literature of almost all denominations is saturated with the idea that faithful labour, even at low wages, on the part of those whom life offers no other opportunities, is highly pleasing to God. In this respect Protestant Asceticism added in itself nothing new. But it not only deepened this idea most powerfully, it also created the force which was alone decisive for its effectiveness: the psychological sanction of it through the conception of this labour as a calling, as the best, often in the last analysis the only means of attaining certainty of grace. And on the other hand it legalized the exploitation of this specific willingness to work, in that it also interpreted the employer's business activity as a calling. [...] The treatment of labour as a calling became as characteristic of the modern worker as the corresponding attitude toward acquisition of the business man. (121)

In America, the virtue that is earned through economic imperatives has superseded any 'Kingdom of God' virtue associated with asceticism. Furthermore, virtue is often a claim of essentialism as that which is without virtue is frequently by default considered immoral and to be feared. This fear is potently realized because the 'virus' of ideas within this supposed immorality is considered infectious, while a deviation from (contribution to) hegemonic capitalistic norms and values is considered to be *willfully* chosen. Moreover, many of the Christian right in America have long accepted that wealth is indicative of God's will. There is what is referred to as 'Prosperity Theology' (quite popular among televangelists as you can imagine why), wherein, similar to aspects of the Protestant Work Ethic, financial blessing is God's blessing, God's doing according to one's measure of faith and corresponding worthiness of reward, here, on earth, with various denominations of provided wealth. As many Christians (and again televangelists and the preachers who stand to benefit) have expressed, God helps those who help themselves; God

answers gestures of generosity in prayer, in spirit, and monetarily with generosity in return, and within these logics, capitalism is God-ordained human nature.

This sort of expression is certainly not exclusive to any particular branch of Christianity. Michael Novak, a Roman Catholic of the American Enterprise Institute, suggests that “the modern business corporation [...is an] incarnation of God’s presence in the world” (qtd. in Geyer 72). On the other hand (seemingly), Warren Montag argues that for many on the left, Marxists specifically, they too have forgotten history and treat capitalism as though “the capitalist market and the capitalist state have assumed the character of nature” (qtd. in Derrida and Sprinker 69). Though I do not agree with this statement, as precisely one of the principles of Marxism is recognizing historicity and its distinction from naturalness, it is worthy of consideration in regard to the rather overzealous acceptance, in general, of the naturalization of capitalism. I do agree with Montag’s following argument, especially in terms of religious, political, and economic discourse that comes from the right in America. He states that there exists a “discrepancy between the noble fictions that accompanied the rise of capitalism, its ‘pompous catalogues of human rights’, its celebrations of ‘Locke, law and property’, and the reality of dispossession, slavery and genocide” (qtd. in Derrida and Sprinker 69). The latter idea(s) seems to contradict the former insofar as the latter is something that many on the left, though certainly not all, but Marxists in particular, tend to address when confronting capitalism, and as I address, the paradoxes therein, and capitalism’s ideologically hold on American patriotic dogma.

American Paradoxes

In terms of patriotic dogma, the widespread distrust of government and taxation (which as indicated earlier is an element of metanarrative though not being national metanarrative in and of itself) plays out quite paradoxically alongside America’s military spending, its common

support for this spending to constantly be increased (something Trump and many others have done), and the distinctly American reverence for militarism. Judt states that the “suspicion of the public authorities, periodically elevated to a cult of Know Nothings, States’ Rightists, anti-tax campaigners, [and] the radio talk show demagogues of the Republican Right, is uniquely American. It translates an already distinctive suspicion of taxation (with or without representation) into patriotic dogma” (31). Judt also suggests that “in the US, taxes are typically regarded as uncompensated income loss. The idea that [taxes] might (also) be a contribution to the provision of collective goods that individuals could never afford in isolation (roads, firemen, policemen, schools, lamp posts, post offices, not to mention soldiers, warships, and weapons) is rarely considered” (31). It is this type of thinking, or the lack thereof, that has allowed for the ‘self-made man’ narrative to be inextricably tied to the dogma of the American Dream.

The ‘self-made’ individual benefits from roads, schools, firefighters, and other taxation assistances, which demonstrates the ‘self-made’ narrative to be incomplete, incorrect, and mythologized. As Elizabeth Warren states,

There is nobody in this country who got rich on their own. [...] You built a factory out there - good for you. [...] But I want to be clear: you moved your goods to market on roads the rest of us paid for; you hired workers the rest of us paid to educate; you were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory and hire someone to protect against this, because of the work the rest of us did. [...] Now look, you built a factory and it turned into something terrific, or a great idea? God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along. (qtd. in Madison)

If an American citizen is expected to be obliged to help fellow citizens, this obligation often constitutes an infringement on the individual's freedom—thus 'where my tax dollars go' is a highly antagonistic issue, and yes, for some, even patriotic dogma. This is a paradox of a nation that has never outrun its Puritan Christian roots: 'love thy neighbor' frequently takes a backseat to hell or highwater. How can it not? If God's wrath overcomes God's love when someone is condemned to hell for all of eternity, how are imperfect humans supposed to love those who are perceived as condemned? It seems a paradox too much to overcome for believers of the doctrine of the sheep and the goats. Indeed, when highwater *literally* entered into the equation in New Orleans with Hurricane Katrina, inequality played fundamentally into the relief efforts and George W. Bush's administration's lackluster response, while the televangelist Pat Robertson mused that Katrina happened because of God's wrath over legal abortion in America (Megan Friedman).

The Robertson sentiment is an example of *stories* that are told; and when a narrative is repeated often enough it may find its place in dominant discourse, especially if it demonstrates meta-appeal. Indeed, repeated Horatio Alger narratives have provided the myth of the American Dream with the status of dogma. Furthermore, the notion that the world needs America in order to function ethically, and thus that America is an indubitably ethical nation, though punished by God when deviation is too widespread or concentrated in a specific location, has been repeated so often that if someone does not show support for America's global military footprint and its hyper-capitalist ethos, they are quite often considered no less than traitorous. This type of story produced by Robertson is the kind of narrative people will follow because of the intertextuality of Christianity and Americanism reiterated, solidified within metanarrative.

Trump Narrative: How Fundamentalism and Metanarrative Disguise Paradox

Let me present a cliché: never let the truth get in the way of a good story. That might as well have been the Trump administration's mantra. But this platitude is also an element of Americanism, I argue, in general—it has perhaps just never been as obvious (to some people) as it was during Trump's candidacy, his 'reign' as president, and his current continued popularity. However, the fact that Trump was voted in at all demonstrates that there are plenty of people who either do not know the truth, or do not care, or simply settle for the alternative truths and alternative facts that they prefer and consolidate with Americanist metanarrative.

Consider for a moment Trump, and his campaigns—rife with anti-intellectual rhetoric, ideals, and catering heavily to anti-intellectual attitudes—that helped put him into the White House. Aiming at the very centre of the Americanist metanarrative with his 'Make America Great Again' slogan, which indicates that what is 'right' and 'true' about America needs to be *reimplemented*, *reasserted* so that Americans can feel, well, *American* again, so that (some of) the citizenry can feel comfortable again in their privileged, deserved, American skin, their essential American-ness, Trump proclaims,

We are gonna win, win, win. We're going to win with military, we're going to win at the borders, we're going to win with trade, we're going to win at everything. And some of you are friends and you're going to call, and you're going to say, 'Mr. President, please, we can't take it anymore, we can't win anymore like this, Mr. President, you're driving us crazy, you're winning too much, please Mr. President, not so much, and I'm going to say I'm sorry, we're going to keep winning because we are going to make America great again. (qtd. in Bedard).

The fact that such simple, insipid rhetoric is so appealing to so many people, points to the prominence of metanarrative in America and therein the supposed importance of America being the greatest nation on earth, and it points to the centrality in national ethos of the ‘winning’ narrative of the American Dream which translates from an individual ideal to a national truism. Indeed, for all of the criticism that was aimed at Trump for portraying America as being in a rather dystopian state and thus the necessity to Make America Great Again, Joe Biden’s response was to promise that his administration would set America back on course. The contextualization that each politician is utilizing is different, but the sentiment is quite similar, or indeed, the same.

Now in some respects, the ridiculousness of Trump’s campaign, and his presidency, points to a potential crumbling of certain aspects of the metanarrative. For instance, usually xenophobia, bigotry toward the Other, racism, openness to violence, threats of violence, and disdain for civil rights, are more (thinly) disguised within carefully crafted rhetoric, or at least cloaked in virtue rather than hatred, righteousness rather than brutishness. Though, admittedly, when it comes to violence against Others (anti, or un-American Others), violence has often times been, and still is, celebrated rhetorically and otherwise. Yet, at the same time, the prominence of the faith in metanarrative logic is precisely what helped Trump get elected; it is exactly what he peddled. It is what Joe Biden is selling as well, albeit, again, with a considerably different rhetorical strategy and tone: America has supposedly slipped from its true and rightful stature so let us re-examine, ‘find ourselves’, our ‘soul’, our ‘character’, and make America great again. In American reality this is the promise of most of those seeking election.

Regarding metanarrative, Truth, facts, self-respect, and greatness, if the unseemliness, incompetence, or simply the unorthodox uniqueness of the Trump presidency allows for people to, perhaps for the first time, critically engage with the problematic aspects of metanarrative

logic and ideals pertaining to Truth, it could be an ethical, eye-opening exercise for many people—positively didactic even. But most prominently, we see instead the traditional contest over American values, and the embrace of illusion both with (the widespread acceptance of) Trumpism’s anti-intellectualism, Trump’s lack of substance in his rhetoric and thought, and as well as with those who oppose Trump and his realities as they in turn reach for their own reassertion and reclamation of the metanarrative and its often-illusory and abstract and/or ambiguous aspects, including, perpetually, the refrain of American values.

For instance, when Mike Pence attended a production of the Broadway play *Hamilton*, the cast implored him to ‘uphold our American values’ (Mele and Healy). And when Obama responded (via Twitter) to those who were protesting Trump after the inauguration, once again the first response was that ‘American values’ were at stake. As this chapter demonstrates, the problematic aspect of this is that in the context of American morality and American ethical action being based in Americanism proper, what we have then is an ongoing battle wherein morality and ethics are strictly located within what those throughout the spectrum from left to right consider Americanist dogma. As such, dogma becomes the priority, rather than engaging in a pragmatic exercise in human ethics and humanity in general. This very much echoes religious arguments over issues of proper scriptural interpretation, rather than the recognition, in the first place, that interpretations of scripture can lead to violence precisely because of the elemental problematic aspects of much scriptural dogma. When dogma is paramount, it is problematic, in part because dogma, despite its fundamentalist qualities, is quite flexible, malleable. It has to be, because fundamentalism always has its cracks. Fundamentalism is embraced in order to cover up its own cracks.

The left and the right can both assert the importance of (their) American ethos and of the metanarrative (recognized or otherwise) functioning therein, which is not an inherently evil act, but in doing often swings the argument back and forth between supposed essentialized, fundamental American ‘Truths’ and righteous intentions, rather than logical thought and rational, pragmatic action. What is a much more insidious (potential) outcome of arguments over American ethos, is that when the *language* and the *rhetoric* and aesthetic symbolic expressions (fireworks, the anthem, the flag, monuments, etc.) become essentialized and are affective and/or emotional in nature, the tendency, American history demonstrates, is for thought and action to follow in kind. As Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, “Even the aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythm” (“Culture Industry” 53). Thus, when *simple* narratives are perpetually espoused and accepted, the tendency in kind is to prefer simple rather than complex narratives, and to adopt simplicity regarding complex issues going forward.

Thus, we see the popularity of ‘The Wall’, perhaps the epitome, in the context of Trump, of a simple solution for complex issues. Part of Trump’s appeal is precisely the simplicity of his rhetoric, wherein there is a simple solution for nearly everything that may be supposedly troubling the American people, such as a Muslim ban, or “Bombing the shit out of ISIS,” even as Trump (and this is in no way a defence) was a less prolific bomber than both father and son Bush, Clinton, Obama, Nixon, Johnson, and plenty of other presidents (Trump qtd. in J. Moore).

Furthermore, recognizing the problematic aspects of intertwining, specifically in this context (supposedly) Christian ideals with ideals of nationalism, in terms of religious understanding(s), when the separation of the sheep and the goats is the bottom line, and sheep go to heaven and goats go to hell, potentially complex issues pertaining to the here and now, to tolerance, acceptance, and regard for humanity, may quite easily lose their nuance due to the

consequential binary ideological foundation upon which all other considerations are based. For instance, while in the parable of the separation of the sheep and goats Christ makes clear that in order to earn the honour(s) of heaven one must take care of those in need here on earth, there is also a common religious and Americanist response to needfulness that God helps those who help themselves and that if one does not properly do so they have earned their plight and such evil need not be responded to with kindness. Moreover, when ‘America First!’ is not only a rallying cry but a deep-seeded ideological foundation of identity, the consequences have proven to be quite calamitous, and indeed divisive, despite the idea that ‘America First’ is supposedly an ideological cry for unification.

In terms of making America Great again through the unification of putting America(ns) first, while Trump campaigned on ‘draining the swamp’ of Washington politicians, he then appointed the very rich to his Cabinet, and selected a big oil titan to be Secretary of State. He chose a devotee of private education who vilified the public school system to be Secretary of Education, selected Ben Carson—who suggests that poverty is a state of mind and therefore privatised, individualized, rather than systemic—to be head the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and chose Texas ex-Governor and *Dancing with the Stars* contestant, Rick Perry, to be the Secretary of Energy—a department that Perry swore, while running for the Republican nominee, that he would shut down should he become President. Trump tapped Scott Pruitt to head the Environmental Protection Agency, a man who had previously sued the EPA several times. No matter how much funding Trump cut from certain departments and agencies,

he had already set their de-legitimation into motion and vastly, carelessly, undermined their importance.³⁷

In this regard, I agree with Žižek who was highly criticized for surmising that Trump as President, in this historical moment, would be the best thing for the American people as Trump would do more, unintentionally, with his outrageous rhetoric and his rash behaviour and lack of understanding, to ‘wake up’ the American people than would Hillary Clinton. In essence, what Žižek was saying is that as people watched the chaos that would ensue if Trump were elected, some of those within the grip of populism, and those who voted against the actual pragmatic interests of the majority of the American people, and especially those on the underbelly of the American Dream, would, perhaps for the first time, think about their political positions with a little more pragmatism. As well (in my words), folks might wake up to the fallacy of meta-American ideals, by examining things as they really are, with ideological bent suppressed by pragmatic actualities. But my argument too is that even as Trump broke his campaign promises (as we have seen many presidents before him do), the populist streak in America is so strong precisely because of metaunderstandings such as the promise of the American Dream, that there will be no revolution or country-widespread awakening in sight.

This is not to say that there is an absence of (somewhat) revolutionary ideas, or ideas that are revolutionary by some standards, but that even ideas aimed at saving the planet from climate change, providing healthcare for all, or making colleges tuition-free, all policy ideas that if implemented would increase *freedom* and quality of life in America, stand little chance against the ‘mighty corporation’ and the entrenchment of hyper-capitalist ideals. Trump ran on a

³⁷ In doing Trump can count on the aforementioned fact that far too often large parts of the citizenry are willing to succumb to populism thereby putting ideology (such as loyalty to party) before their own actual practical best interests.

campaign that promised to drain the swamp of corporate interference and career politicians in Washington, and then proceeded to establish the Trump Leadership Council made up of the extraordinarily rich, which created a “corporate takeover of government with no parallel in American history” that prioritizes deregulation for climate deniers and “fossil-fuel champions” (Robert Weissman qtd. in Kroll 35).

Despite Trump’s and many other presidents’ promises, the socioeconomic and cultural center, the hegemonic middle—made up of not the majority per se, but of the consensus of the powerful, or of power in general, and the power of what is argued or thought to be consensus which then become the norms for those who lack agency, access, and power—will hold against the ‘outside’ that wishes to be treated with the promised but unrealized equality that is supposedly an American tenet. Furthermore, as much as Trump promised to drain the swamp, and as much as he convinced people to vote for him precisely because he is not a typical politician, his policies have been far to the right, and not in the best interests of the majority of the American people. Rather, his policies were very much in the interests of the wealthy and those on the right who still do not seem to understand, or will not accept, that climate change, for example, is not simply some sort of ‘ghost story’ cooked up by motivations of leftist, anti-capitalist politics.

The proliferation of capitalism (as the mainstream economic base structure of the masses which then conditions the cultural institutions of superstructure, even as this relationship between base and superstructure may be partially reciprocal and is always in process), and its general acceptance as a democratic and liberating American truism, is too the proliferation of ideological constraints insofar as ideology is revealed in its unmasking. Without the unmasking, or critique, or critical self-reflection, ideology is pretext, which *is* overdetermination.

Accordingly, in terms of populism and democracy, as Laclau suggests, “political subjects are always, in one way or another, popular subjects” (*On Populist Reason* 232). “[T]here are no pure subjects of change,” he argues, “they are always overdetermined through equivalential logics. [...] And under the conditions of [...] capitalism, the space of this overdetermination clearly expands” (Laclau, *On Populist Reason* 232).

Overdetermination is an element of ideology.³⁸ Moreover, “[a]ny perspective expressed is in some sense ideological,” writes George Taylor in his introduction of Paul Ricœur’s *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia* (xv). When perspective leads, without self-reflection independent of, or critically aware of, said perspective, it is an ideological guiding overdetermination which is inevitably a pretext of various given perceived realities. Furthermore, when capitalism is a base reality, it is a pretext to other actualities regardless of it seemingly being (perhaps) disparate—i.e. the (false) distinction of base, superstructure, and infrastructure. In terms of institutional framework, cultural tradition, and the relations of production and forces of production within capitalism, “the distinction between superstructure and infrastructure is not appropriate, because we include something of the so-called superstructure within the concept of praxis. [P]raxis incorporates an ideological layer; this layer may become distorted, but it is a component of praxis itself” (Taylor in Ricœur xvii).

Pretext, Essentialism, and the Americanist Populist Backwards Gaze Towards Utopian Promise

In terms of utopian longing in the face of an allegedly dystopian present, and thus in the case of Americanism, the ideological constraints of pretext, praxis, and the backward gaze, what is presented is a supposedly idyllic and stable past that has purportedly been disrupted, and thus,

³⁸Again, Althusser is critical here in the formulation of imaginary relations.

we are stuck in an unstable present. In actuality, the present is always unstable which is why the narrow lens of the backward gaze—which inevitably, purposefully, blindly, leaves much out of the picture—is so appealing for many. Reagan wanted the citizenry to “share his vivid illusions of what America once had been,” writes Jan Hanska (87-88). While more contemporarily, every single 2016 Republican debate contains moments such as this: “[Barack Obama] knows exactly what he’s doing. He is trying to change this country. He wants America to become more like the rest of the world. We don’t want to be like the rest of the world. We want to be the United States of America. And when I’m elected President, this will become once again the single greatest nation in the history of the world” (“Rubio Delivers Remarks at Values Voters Summit”). If (ideological) Americanist pretext determines that the United States must be / is the greatest nation on earth then the absence of illusion is most certainly cynical.

Pretext and practice are inextricably bound, and practice works towards the reification of pretext. Furthermore, all reification, as Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, is a *forgetting*—a forgetting that that which is reified has a history that precedes its ‘reality’, or its Truth. Reification is a failure of recognition wherein “a system of behaviour develops in which the members of particular groups of individuals [for instance] come to be treated as things because their antecedent recognition is retroactively denied” (Honneth 81). In other words, to have a reified pretext thrust upon oneself is to have one’s ontology prescribed from without, or removed from without, and thus, as Franz Fanon aptly suggests, it is to exist in a de-personalized infernal circle within the shadows of pretext (*Black Skin, White Masks*). “A feeling of inferiority?” Fanon asks, describing the rather dystopian racialized reality of being prescribed ontological ‘essence’ from without, “No, a feeling of nonexistence” (139). “And so it is not I who make meaning for

myself,” Fanon writes, “but it is meaning that was already there, pre-existing, waiting for me” (139, 134).

It stands to be questioned—but too seldom is—what cost is suffered, both within and without a nation’s borders, when the need to be ‘the greatest’ is at the core of national ethos. Without question, in the United States this imperial ambition has led to many ‘might is right’ scenarios whether the majority of power was in the hands of the left or the right. Questioning or criticizing both the goal, the inalienable right, and supposed actuality of America being the greatest nation on earth is often met with cries of sacrilege as an attack on the value of America and thus an attack on American values. For Nixon, even America’s greatest foe could only be the greatest nation on earth itself: “North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that” (“Nixon’s ‘Silent Majority’ Speech”). Thus, only America can bring down American Values through lack of adherence, lack of application, lack of faith, and shortcomings in the defense of the attack on American Values.

Left and Right in Essentialist Americanism

On the political left (which is typically not terribly far left in America), the rhetoric of the attack on American values could be categorized less as a mainstay and more of a tendency, and a tendency that is more rational and less fear-based and less fear-mongering than on the right. Indeed, the reaction of many on the left to Trump’s ascendancy to power demonstrates this to be true, as many of the loudest voices were simply asking—among other things—for the administration to be accountable when it upholds ‘alternative facts’, for the President to rescind his declarations that a legitimate press is guilty of proliferating ‘fake news’, and for equality and civil rights to be upheld, even as the left has plenty to fear in regard to *their* freedoms and *their* American values.

The prominent voices on the right, on the other hand, have labelled much of the left's reaction to the Trump administration as 'hysterical', as though pointing out that it may be dangerous to have a President who *publicly* does away with facts, is openly racist, sexist, thin-skinned, reactionary, and childish, is foolish fear-mongering in itself. (Usually the administration, or American 'history' for that matter, simply finds ways to cover-up, hide, or quiet certain facts from the American people—Nixon and his Oval Office recordings are oddly, yet appropriately, an example of this American arrogance—which is perhaps a missing part of the narrative on the left at the moment.) However, the right does occasionally have a somewhat valid point insofar as they are hearing echoes of their own rhetoric of attacks on American values, as 'Not my President' (a blatant misunderstanding of how the American democratic process works), for instance, became a protest chant which is simply incorrect and ill-advised, especially when in the midst of claiming that there is a presidential attack taking place on American values.³⁹

Although much of the commentary on the political left regarding Trump's inadequacies and blatant disregard for truth, among other infractions, is correct and/or entirely relevant, it has simply not worked in the manner in which it has historically benefitted the right. For instance, when Trump continually calls into question the legitimacy of his elections because of voting fraud and such, and in 2020 hinted (a hint that became his mantra) at refusal to leave office despite potential election results, the left may seemingly be correct in stating that "This may be the most damaging thing he has ever done to American democracy" (Douglas Brinkley qtd. in Hasen). But statements such as this often come across as hyperbolic and are quickly dismissed as hysterical by the right as they double down on their Stop the Steal rhetoric.

³⁹ This demonstrates the relevancy of Bauman's comment about circular reasoning.

The more that the left protests in such (baited) strenuous manners, and the more that Trump continues to get away with *everything*, while his cronies and employees fall to the wayside, the more the leftist rhetoric does take on a rather empty, even campy, apocalyptic tone. The latter becomes easier and easier to not only dismiss, but also helps to portray the left as hysterical in part because there are no presidential consequences (yet) to point to as proof of the realities of the retorts from the left. In other words, Hitler comparisons, for example, do not help the left. While this type of rhetoric has historically galvanized the right (and indeed is doing so now in regard to COVID-19 vaccination mandates), it is doing little to legitimize the commentary on the left while simultaneously, ironically, giving the right an opportunity to mock the supposedly hysterical, cynical musings of the left, despite the similarities to longstanding tendencies of the right.

Because of the vastly different ways in which ‘freedom’ is defined within the spectrum of left and right at any given moment, someone on the left could certainly argue that their American values are under attack by the right, which is precisely why it is often a useful argument in political rhetoric, when needed, as opposed to it being seemingly compulsory in the rhetoric of the right. Certainly, because of the right’s more potent tendency towards the backward gaze of ‘Traditional American Values’, the left has reason each time a Republican shift in power is potentially looming to claim that this change would be a seismic shift in the American landscape, and they often then do indeed employ apocalyptic (violent) rhetoric regarding the coming potential Republican cataclysms that is not altogether different from that which is employed by the political right.

Jessica Mendoza, a staff writer for the *Christian Science Monitor*, states, “Under Obama, [...] conservatives warned of an existential threat to the nation. Now, liberals [the left] are using

similar language. The concerns are not baseless, [...]but intensifying partisanship is a key driver.” I argue that ‘intensifying partisanship’ is misleading insofar as partisanship is no more or less polemic or divisive by any significant standard as in many other historical moments.

Consider the moral majority at its peak in the 1980s, or the tumultuous 1960s when the war in Vietnam was raging and the streets of America were filled with protest. Consider the ugly, though self-proclaimed, and piously executed, Christian reign of President Nixon.

Yet, in many moments past and likely future, there are those who believe that they are living in a period of *unprecedented* divisiveness and danger. Regarding the rhetoric of the left during the Trump administration, Mendoza cites John Pitney Jr., a professor of politics at Claremont McKenna College: “There is legitimate basis for concern,” Pitney Jr. states, “While apocalyptic rhetoric might be exaggerated, there have been real invasions of civil liberties, deep threats to civil rights. It’s perfectly appropriate to be watchful and wary” (qtd. in Mendoza). Pitney Jr. is not wrong of course, but is he pointing out anything terribly new or entirely unique about the attentiveness and caution that citizens should demonstrate regarding the politics of their community, or of the invasions of liberties and threats to civil rights? In short, no. Jann S. Wenner, founder of *Rolling Stone* magazine writes, “I came of age with my country in flames, at home and abroad. Nixon came along and mobilized fear and hate into a national political movement. He started the War on Drugs. Every last bit of it was racist. The men I believed in were assassinated, shot down like dogs. *This was not what we’d been promised. This was not the American Dream*” (109; emphasis added). Wenner is not incorrect in his description of the times, but the emphasized portion of this quote (and others similar) is constantly problematic, while the divisiveness and the danger of the times he describes are not unprecedented though the specifics may be of a particular type.

As the left utilize the apocalyptic rhetoric that is a staple of those across the aisle, they also tap into the persecution complex that often accompanies said rhetoric in order to bring immediacy to issues that may have indeed been issues all along. It is in the immediate moment, in presentism, wherein the left plays the card that *their* American values are under attack like *never before*. If one chooses their signifiers as they wish, one can always argue myopically that the end is nigh, the present is the precursor of (apocalyptic) disaster, and certain specific values are thus under attack. Christians have been doing just that for ages. But the right is the party of the apocalypse and it does not serve the left well to join in the banging of that particular gong.

There is a difference, however, in general, between the left and the right in persecution-type thinking and its rhetorical execution. The reason for this discrepancy could lie in the findings of psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues. Haidt's studies suggest that conservatives tend to treat five categories of morality—fairness, compassion, loyalty, authority, and purity—relatively evenly, while liberals tend to treat fairness and compassion with the highest regard and each in higher regard than conservatives. The study demonstrates that when liberals feel, act as though, or utilize rhetoric that indicates that their values are under attack, we can surmise that their intentions and the actualities of circumstance are often more altruistic and are in regard to civil rights and legitimate liberties. Their concerns are less a matter of faith, belief, perceived reality, than the actuality of circumstance. This is not to say that the issues at hand are not framed or immediately thought of as an infringement on the left's American Dreams and values. But it is important insofar as underlying a great deal of Americanist belief, much the same as Christian belief—made all the more prevalent when engaging in essentialist and fundamentalist rhetoric and belief—is a perpetual state of crisis, both perceived in terms of

some of the ways in which it is thought to be under attack, and entirely real in terms of the instability of dogma.

Conclusion

I have discussed, to some degree, essentialism, populism, capitalism, Christianity, metanarrative, dogma, fundamentalism, utopia, apocalypse, community, and ethos including their intertextualities and the American paradoxes that they produce and sustain. Now I will move to fundamentalism more directly, especially as it pertains to Americanism and its intertextual ties to Christianity, in order to understand further the central argument of this dissertation: what has been established in the United States is a sociocultural paradigm wherein the absence of illusion is cynical and the absence of violence is immoral. Both fundamentalist Christianity and fundamentalist American patriotism have their fair share of violence and illusion.

Chapter Four

A Christian America: Fundamentalism, Anti-Intellectualism, and Intertextuality in American Culture

Introduction

This chapter begins with an examination of fundamentalism and how it is produced, supported and reasserted by metanarrative. Anti-intellectualism and Christianity, I argue, play a large part in this process as does political rhetoric from both the left and the right. Therefore, political party lines and the affect and populism therein demonstrate that fundamentalism is not simply a tendency of only the right or the left, while as well, party lines, affect, and populism are fundamentally influential to American democracy.

Fundamentalism, essentialism, anti-intellectualism, media, secularism, these are all forces behind metanarrative working in various manners. Anti-intellectualism, for example, as Hofstadter makes clear, is a staple in American history. It is a tendency in Americanist thought, though it is by no means a staple of *every* American's thought. Nevertheless, anti-intellectualism gives power to belief over substance and allows the Bible (in all of its various versions)—and its essentializing tendencies therein—to hold tremendous hegemonic privilege in America. The Bible and biblical language in general can be found in the political rhetoric of both the left and the right thus allowing it to become intertextualized with Americanism. Indeed, the president of the United States is still sworn in with their hand on the holy book and with a Christian pastor standing by to pray. Intertextuality privileges binary logic thereby framing reality in rather simplistic ways thus affectively allowing fundamentalism and democracy to be intertextualized in quite paradoxical fashion.

Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism, as a concept, a categorization, originated in a very specific theological context in 20th century Protestant America, but the term has since been applied to many religious contexts. Fundamentalism, as I use the term, is a stance of ideological certainty, ideological orthodoxy—religious or otherwise—not wavered by contingencies. Fundamentalism is a *whole way of life*. It is a worldview, a universal view, that cannot be shaken despite evidence that the wholeness of the belief is in actuality fragmented, partial, incorrect. In the context of Americanism then, fundamentalism is a stance wherein certain ideas and actions regarding what it means to be an American are set in stone.

Borrowing from Malise Ruthven’s definition of the term—though not fully adhering to it as Ruthven’s definition remains constricted by religious context only—fundamentalism is “beleaguered believers attempt[s] to preserve their distinctive identities as individuals or groups” in the face of *inconvenient* ideas and facts that may contradict belief (5-6). This chapter demonstrates, due in large part to America’s Christian history, that fundamentalist Americanism has been able to thrive in political rhetoric, at an individual level, and in national ethos. Furthermore, fundamentalism in an Americanist context allows certain terms to take on the power of religious truth—Freedom, Liberty, Bravery, Equality—and yet can be defined and utilized very differently by those who hold their Truth to be self-evident.

Fundamentalism ‘bleaches out’ multifaceted and polysemic realities, diluting complex actualities and the multiplicity of meaning into rather singular or overly simplistic understandings (Ruthven). Thus, underlying a fundamentalist worldview is a *perpetual crisis of instability*. What helps to affirm fundamentalist belief, in part, is the confidence and trust in tradition—the frequent rhetoric and reliance, in the context of the discussion here, on traditional

(American) values. Traditionalists may not know that they are traditionalists, or may be entirely proud of the fact that they are traditionalists, but in each instance “alternative ways of thinking or living are simply not taken into consideration” (Ruthven 11).

Consider the following quote from Evangelical Christian, Atmospheric Scientist, and climate change activist, Katharine Hayhoe. Hayhoe, who argues that climate change scepticism “usually isn’t rooted in theology, but politics,” states, “I’ve literally had people say, ‘I agree with everything you say, but if I agree with you, then I would agree with Al Gore. I could never agree with Al Gore’” (qtd. in Neidl 61).⁴⁰ While for many people, certainly theology influences views on climate change, and theology intertextualized with politics often contributes to a more obstinate stand on certain issues including climate change, Hayhoe demonstrates what a fundamentalist viewpoint often looks like, regardless of its source of belief.

Fundamentalism thrives and survives on ideological endpoints: dogmatic certainties with all the power of religious Truth (whether based in religious dogma or otherwise), and thus supported, often rather singularly, by inner conviction, especially in the face of any evidence to counter said conviction. It is not too much to say that the dogmatic certainty of inner conviction exemplifies the very definition of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism—whether religious, nationalistic, or otherwise—is not literalism, though that is precisely what it is often understood to be. Rather, fundamentalism is an ideological absolutism that is nevertheless (quite counterintuitively) *malleably* applied in practice.

“Grant one error to the sacred text and its authority is gone” has been a common refrain of Christian fundamentalists when referring to the Bible (Hodge qtd. in Nordbeck 21). Yet,

⁴⁰ This very much resembles the type of stance around vaccines as in the reluctance of GOP politicians to either disclose their vaccination status or proclaim their refusal to get vaccinated.

among other incongruities, there are two different creation stories in the first three chapters of the first book, so the ‘error free’, or infallible nature of the document, loses its shine fairly quickly if honestly investigated. Moreover, the Christian who finds a scriptural basis for an intolerance of homosexuality, for instance, will likely not use other passages within the same scripture as a basis for putting their neighbour to death for working on the Sabbath. As is the case with much scripture—Christian or otherwise—one may hold certain parts of the document as being entirely important and entirely literal, when convenient, and when it aligns with one’s *comfort level* and subsequent moral stance, while other parts are held to being rather interpretive, or contextual, again when needed, even as one might (determinedly) maintain that the work is inherently infallible.

Moreover, if one tends towards essentialist or fundamentalist aspects in their religious belief—and religious belief tempts both essentialism and fundamentalism as the ideas within religious belief are often “taught normatively” and are “held to be uniquely true”—there is a greater tendency to be essentialist or fundamentalist in one’s political worldview, while also prone to intertextualizing politics and religion (Weaver-Zercher 5). Indeed, Ruthven claims that while “some scholars see fundamentalism and nationalism as rival ideologies, in America, [...] the movements are often barely distinguishable” (82).

The notion that secular authority is more progressive, more modern, more inclined to rationality than religious dogma is often taken for granted as well. Secular authority is also often inclined to regressive, reductionist, essentialist and fundamentalist reliance, especially when such reductionist stances of certainty are privileged in dominant mainstream discourse, which I argue they are in America. A politician’s stance of certainty, however lacking in actual substance, draws mass appeal: ‘Mission Accomplished’, claimed George W. Bush quite prematurely, and

for that matter entirely incorrectly, during the war in Iraq. “Let’s remember what we’re all about,” Reagan states, “All of us, as Americans, are joined in a common enterprise to write the story of freedom—the greatest adventure mankind has ever known, and one we must pass on to our children and our children’s [children]” (“Transcript of the New Hampshire GOP debate”). Both the former and the latter statements appeal to inclusiveness, wholeness, certainty, and they are mythological and mythologizing in their absolutism indicating the anti-intellectualism in metanarrative understandings. Nationalistic metanarrative and metacultural understandings and the anti-intellectualism often found therein can be produced and sustained by political rhetoric, patriotic public panoplies, the National Anthem, school textbooks, and all matter of mass media.

Forces of (Fundamentalist) Metanarrative

If, as Butler suggests, nationalism works by producing and sustaining a ‘certain version of the subject’, in part produced and sustained through various powerful forms of media, then correspondingly it should be acknowledged, as Susan Jacoby asserts, “First and foremost among the vectors of anti-intellectualism are the mass media. [And] the variety of entertainment, given that all of the media outlets and programming divisions are controlled by a few major corporations, is largely an illusion” (10, 18). While Jacoby’s assertion is correct in many respects, that is not to say that the media are the ‘enemy of the people’ as Trump and many others suggest, nor should it be understood that *Fox News* is no different than *CNN*. Indeed, there are some extremely problematic elements of mass media and social media to be sure, but it is important too that there be freedom of the press, and that individuals are then critical in the ways in which they engage with mass media. Nevertheless, as Jacoby suggests, if the few control the information provided for the many, then there is much to worry about in terms of the hegemony,

monopoly, *communication*, and the anti-intellectualism of media-framing-mechanisms sustaining metanarratives and metaculture.

All communication is symbolic. Therefore, (as Stuart Hall points out in “Encoding/Decoding”) as the media, for example, encodes its information, the viewer, or the ‘reader’, decodes this information, meaning, among other things, that reading and decoding ‘reality’ is fundamentally interpretive and can be a wearing task. Moreover, the framing mechanisms that purport to represent reality, are fundamentally interpretive as well, whether one trusts what they see or decides that mass media are fundamentally biased, fake, even evil. However, if reading reality is a wearing task, then the media may choose to encode in a manner in which the reader may more easily or *less subjectively* decode. Whatever the individual decides to do with the information provided by media, if communication is fundamentally interpretive, then there is bias—overt or otherwise—on both that which is encoded and that which is decoded.

As far as decoding is concerned, one of the practices that works to sustain fundamentalism and therein perceived binary, right or wrong, black and white objective Truths, is selective adherence to signs and wonders which act as framing mechanisms that reify the faith: evidences of Truth like rainbows, Jesus’ face on a slice of toast, Horatio Alger narratives, natural disasters, human-made righteous destruction, sick being healed, enemies being vanquished. Public panoplies such as the nationwide celebrations of Osama bin Laden’s murder, or jingoistic military celebrations at sporting events, work like a salve on the wounds of (among other things) inequalities, differences, neoliberalism’s travesties, whilst reasserting American myth, through *implicit* cultural policy, into the hearts and minds of the masses.

In these moments—especially the latter regarding jingoistic practices at sporting events—militarism, masculinism, competition, capitalism, God, freedom, obedience to social hierarchy,

and loyalty and patriotic participation in accordance with such ideals, all work together, intertextually, as proper American values producing a distinctly American morality thereby delineating a version of the proper American subject in accordance with metaculture. To question these values and this metaculture is widely considered downright anti-American, while the reiteration and reproduction of these values and this culture induces reification which, again, is a forgetting in public consciousness of the inherent un-naturalness of the reality of these values and culture and the falsity of the 'realness', the 'reality' of their interrelations. Thus, the supposed realness of fundamentalist Americanism gains a privileged position in the actualities of American culture.

Fundamentalist Americanism works affectively by rendering logic and reason burdensome thereby allowing certain power-knowledge relationships to be decontextualized and de-historicized, instead understood as self-evident, declarative truth. As such, American values, and a distinctly American morality that is measured according to the moral barometer of the American Dream and is sustained by dominant discourse, works to delineate a version of the proper American subject. Right-wing Americanist writings demonstrate active fundamentalist Americanism, the Christian religion (explicitly or otherwise unnoticed) and its links to American values, and the dogma of the American Dream at work. Jerry Falwell demonstrates the intense overt linkage of Christianity to American values and the perpetuity of announcements that American values (and in this case too Christian values) are under attack: "What has gone wrong?" he asks, "What has happened to this great republic? We have forsaken the God of our fathers. [...] Our country needs healing. [...] 'O God' [...] the destiny of our nation awaits your answer" (qtd. in Harding 120). Falwell and many others represent metanarrative values insofar as they (re)mythologize America by essentially believing and telling stories about stories, narratives

about narratives: liberals are this, conservatives are that, and the True and righteous American values are patented by one side or the other and reiterated in fundamentalist manners.

As mentioned, this practice is not strictly an element of the political right. Obama writes, “[T]he *idea* of America, the *promise* of America: this I clung to with a stubbornness that surprised even me. [...] ‘We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal’—*that* was my America” (14; original emphasis). An *idea* of America is one (potentially problematic) thing; the *promise* of America is quite another. Moreover, the stubborn clinging to what is *my* America can be quite dangerous, whether in Glenn Beck’s case, Ann Coulter’s case, Falwell’s, Obama’s, George W. Bush’s, or a second grader’s. Actuality and reality are interrelated yet different things, just as Christianity and secular Americanism are different yet ultimately interrelated things.

Butler, who argues, as I do, that secularism frequently carries religious content, suggests too that “secularism has a variety of forms, many of which involve forms of absolutism and dogmatism that are surely as problematic as those that rely on religious dogma” (*Frames of War* 122). I argue that in an Americanist context this is due, in part, to the fact that American *secular* society is nevertheless rooted in, and influenced by, Christianity. There are many beliefs endowed with a “degree of seduction and force comparable to those of [...] religion,” such as, for example, many facets of Americanism like the (selectively adhered to) ‘holy’ founding fathers, and the ‘infallible’, yet counterintuitively amendable, constitution (Ahearne 149). Interestingly, but not a rare example by any stretch, in one breath Senator Ted Cruz states during a Republican debate that he has spent his *entire life* defending the constitution before the Supreme Court—which is, of course, not logistically possible—and then in the next moment states the importance of amendments to the constitution (“Transcript of Republican Presidential Debate”).

American secular nationalism shares many of its characteristics with religion: “doctrine, myth, ethics, ritual experience, and social organization” (Ruthven 88). Many forms of secularism, such as secular nationalism, are often incorporated much more insidiously, more invisibly, than that which is explicitly based on religious dogma, but are often, for this very reason, terribly powerful. Again, comparable to religion, nationalism is prone to fundamentalist tendencies, and fundamentalisms are riddled with paradox. Certain American tenets, American values, that are frequently treated as American dogma, such as freedom, liberty, democracy, justice, the rule of law, progress, and innovation, are not as black and white or inherently good and moral as they are often rhetorically wielded or supposed when enacted.⁴¹

Anti-Intellectualism, Power, Belief, the Hegemonic Privilege of Christianity, and the Bible’s Essentializing Tendencies

As indicated earlier, the prominence of fundamentalist Americanism, and of essentialist understandings of Americanism, is due, in part, to a long history of (privileging) anti-intellectualism in America. As Hofstadter aptly argues, “[American] anti-intellectualism is, in fact, older than our national identity, and has a long historical background. [...] I am disposed to believe that anti-intellectualism, though it has its own universality, may be considered part of our English cultural inheritance, and that it is notably strong in Anglo-American experience” (6).

America finds its anti-intellectual origins in the religion of the ‘founding’ Puritans, whose exodus from Europe took place according to their desire to create a model Christian nation, a utopian community of the elect, a *chosen* people. And while Hofstadter argues that the anti-intellectualism of the Puritans has been drastically overstated, he does concede that they

⁴¹ This is not to say that morality cannot be found within these values, but that when they are treated as dogma—or transition into dogma—it devalues them.

“imagined that they might be able to commit an entire civil society to the realization of transcendent moral and religious standards, and that they could maintain within this society a unified and commanding creed” (62). I argue that the only way that this could be achieved is by limiting knowledge, which is a facet of anti-intellectualism.

The enduring history and prominence of Christianity in America factors greatly into the privileging of certain discourses over others, for example, the penchant for and privileging of essentializing discourses. As Wald and Calhoun-Brown argue, “the idea of ‘chosenness’ encouraged Americans to think about their nation in missionary terms. [And d]espite the passage of centuries, these ideas continue to cast a long shadow over the conduct of American political life” (43). While there may be conflicts of culture within different Christian communities, and at times bitter differences regarding doctrine, the areas of difference should not be overemphasized in terms of the overall prominence, privileging, history, and hegemonic hold of Christianity in general in America. Wald and Calhoun-Brown, in their previously cited statistics regarding supposed religious pluralism in the United States, albeit unintentionally, also demonstrate the power and privilege of the Bible in America. As Jacques Berlinerblau suggests, likely at no time or nowhere in history, other than in the United States, has “a text so readily *conformed* to its admirers’ political opinions” (44; emphasis added). (The Qur’an may have gained an edge on the Bible in this regard—not in America but worldwide—but nonetheless Berlinerblau is not wrong in asserting the power, the malleability, and the selective adherence that followers of this sacred text indulge.)⁴²

⁴² What Berlinerblau suggests is precisely in keeping with the overall assertion of this dissertation that the issue is not one form or denomination of Christianity specifically, but Christianity in general as in its many forms, especially fundamentalism, it is indeed malleable and conforms to believers’ comfortability, morality, ideology and vice versa.

Consider Trump's photo-op at St. John's Church where he had peaceful protesters forcefully removed simply in order to take a picture of himself holding up a Bible. Or, we have George W. Bush's declaration that his favourite book is the Bible. There is also the centrality of the Bible during the inaugurations of U.S. presidents; it is often quoted, verses are read, and it is used as a swearing-in prop. For many who hold the Bible at the heart of their politics, their (often false) perception of the rise of secularism, is perceived as a constant imminent threat to the *soul* of the nation.

It is important to recognize the historical popularity and privilege afforded to Christian discourse *in general* in America, whether on one side of an issue or the other, despite the popular idea that Christianity is perpetually and increasingly under attack, which, indeed, gives way for the tendency of then doubling down on essentializing and/or fundamentalist discourse. *As with many forms of privilege, those that have it rarely fully realize the extent of it, if they recognize it at all.* Christianity and its primary text, the Bible, are in a privileged position in America, despite the Bible's frequent lack of relevance in current historical moments, its shortcomings in terms of historicity (including how and when it was sanctioned and canonized) and its lack of context in general, and the scriptural infidelity often demonstrated by those who cite it whilst proclaiming its relevance, importance, and often its infallible nature. This infidelity can frequently be deciphered when close scrutiny is applied to those who cite the Bible, especially those who posture themselves in fundamentalist fashion.

As normative Christian values (existing under the guise of secularism or otherwise) are resisted by some, they are in turn fervently defended in moral terms by others. For example, Thomas Krannawitter and Daniel Palm (who preface their text with a quote from Justice William O. Douglas stating, "[America is] a religious people whose institutions presuppose a supreme

being,”—which is certainly a longstanding tenet of Americanism for many people, printed on their currency no less) argue,

If the principles of the American Founding are true—if freedom requires limited government, and limited government requires *morality* and *religion*—then the ACLU’s [American Civil Liberties Union] constant assaults on religion and morality represent a serious threat not only to religion and morality, but to the American constitutional form of government that rests upon those principles. (9; emphasis added)

First of all, if what are considered here to be the principles of the ‘American Founding’ are true, then there were some awfully immoral and unethical things being done in the name of religion, and the argument should thus be made that the nation was founded, in part, on the principles (reality, actuality) of slavery, genocide, and stolen land. Secondly, Krannawitter and Palm further argue that “reason can never vindicate its own claims, as the conclusions of human reason are always accompanied by skepticism,” while they also insist that “reason can never fully refute [comprehensive, divine] revelation” (10). The selectiveness and narrowness of their position is astounding yet common. The idea that a ‘reasonable’ theoretical (or otherwise) position being met by skepticism equates to that idea being unable of vindicating itself, is a rather ridiculous presumption, and an unreasoned argument itself. However, it is a position that aligns with my argument that American actualities are often met with incredulity, cynicism, and the insistence for illusion, especially when fundamentalist belief is employed.

Hofstadter argues that since fundamentalists (and in this case he is referring specifically to Christian fundamentalists), “like to feel that they have a comprehensive world view, [...] their minds are more satisfied when religious and political antipathies can be linked together” (133). I argue, that those with a seemingly comprehensive Christian worldview are quite likely to have a

political stance, in this context an idea of Americanism proper, that is for themselves impenetrable. Like Christianity, when it comes to many aspects of Americanism, and in particular fundamentalist and/or essentialist Americanism, faith needs no proof, though it nevertheless selectively chooses signifiers that affirm faith in order to provide faith with certainty. For instance, when George W. Bush was faced with the question from *NBC*'s Matt Lauer as to whether everything his administration was responsible for—the wars, torture, foreign civilian casualties, etc.—was worth it, Bush simply proclaimed that of course it was worth it because he had vowed to protect the United States, and there had not been another attack since 9/11 (“Decision Points”).

This black and white, binary, reductive response to a question that requires nuance is typical of George W. Bush's rhetoric (and likely his thinking) regarding his wars and allowed / ordered torture. As theologian Kelly Denton-Borhaug argues, George W. Bush's “rhetoric of sacrifice [regarding the American lives lost in the military conflicts he created] was shaped in a purposefully strategic fashion so as to coincide with perceived American values and expectations.... Spotlighting sacralized military sacrifice has had the intended consequence of veiling, discouraging or mystifying hard questions” (qtd. in Pahl 172). Moreover, surely, as a staunchly Christian Conservative, America's resistance to foreign attack post 9/11 was not only confirmation for George W. Bush (and others) that he had done the right thing(s), but provided him with a signifier of God's favour for his faith, for the administration's actions, and for the righteousness of America and its military endeavours. As Butler writes, “President Bush told us he was guided by God and, for whatever reason, this was the kind of discourse he mobilized at times to rationalize his extra-legal, if not criminal, actions” (*Frames of War* 124). Butler states ‘for whatever reason’ here, but the reasoning is quite obvious. Not only did he believe that he

was guided by God, but this type of discourse speaks to inner conviction, belief of a higher order, and helps gain the consent of the masses.

“The first principle of moral psychology,” Haidt writes, is that “[i]ntuitions come first, strategic reasoning second” (70; original emphasis). Therefore, inner conviction, ‘truth from the gut’, is already given a head start. Furthermore, specifically within the context of Americanism in this instance, the permanence implicit in the conviction of ideological endpoints, which strategically lack dialectical engagement, promotes structural-posturing and systematic-posturing policy—economic, political, and moral—that operates in terms of the faith in an established, sacralized metanarrative. Metanarrative acts in concert with ideology (or, put another way, they both produce and sustain one another) insofar as the latter can be described as a “‘false consciousness’, [a] misrecognition of the social reality which is part of this reality itself” (Žižek, *The Sublime Object* 25). This metanarrative is firmly cemented in dominant discourse, which tends towards, and thus privileges, myth rather than historical accuracy, and myth simplifies, whilst inflating, aspects of the past.⁴³

Furthermore, reiteration of righteousness becomes that much more powerful when religion is sprinkled into nationalistic narratives of social realities. “I believe that God wants everybody to be free,” George W. Bush states, “And so my principles that I make decisions on are a part of me. And religion is a part of me. [...F]reedom is the almighty God’s gift to each man and woman in this world” (qtd. in Espinosa 493). Under this ideological and rhetorical pretense and/or determination, Bush supposedly sought to deliver ‘freedom’ to Iraq and

⁴³ Americanist metanarrative—which for many people is vital to their individual identity and has been sacralized in terms of national consciousness—in turn produces a distinctly Americanist faith. This faith is upheld by reiteration of righteousness and reification of righteousness as that which is abstract becomes ‘real’ and true normative reality regardless of the actuality of circumstance, thereby offering (an imagined) reassurance to the present while glossing over the contradictions of the past.

Afghanistan, and many of the American citizenry as well as numerous politicians supported his initial decisions regarding his administration's wars. "National self-criticism is difficult," Jon Pahl, Professor of the History of Christianity at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, states, "and during the 'war on terror,' it appears to have been nearly impossible" (173).

Self-criticism is too often absent when *certain* Americanist discourses are given the weight of utopian and apocalyptic significance and produce utopian expectations and apocalyptic consequence in terms of ecological destruction, culture wars, actual wars and various other militarized interventions. Yet, different 'denominations' are bound to splinter from one another over the interpretation of Americanism proper. If this is indeed the case, as I argue it is, there are still really only two camps with which one can reasonably align oneself if pursuing a legitimate chance of having one's 'side' in power, certainly in presidential power: Republican or Democrat—the binary solution for upholding America's values and democratic freedoms. Inevitably, the limitations brought about by what is basically, or certainly predominantly, a two-party system, is that in order to draw mass appeal the rhetoric on each side is often extremely similar—the talking points that insinuate the ultimate loyalty to American values and thus appealing to popular notions of patriotism—while dominant discourse is too often restrained by understandings that fit within the paradigms of easily understandable supposed American truisms.

Rhetoric: Right and Left

For example, as mentioned, as Biden proclaims that we must 'restore the soul of America', Trump insists we 'make America great again'. The list goes on. The problematic nature of the 'list' is the insistence from each side of the aisle that there is a 'soul' to contend

with, and that *they* have their hands on the pulse of what is needed to offer to America, or sustain America, or restore America's soul and uphold its character. The language is metaphysical, the rhetoric redundant, and the claims polemical yet supposedly unifying in their tautology.

Regarding the Biden campaign for president, Taibbi writes, “[Biden is] unafraid of redundancy and reaches with awe-inspiring frequency for certain words. He says America 30 or 40 times per appearance – literally – getting there with a heavy use of related constructions like the United States of America, the American people, and the story of America” (“The Biden Paradox”). He continues, “The perfect Biden rhetorical devices are metronome tautologies: [...] ‘This election is about the American people. [...] The American people, and this is not hyperbole, have never, ever, ever let the American people down. This is the United States of America’” (Taibbi, “The Biden Paradox”). Yet these are not just Biden's rhetorical devices, they are perpetually utilized in American politics and by American citizens across the political spectrum. Moreover, there *is* more than a significant amount of hyperbole involved.

Taibbi recognizes the effect, for better and worse, of this type of rhetoric on American audiences. Nevertheless, while much has been made about Trump's MAGA slogan—its racist connotations and the like—and rightly so, very little has been made about all the Americanist rhetoric on the left about unification, division, and the need to save a divided America, including, Biden's platform regarding saving the *soul* of America. Yet, the political right does not seem to have a problem with the rhetoric but with the perceived lack of Biden's application of his rhetoric. In other words, there has been criticism from the right that Biden is not the man for the job of unification, but in terms of critique of this type of rhetoric *in general*, it is indeed lacking.

This is where much of the literature on Americanism, Christianity, and Politics in America falls short. There are plenty of works both aimed at the left and right and coming from

the left and the right regarding proper American ideals, but very little that addresses the systemic problems that are produced and sustained by this type of thinking within the ethos of Americanism in general. America will never be undivided. That is not what is required for democracy to work. Democracy is messy and fragile; it does not offer utopian outcomes. Michael D'Antonio and James Cohen write in an October 2021 *CNN* opinion piece that a “recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found White evangelical Protestants, who form a significant portion of Trump's base, are particularly open to the idea that America is for people like them” (“The racist theory that is animating some Trump backers”). They continue, “Slightly more than half agreed with the notion ‘God intended America to be a new promised land where European Christians could create a society that could be an example to the rest of the world’ and most of them agreed *today's* immigrants are ‘replacing our cultural and ethnic background’” (D'Antonio and Cohen; emphasis added). The constant, and founding, hope and wish for a utopian America is both futile and extremely dangerous, as the popularity of the ‘great replacement’ narrative (as well as other narratives that align in support) on the right suggests.

Intertextuality, Binaries, and ‘Reality’

As different discourses align with one another, such as utopia and apocalypse, or religious views and political views such as Christianity and Americanism, they gain strength in their intertextualization. Intertextualization does not usually work to make simple understandings more complex, but quite the opposite; it reduces complexity in order to produce an unshakable—in the eyes of the beholder—reality. For example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt describes what he considers three indispensable institutions in American life: religion, democracy, and international good faith. He states,

In modern civilization, all three—religion, democracy and international good faith—complement and support each other. Where freedom of religion has been attacked, the attack has come from sources opposed to democracy. Where democracy has been overthrown, the spirit of free worship has disappeared. And where religion and democracy have vanished, good faith and reason in international affairs have given way to strident ambition and brute force. (Roosevelt qtd. in Espinosa 215)

There may be some truth to what Roosevelt is saying, but it is an oversimplification of the workings of the world at large, and of the cozy, supposedly integral relationship between religion, democracy, and international good faith. Nevertheless, Roosevelt's confidence in his logic and his faith in these 'institutions of American life' are most certainly strengthened by his intertextualizing the topic matter(s) at hand, as the importance of each of these institutions is strengthened when each becomes an imperative, and thus a facet, of the other. In the web of the 'real', bell hooks reminds us, various discourses act as "interlocking systems" that uphold each other especially when society employs "either/or [binary] ways of thinking [which] are the philosophical underpinnings of systems of domination" (*Yearning* 62).

David Domke, for instance, points to a "binary-rich" passage from Reagan's 1984 State of the Union address which frames America in a rather familiar manner (note too the religious, 'missionary' quality of the essentializing language being used, thereby intertextualizing religion and politics): "We're a powerful force for good. With faith and courage, we can perform great deeds and take freedom's next step. And we will. We will carry on the tradition of a good and worthy people who have brought light where there was darkness, warmth where there was cold" (157). There is very little that is of substance actually being said here. The general lack of specificity ironically makes the rhetoric all the more powerful, precisely because of its generality

and the simultaneous emptiness of what is being said, as the rhetoric is framed in a manner that works to produce a noticeably selective—and yet for many people an obvious—version of reality.

The rhetoric also works to essentialize qualities of America and the American people, or, to uphold essentialist ideas regarding qualities of America and the American people by framing matters in binaries and religiously inflected language. As I have discussed, binary ways of thinking are a staple of essentialist and fundamentalist views: heaven and hell, good and evil, right and wrong, left and right, period. Meanwhile, freedom, a supposedly American tenet, as Adorno argues, “would be not to choose between black and white but to abjure such prescribed choices” (*Minima Moralia* 132). Yet, despite being inherently incomplete, binary ways of thinking espouse wholeness; they are meta, specifically because they are a shortcut to thinking—an anti-intellectual exercise in either/or truths.

There is a notable difference between the way the left and the right hold certain ideas to be meta and binary. For instance, the right currently lament ‘cancel culture’ (something the left is certainly not exempt from), a term that is used to describe what is *often* actually simply the evolution of thought on certain subjects and even simple free-market decisions (e.g. Mr. Potato Head going genderless, taking six (racist) Dr. Seuss books out of circulation, changing Minnie Mouse’s outfit, and the decision to change the look of the M&M candy ‘spokespersons’—all of which were met by extreme derisiveness and incredulity by many on the right). Meanwhile, the right themselves have a history of such ‘cancelling’ activities such as burning books or taking part in ‘Satanic Panic’ (among other things), and these were perceived by the right as correct moral actions because of the dissent or moral corruption of what were considered challenging to their meta-ideals.

Obviously, the history of this kind of thinking is long and storied in the United States ('cancel culture' may be a new expression, but what was McCarthyism if not government sponsored cancel culture?), but now as racism is being reckoned with, *still*, and *again*, in large numbers publicly for various reasons and in various manners, and certain realities of metanarrative or simply dominant discourse are being evaluated and challenged in different ways, the right is making more out of Dr. Seuss than Biden's stimulus plan, while the left, it could be argued, is becoming overly sensitive to issues of free speech. To be clear, confusing racism or hate speech with free speech is an important issue as they are obviously not one and the same, but there are examples of the left demonstrating an abundance of sensitivity to issues that are not issues of the present, or are things that cannot be erased because of offense taken (in larger numbers) presently that were not widely considered problematic in the past, producing sometimes ridiculous discussions that both embolden the right and absorb enormous amounts of energy.

For example, regarding the latter, and thus regarding the backward-looking disdain from the left toward unbecoming previous cultural norms or historical figures, to paraphrase Bill Maher, how were we supposed to be 'woke' before we knew what 'woke' was? This does not excuse past cultural wrongs, and it oversimplifies and deemphasizes the sins of the past, but it is an acknowledgment that culture evolves, and hopefully history bends towards ethical correctness. As Žižek argues, although

Gandhi fought in South Africa for the equal rights of Indians, he ignored the predicament of the Blacks—but he nonetheless brought to a successful conclusion the biggest ever anti-colonial movement. So while we should be ruthlessly critical about our past (and especially the past that persists in the present), we should not succumb to self-contempt—

respect for others based on self-contempt is always and by definition false. (*Pandemic! 2* 38)

One might consider ‘white guilt’ in these regards, which could certainly be considered patronizing rather than reflective and/or respectful. Further, Žižek cites Fanon who Žižek states “certainly could not be accused of not being radical enough,” as asserting “I am not a slave to slavery that dehumanized my ancestors” (qtd. in *Pandemic! 2* 39).

Indeed, one of the best ways to correct the present is to acknowledge that certain past (and present and future) cultural moments should make us uncomfortable, for if we are not uncomfortable, or critical, we are not evolving as we should, and are allowing instead for metanarrative normativities to dominate. This is a primary difference between the left and the right currently in America: the lack of regret or evolution on the right for the lamenting within the backwards gaze to metanarrative, and the overly zealous discomfort on the left for lack of acknowledging that the arc of history bending towards ethical treatment of one another comes with recognition, not always condemnation and overly apologetic political correctness.

There can be respect given to the founding fathers for their foresight whilst still acknowledging that they were far from being deities, while we can acknowledge the benefits of elements of the past without condemning everything that is not politically correct in our current supposedly ‘woke’ cultural moment (while ‘woke’ itself has come to be considered contemptuous, dangerous, and politically incorrect in many instances especially on the right). In other words, forming *new* meta-ideals is as problematic as historically (supposedly) concrete and still-current meta-ideals that have become reified in public consciousness.

A reified reality, as with the mechanisms which frame this reality, is always disregarding something(s), always keeping certain things out of the picture (Butler, *Frames of*

War). Reification is a forgetting that produces the *unexamined life*, sustained by insidious and seemingly invisible hegemonic forces, as well as entirely visible and recognizable factors that frame this reality, such as political rhetoric, implicit cultural policy, anti-intellectualism, and mass media, even as the frames are subtended and sustained by acquiescence to hegemony and the certainty of fundamentalist faith. Meta-Fundamentalist-Americanism relies on reification, an affective tool of ‘wholeness’.

Affect, Party Lines, and Populism

Historically, the political right in America has been much more prone to the ‘wholeness’ of fundamentalist-type thinking, much better at performing ‘big picture’ solidarity, thus making the nuance on the left seem highly problematic due precisely to the inner distinctions therein. ‘Wedge issues’ have historically often prevented the left from gaining the ever-appealing ‘wholeness’ that essentialist thinking is drawn towards and that which makes essentialism appealing in the first place. The left often seems quite fractured insofar as, for example, criticism of the right is not as effective as the right’s ability to mobilize hope and fear, conceptually, in *affective* manners. Massumi states,

A concept is by nature connectible to other concepts. A concept is defined less by its semantic content than by the regularities of connection that have been established between it and other concepts: its rhythm of arrival and departure in the flow of thought and language; when and how it tends to relay into another concept. When you uproot a concept from its network of systemic connections with other concepts, you still have its *connectibility*. You have a systemic connectibility without the system. In other words, the concept carries a certain residue of activity from its former role. You can think of it as the rhythm without the regularity, or a readiness to arrive and relay in certain ways. Rhythm,

relay, arrival and departure. These are relations of motion and rest: *affect*. (*Parables for the Virtual* 20; original emphasis)

What Massumi is pointing to is intertextualization at work and it may not be a conscious realization of many on the right, but it has served them well, as there are long-established fundamental affective associations within conservatism.

Lawrence Grossberg argues that affect is “what gives ‘color,’ ‘tone’ or ‘texture’ to our experience” (585). He states,

[A]ffect is also organized; it operates within and, at the same time, produces maps which direct our investments in and into the world; these maps tell us where and how we can become absorbed – not into the self but into the world – as potential locations for our self-identification, and with what intensities. This ‘absorption’ or investment constructs the places and events which are, or can become, significant to us. They are the place at which we can construct our own identity as something to be invested in, as something that matters. (Grossberg 585)

Again, this is an area in which the political, economic, and religious right has historically been quite successful: directing those invested to recognize the intensity of the significance of their investment. Moreover, the lack of cohesiveness, the lack of solidifying concepts with one another on the left, becomes an issue of ‘insufficient purity’ when it comes to Americanist dogma, which has historically hurt Democrats much more than Republicans who are normally more apt to toe the party line than to think independently in specific situations, to never stray from the fundamentals, or to treat the fundamentals as eternal, connected, unchanging, without nuance. To put it another way, often Republican politicians seem to lack political courage insofar as they, again, toe the party line in terms of conceding to their base, including their financial

investors, when it comes to all variety of issues including guns, climate change, abortion, and Christianity.

Indeed, Donald Trump's 2016 campaign demonstrates both the willingness of many Republicans (politicians and otherwise) to toe the party line, despite the fact that Trump is no typical Republican candidate. He based much of his platform on the idea that he was a maverick of sorts, though his policy, or attempted policy, while in office was very much on the far political right side of things. Despite what many *consider* his (oft overstated) divergence from Republican orthodoxy, and in spite of, in some cases, politicians on the right expressing (feigned) disgust with his 'crass' atypical nature as a Republican candidate (until he actually won the presidency), they often did not express disgust with aspects of his agenda. As well, Trump's campaign demonstrates right-leaning politicians' and public figures' stubborn reluctance to exhibit firm dissent within the confines of party allegiance until one's own political and/or economic future may become more precarious due to their support of the populist Republican candidate.

In spite of innumerable lies told by Trump, racist mudslinging, sexist comments, crude and negligent knowledge of a plethora of foreign and domestic issues, it was not until he boasted about committing sexual assault that some Republican leaders chose to be temporarily disassociated with him, and in a few cases publicly withdrew their support for the candidate. More often than not, however, the politicians on the right who did proclaim their disfavour with many of Trump's comments did not pull their support from the candidate, even after his first term ended, thus remaining loyal to the 'proper' Grand Old American Party, even as it was previously supposed by many that his boorish manner was working to dismantle the solidarity of the Republican party, or, indeed, ruining the Party as a proper establishment altogether.

Many Christians, on the other hand, used ‘washed in the blood of Jesus’ conviction in order to justify their support for Trump, despite his many (often ignorantly deliberate) foot-in-mouth moments and morally and ethically questionable actions. James Dobson, a leading American evangelist, claimed that Trump was a ‘born again’ Christian and thus worthy of Christians’ support simply because the issue of faith in terms of accepting Christ surpasses all matter of misguided rhetoric and action. Moreover, Jerry Falwell Jr. of Liberty University—an intensely conservative Evangelical academic setting where various co-ed activities such as hugs that last more than three seconds were once banned—endorsed Trump as well. Such is the selectivity of fundamentalism, or, of selective fundamentalist, orthodox, dogma and belief. And such is the power of populism, and the anti-intellectual logic often functioning within.⁴⁴ As Žižek argues, populist logic demonstrates

a refusal to understand or engage with the complexity of the situation. [...] Therein, in this refusal-to-know, resides the properly *fetishistic* dimension of populism [...which] functions as an exact inversion of the standard formula of transference. [...] What fetishism gives body to [in this case] is precisely my disavowal of knowledge, my refusal to subjectively assume what I know. (*First as Tragedy* 61; original emphasis)

Fundamentalism then, I argue, is a function of populism, and vice versa.

Fundamentalism and Democracy

In Trump, we have a man perceived by many to be a successful businessman, an embodiment of the American Dream, promising to Make America Great Again by keeping the Other at bay (behind a wall among other means), and correcting the economy by putting it on the

⁴⁴ Indeed, Falwell Jr. subsequently found himself marred in controversy himself. But Like Trump, and Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Baker, Peter Popoff, Ted Haggard, and many, many others, being washed in the blood of Christ brings with it swift forgiveness and usually a return to the pulpit (and the financial rewards therein).

‘proper’ neoliberal (deregulated) capitalist course. All of this is made possible by feigning crisis due to internal and external forces that are not sufficiently purely American—details regarding all of the above be damned. “Dispelling rationalizations,” Adorno states, “becomes itself rationalization” (*Culture Industry* 40). It stands to be stated as well, as it pertains to Trump’s xenophobia that has garnered him so much support as he promised to give jobs back to Americans in part by expelling the Other, that it is quite ironic that ‘immigrants coming to our country and stealing our jobs’ is *literally* the American Dream in action. Furthermore, “Liberal democracy,” Žižek writes,

‘represents’ a very precise vision of social life in which politics is organized by parties which compete through elections to exert control over the state legislative and executive apparatus, and so on and so forth. One should always be aware that this ‘transcendental frame’ is never neutral—it privileges certain values and practises. This non-neutrality becomes palpable in moments of crisis or indifference. (*First as Tragedy* 136-137)

He continues, “There is no reason to despise democratic elections; the point is only to insist that they are not *per se* an indication of Truth—on the contrary, as a rule, they tend to reflect the predominant *doxa* determined by the hegemonic ideology” (*First as Tragedy* 137; original emphasis).

Trump, therefore, despite seeming to be an outlier of sorts, taps into populist reasoning within American ethos—a history of privileging anti-intellectualism, widespread distrust and disdain of the Other, and absolute trust in capitalism unfettered by government or external (un-American) sources (among other issues).⁴⁵ The fact that Trump asserts power over truth (even as

⁴⁵ Here, Baringer’s *Metanarrative of Suspicion* in America loses more of its footing. If the suspicion that she speaks of were indeed metanarrative, then there is no way that Trump with all of his blatant lies and foolishness would have ever found such widespread acceptance and embracement. Rather, preexisting Americanist metanarrative swept

he is no longer in office) is nothing new; it is just being done more transparently, more blatantly, obstinately, and in some cases more egregiously than other American presidents before him. Trump is a manifestation of anti-intellectualism and thus is anti-intellectualism embodied. Furthermore, fundamentalism is found within populism insofar as it blurs the relationship between power and knowledge—as hegemony gains its power not from majority rule per se—and represents or indicates wholeness whilst being inevitably partial and fractured.

The fundamentalist mindset is not particularly sensitive to nuance and degrees. As Hofstadter argues, the fundamentalist is “essentially Manichean; [the fundamentalist] looks upon the world as an arena for conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, and accordingly it scorns compromises (who would compromise with Satan?) and can tolerate no ambiguities” (135). While Hofstadter is referring specifically to Christian fundamentalism in this passage, replace ‘Satan’ with ‘Democrats’ or ‘Republicans’, and his defining terms are well-suited for fundamentalist Americanism as well.

The “*secularized* fundamentalist mind,” Hofstadter continues, “begins with a definition of that which is absolutely right, and looks upon politics as an arena in which that right must be realized” (135; emphasis added). Importantly then, when dealing in fundamentalism, the duty of the believer, religious or secular, is not simply to spread the word but to *impose* it. And it can certainly be argued that imposition in general is at its least an ethical quandary, and at worst produces violence. Hofstadter asserts that anti-intellectual attitudes within and without fundamentalisms “gravely inhibit or impoverish intellectual and cultural life” holding intellectualism to very likely be “immoral, dangerous, and subversive” (9, 19). The meaning of

citizens into its populism and allowed for this ‘outlier’ to be demonstrative of, and to embody distinctly, Americanism as many Americans know it and want it to be.

intellectual life, according to Hofstadter (as mentioned earlier but worth repeating), “lies not in the possession of truth but in the quest for new uncertainties” (30). But uncertainty is a troubling, and yes, often immoral, dangerous, and subversive concept for those who espouse to know truth, especially Truth of the ideologically dogmatic variety, again whether secular or religious. As far as popular religion in America is concerned, or American religion, or the ‘proper’ American religion, Christian truth has been a part of Americanist metanarrative and metaculture since the Puritans landed, through the Great Awakening, the second Great Awakening, Billy Graham’s Evangelical movement, Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, and Trump’s photo-op at St. John’s Episcopal Church.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed many of the forces that produce and uphold metanarrative and metaculture in America thereby demonstrating the destructive power of, specifically, fundamentalism, essentialism, and anti-intellectualism, including the way that various forms of these discourses function within (among other things) media and secularism. Due to the historical longevity of metanarrative and metaculture in general, which is in large part how they gain their hegemonic placing at the center of national ethos, the next chapter further examines aspects of American metanarrative and metaculture including the negative effects on ethics and Others.

Chapter Five

American Metanarrative and Metaculture: Ethics, Racism, Grievability, and Symbolic Reality

Introduction

One of the most prominent problematic aspects of metanarrative and metaculture is the way in which they impede upon ethical conduct and ethics in general. When metanarrative and metaculture become entrenched in national ethos, it affects how those who are considered Other in America and outside American borders are treated. This treatment, as Butler points out, is often split between an essentialist—my usage of the word not Butler's—dichotomy of grievable and ungrievable lives. Examining specifically the way this (often metanarrative) dichotomy ethically affects the political right in America wherein the ideals of the American Dream and therein small government and rugged individualism are much more stringently upheld than they may be on the left, we can see how the right upholds the Dream and versions of Us and Other as an ultimate litmus test of proper Americanism—the 'correct' American ideals within the reality of Americanism. Thus, the Dream has widespread populist appeal insofar as it indicates the *wholeness* of the community (including the level playing field wherein everybody supposedly has the equal or *the same* opportunities that everybody else has) of believers and actors within proper Americanism, even as it ironically delineates further distinctions of Us/Other dichotomies. (Of course, the same opportunities are not shared by all. 'If I can do it, you can do it' is perhaps the biggest lie and most obvious shortcoming of the ideology of the Dream.) As such, metanarrative and metaculture and the varying qualities therein demarcate the consequential question of what does it mean to be an American?

Certainty in Symbolism

Metanarrative, much like religion (and in America intertwined with the Christian religion), allows for people to be certain about ideas that are fundamentally uncertain. It produces, among other things, the notion that a symbol such as the nation's flag points to fundamental, certain, critical realities—realities that may be quite separate from *actualities*, and 'realities' that may be entirely de-historicized from, for example, the racism and xenophobia that it can be argued the flag symbolically represents. Yet, to mention an actual article of history that betrays the metanarrative is to risk being labelled un-American, which often equates to being anti-American for attacking 'American values', even though the values at stake in this context (regarding the flag) are only present symbolically.

For example, during the 2016 National Football League season (and subsequently beyond 2016 and in many other sports as well), several NFL players chose to display their disgust with the way in which black people are often treated in America by taking a knee during the pre-game performance of the national anthem. The most notable among them, or he who received the most attention, was second-string quarterback Colin Kaepernick who has effectively been debarred by the NFL. Conservative political commentator, Tomi Lahren responds to these players' actions by asking incredulously, "Why would you take out your perceived oppression of black people out on the national anthem and our flag? [...] How do you then go and disrespect the flag and the anthem of that country?" ("Exclusive – Tomi Lauren Extended Interview"). "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color," Kaepernick states, "[t]o me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder" (qtd. in Freeman). "That comment, and his continued protests," Mike

Freeman of *USA TODAY* correctly claims, “launched a thousand hateful ships, as the right wing, and even a president, spent years attacking him. In the end, however, what we knew then, and especially know now, is that Kaepernick wasn't just right, he was prescient.” Comedian Dave Chappelle had a rather apt response to comments like Lauren’s when he pointed out that the (white) insurrectionists during the January 6th march on the Capitol utilised the flag as a *physical* weapon. Metaphorically and symbolically the flag has always been weaponized, but as far as the specific response to Kaepernick and the supposed disrespect for the flag, and the actuality of the physical weaponization and thus disrespect for the all-important symbolism of the flag, the hypocrisy is profound.

Lahren’s response is indicative of metanarrative logic responding to something that requires awareness of greater context—such as the fact that the flag may represent something different for one person than it does for another, and that it is not strictly tethered to militarism (although that is often explicitly and implicitly the case—as seen in the debates regarding an anti-flag burning amendment to the Constitution). Lahren’s logic privileges the symbolic, and the idyllic, over actualities. But for many people, ‘Old Glory’ and the national anthem simply represent, and even encapsulate, American values. Never mind that if the flag and the anthem represent American values, and if freedom is included in said values, then the anthem explicitly states that militarism—in the form of ‘bombs bursting in air’—is indicative of American freedom. Moreover, what American values are, wherein the truth or the ‘Truth’ lies within these ideals, and what actual daily life looks like from the crest of the wave of the American Dream or from the shore, or from a racialized perspective, a subjugated perspective, varies greatly for all of those who comprise the citizenry.

Consider the contentious debate over Critical Race Theory (CRT) in America, wherein an honest historical examination of race relations, the legacy of race relations, and the current reality of systemic racism in America is considered by many on the right (many, though not exclusively, white people on the right) to actually be a racist exercise against white people. CRT is frequently called anti-white and un-American. As the words “SCHOOL INDOCTRINATION,” flash across the screen in all caps, *Fox News*’ Tucker Carlson acts completely aghast as he calls CRT “explicitly political and openly racist” and “a curriculum that teaches [...] kids to hate their country and to judge their classmates based on how they look—on their skin colour” (“Concerned Parents”). Clearly this summation is incorrect. But the disdain for even a discussion of systemic racism in America, for many people, fragments the mythology of a free and equal America. It tears holes into the dogma of the American Dream. It fragments their righteous metanarrative. CRT also simply makes many white people feel judged in a manner that they are not accustomed to, even if that ‘judgement’ is imagined or impersonal. Critical Race Theory examines supposed essentialized American Truths and brings distinctions to binary explanations of reality such as freedom and equality thereby destabilizing that which was thought to be certain and unquestionable.^{46 47}

⁴⁶ As with many academic pursuits, CRT may not be perfect in its content or in its execution, and it does have its critics even on the left. But the point here is the existence of the immense fear and resistance to discussing actualities against supposed Realities and the intense preference for myth over history. The fact that the vast majority of people that are against CRT are white speaks volumes as well.

⁴⁷ Thus, again, metanarrative in America, due in no small part to its essentialist aspects, privileges myth over actuality as the absence of illusion becomes cynical in a culture of optimism. And it *is* a culture of optimism—certainly in terms of militarization, equality, freedom, and the American Dream. It is a culture whose origins and legacy are utopian, wherein history is reverential and historicity is problematic, a culture wherein rugged individualism in terms of self-determination for the individual and for the nation is paramount, while acquiescence and conformity to certain aspects of Americanism, aspects of American ethics and American morality, are also imperative in terms of national and individual identity.

To think critically about systemic racism and race relations in America puts doubt into the illusion of the level playing field thereby placing cracks (that were already there) into the melting pot. This is why critical analysis can be discomfoting. Many people cannot admit that cracks may exist nor do they want to see the cracks. A fundamentalist American *cannot* see the cracks. Thus, critical analysis is the examination of that which otherwise, often quite purposely, goes unexamined. Critical analysis, then, also involves self-reflectiveness potentially fracturing identity and self-identification. *CNN* political contributor Van Jones states,

It's not the racist white person who is in the Ku Klux Klan that we have to worry about. It's the white, liberal Hilary Clinton supporter walking her dog in Central Park who would tell you right now, 'Oh I don't see race, race is no big deal to me. I see all people the same, I give to charities.' [B]ut the minute she sees a black man who she does not respect, or who she has a slight thought against, she weaponized race like she had been taught by the Aryan Nation. (qtd. in Žižek, *Pandemic! 2* 184-185)

There is much that could be said about this statement, but the takeaway that is important in this context, in the context of CRT, is that 'not seeing race' is precisely the problem.

Race is a social construct; we know that now. Its biological implications have been thoroughly debunked. But race exists socially and America has an extremely racist history. When racism is a part of dominant discourse, and there is an inherent lag in changing discourse, not seeing race may be a convenient utopian wish, the promise of a utopian post-racial America, but 'not seeing colour' is a reality that denies sociocultural actualities. Stating that one does not see colour also likely (as in the example that Van Jones utilizes) admits culpability to lack of recognition of privilege thereby posturing oneself morally in precarious terrain and opening oneself up to unethical outcomes of said moral posturing. In these regards, such as being 'colour

blind', or in terms of CRT (though he does not address it specifically as such), Žižek argues that the "US never was the world's moral leader since it needs a radical ethico-political renovation that far exceeds the liberal-Left's vision of tolerance (*Pandemic!* 2 187). Tolerance, as discussed earlier, is problematic moral and ethical territory.

Metanarrative, Ethics, Reality, and their Uncertainties

It is worth stating again: ethics must be *grounded* in the uncertainty—metaphysical, ontological, pragmatic, and otherwise—and in the precarity that binds humankind together, rather than substantiated by divisive supposedly morally certain ideology derived from, for instance, national identity. Catherine Keller writes, "[U]ncertainty lurches at moments toward the unbearable. Yet it is precisely the tone of *certainly* that rings apocalyptic" (123; original emphasis). Morally-certain ideology too often decreases precarity for some whilst maximizing precariousness for Others. "Precariousness," as Butler suggests, "implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. [...P]recariousness imposes certain kinds of ethical obligations on and among the living." (*Frames of War* 14, 22). Thus, ethics must be situational (which can still be quite problematic thereby requiring rigorous thought and debate) and rational, and further, must not be rooted in individual morality or in national ethos for that matter, and certainly not in elitist nationalism that utilizes utopian (as well as exaggerated, prejudicially-purposed dystopian) tropes in order to justify apocalyptic acts.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Since I have already have and will continue to cite Butler and Žižek fairly extensively, it may be useful to briefly point out one of the major contestations between the two theorists and where I stand. Quite simply, Butler argues that Žižek is a Hegelian formalist. I tend to agree and argue that that is indeed a hindrance at times, but by no means diminishes the whole of his work. Butler, rather has always emphasized performativity as an important aspect of culture and the study thereof. In this regard, I side with Butler insofar as formalism in general, I argue, is by definition, or certainly can become, dogmatic. In doing, formalism requires making the effort to have everything fit into a preexisting framework, thereby causing one to demonstrate time and again that a specific theoretical predisposition is correct. The emphasis on performativity, and therefore the lack of a rigid code of culture, embraces an uncertainty within Cultural Studies and Critical Theory which, as this dissertation argues, is terribly important.

This is not to say that there should be a complete disregard of the idea of universals in terms of ethics, but it is to say that even supposed universals are often, though not always, quite counterintuitively, contingent, and are certainly often treated as such. Adorno states, “That all [human beings] are alike is exactly what society would like to hear. It considers actual or imagined differences as stigmas indicating that not enough has yet been done; that something has still been left outside its machinery, not quite determined by its totality” (*Culture Industry* 65-66). He continues, “An emancipated society [...] would not be a unitary state, but the realization of universality in the reconciliation of differences. [...] The spokes[persons] of unitary tolerance are, accordingly, always ready to turn intolerantly on any group that remains refractory” (Adorno, *Culture Industry* 66). In other words, reconciliation and universality bend in favour of metanarrative and metaculture, dominant discourse, and existing implicit policy.

For example, in terms of what may be tolerated and what is not, in the United States, murder is obviously illegal, abhorrent, and immoral, *unless* it is state sanctioned. Also, there is a vigorous Pro-Life movement on the right in America that claims abortion to be an ultimate murderous wrong, though as indicated earlier they might better be called ‘Pro-Birth’ rather than ‘Pro-Life’ if their Pro-Life stance states nothing about capital punishment or argues that their troops are doing right in murdering others, and if their views on healthcare do not include proper provisions for the women and children who populate the citizenry.

What people are willing to tolerate or what they find intolerable, as Brown argues, “involves two kinds of boundary drawing and a practice of licensing. Its invocation involves drawing spatial boundaries of dominion and relevance, as well as moral boundaries about what can and cannot be accommodated within this domain” (*Regulating Aversion* 29). Brown uses the

issue of abortion as an example. She writes (prior to the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*),

[S]ome Americans who personally believe abortion to be morally wrong tolerate its conditioned legality because they believe that this moral question is an individual one, though they may regard ‘late-term abortions’ as intolerable. Others, believing abortion to be murder and equating ethical action with the prevention of murder, cannot tolerate the practice under any circumstances and may go beyond opposing the legality of abortion to actively seeking to prevent abortions from taking place. In just these two positions, one can see the boundaries of dominion and relevance shift from individual to society, and it is possible to see as well a practice of licensing that sets out what kinds of abortions—for whom and at what point in a pregnancy—may or may not be considered tolerable.

(Regulating Aversion 29-30)

Indeed, there are further varying degrees and considerations. As stated, one may view abortion as illegitimate murder and executions of adult criminals as legitimate and morally sound. One may also consider the murder of an abortion provider to be ethical as well, as it will, in the eye of the beholder, save more unborn lives by discarding of the single born life. Or, it may be a justified murder, morally correct vigilantism, tolerated as the lesser of two evils.

Thus, we may state quite simply, as an axiom, that all of humankind are created equal. But ‘created’ and ‘equal’ are defined drastically differently in different contexts. For instance, Butler writes,

[O]ne response to a ‘pro-life’ position is to argue first for the equal value of life, and to show that the ‘pro-life’ position is actually committed to gender *inequality*, attributing an embryonic life with the right to life while decimating the legitimate claims that women

make to their own lives in the name of freedom and equality. Such a ‘pro-life’ position is incompatible with social equality, and intensifies the differential between the grievable and ungrievable. Once again, women become ungrievable. (*The Force of Nonviolence* 57; original emphasis)

Similarly, regarding the defining of terms such as grievability, and social equality, it may also be fairly obvious to most people that slavery is reprehensible, absurd, and repulsive. But the term ‘slavery’ itself is defined quite differently, for instance, within certain Marxist perspectives rather than in a legal sense; and legality is contextual, bound by geographical location among other things.

Universals become quite philosophically, not irrelevant per se, but *challenged* in the face of *actualities*.⁴⁹ Žižek asks, “You know what’s the problem with the term ‘illusion’? The opposite of illusion is reality, but this reality is constructed *through* illusion” (qtd. in Jones; original emphasis). Quite simply, I agree. There is truth to Žižek’s assertion as this thesis demonstrates that the lack of illusion in America is widely considered cynical for discounting certain supposed Realities. As well, we know that ideology can create and contribute to quite an illusory reality. (Again, rather than ‘reality’, it would be more accurate if Žižek’s statement was that the opposite of illusion is *actuality*.)

Theory is not unimportant, or frivolous⁵⁰—quite the opposite as I argue with regard to postmodernism, or regarding marginalized lives for instance, or any number of other subjects.

⁴⁹ See footnote on page 50.

⁵⁰ As I addressed Butler and Žižek earlier, this is a good place to address Chomsky and Žižek. Chomsky has argued that Žižek is an extreme example of a theorist who is merely posturing in their work and that he provides no discernable empirical conclusions of a practical nature. He also calls out Lacan (who Žižek often references) as being a charlatan. Chomsky’s contention is that this kind of theory is frivolous and of no value once the ‘big words’ are taken out as all we are left with is again frivolity without empiricism and conclusions. I argue in this dissertation that solution-based thinking, or theory based on determining conclusions can be incredibly counterproductive and

But some theory is not all that useful without the acknowledgement that actualities often lead us away from the universal, and point instead, toward the capability and the importance of situating theory in a realm where, again, ethics are locational and pragmatic, and are so in terms of *social justice*, rather than nationalistic sentiment or individual morality. For instance, Lyotard makes a distinction between ‘traditional’ theory and ‘critical’ theory. He writes,

‘Traditional’ theory is always in danger of being incorporated into the programming of the social whole as a simple tool for the optimization of its performance; this is because its desire for a unitary and totalizing truth lends itself to the unitary and totalizing practice of the system’s managers. ‘Critical’ theory, based on a principle of dualism and wary of synthesis and reconciliations, should be in a position to avoid this fate. (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 12)

Unitary and totalizing practice is a function of metanarrative and vice versa. In regard to the context of the subject matter at hand, the utopian faith in Americanist metanarrative functions in concert with apocalypse, for the ‘reality’ of the utopianism of the American Dream and the presumed sanctity of American life are highly *selective* promises, while too the actuality is that what is right in an American context is ever so frequently determined by might—militaristic, economic, and political—which, often ironically, reasserts the metanarrative.

that embracing a problem without being bound to a specific solution is often a better manner in which to solve that which is problematic. Rather than ‘do not present me with a problem but present me with a solution’, I argue that we can be critical of that which is problematic without necessarily coming to a decisive or soluble conclusion. This is not to say that critique or criticism do not seek solutions; they do. It is only to say that the critique first, rather than a solution-based approach, may be a much more productive exercise as it inevitably opens new ideas and interpretations, successful or otherwise. For instance, if one wants to lose weight, they may decide in advance that the solution is going to the gym or dieting. Or one may simply examine their lifestyle and decide that exercise may be beneficial in a variety of ways and the lack thereof is detrimental, problematic. Solutions will likely subsequently present themselves.

In terms of *economic* might ironically reasserting metanarrative ideas, Žižek argues that the way in which “the market fundamentalists react to the destructive results of implementing their recipes is typical of utopian ‘totalitarians’: they blame all failure on the compromises of those who realized their schemes (there was still too much state intervention, etc.), and demand nothing less than an even more radical implementation of their doctrines” (*First as Tragedy* 19). In terms of metanarrative and *military* might, Butler correctly asserts that America is a country that “systematically idealizes its own capacity for murder,” with impunity nonetheless, while at the same time “the US government gives all kinds of reasons for its killings while [...] refusing to call those killings ‘killings’ at all” (*Frames of War* 46). This argument could be upheld in part by simply, again, being critically aware of the lyrics to the national anthem. In that regard and others, it is important to recognize too when America brazenly, triumphantly revels in their killings. This is revealed in the intense linkage of nationalism and militarism and is demonstrated in the ‘taking a knee’ during the anthem as being tantamount to disrespect for the military and by extension disrespect for America in general. Though the gesture of kneeling during the anthem has always been explicitly about racism in America, it provides people with the appearance of something else.

As mentioned earlier, there exists a critical, pervasive anxiety of *appearances* in America, as Butler’s aforementioned assertion in part demonstrates. Butler also argues that “Nationalism works in part by producing and sustaining a certain version of the subject. We can call it imaginary, if we wish, but we have to remember that [...] what gives power to [the] version of the subject is precisely the way in which the subject’s own destructiveness [is rendered] *righteous* and its own destructibility *unthinkable*” (*Frames of War* 47; original emphasis). Therefore, neither the left or the right in the United States are immune from, and deserve no

impunity, for engaging in action that “echoes with the hoofbeats of secular apocalypse” (Keller 13). In this regard, Keller points to America’s “devastating oil addiction [...] support of the Israeli state’s immoral policies toward the Palestinians, [...] and] patronage of unpopular Arab governments,” and by no means is that a comprehensive list (124). Those who are ‘deserving’, then, of being destroyed—and this includes the willingness to accept ‘collateral damage’ which involves, among other atrocities, the destruction of citizens—are the ungrivable lives, while those whose destruction is unthinkable are grievable lives.

Others in America

We can think about the idea of grievable and ungrivable lives both in the context of war and in the context of capitalism wherein some lives are simply considered more important than others, treated as more important than others, often in direct correlation with economic circumstance or economic interest. Regarding the context of capitalism, we need not look any further than one’s *usefulness* as a consumer and how that measures one’s *worth* as a citizen, and how well the ‘less useful’ Americans are taken care of or how they are ‘ungrieved’. “The collateral victim of the leap to the consumerist rendition of freedom,” Bauman writes, “is the Other as object of ethical responsibility and moral concern” (*Does Ethics Have a Chance* 53).⁵¹ What must be pointed out here is that there is, of course, a morality component at work within the binary of righteous destruction and unthinkable destructibility, of grievable and ungrivable lives, that requires examining.

When the ungrivable are framed as a threat to the preservation of the grievable, the vanquishing of an ungrivable life may be construed as a moral act. Indeed, I argue that in order

⁵¹ Consider millionaire ex-NFL quarterback Brett Favre allegedly securing millions from the Governor of Mississippi taken out of money slated for welfare recipients in order to build a volleyball facility at Favre’s daughter’s university where she is in fact on the volleyball team.

to justify grievability, the vanquishing of the ungrievable *must* be construed as moral, for to tolerate the ‘nonlife’ of the ungrievable if it is a threat to the grievable is to compromise the morality, or more exactly, the moral posturing of the (righteousness of the) grievable life. The binary of righteous destruction and unthinkable destructibility, of grievable and ungrievable lives, is an *essentialist* binary, or certainly becomes one when enacted. Therefore, if one’s destruction is framed as unthinkable, then the moral play within this paradigm lies in enacting the righteous destruction of the Other. Thus, the absence of violence is immoral.

This reality/actuality is particularly potent when nationalism is spiked with metanarrative ideals of exceptionalism within an ideological dichotomy of another’s (potential) righteous destruction and one’s own unthinkable destructibility, exacerbated, in America, by military ubiquity and capitalist fervour. Meanwhile, metaculture produces an inclination for limiting national self-reflection that is less than reverential in terms of being the greatest nation in the world where freedom reigns and democracy is supposedly inherently just.

Francis Mulhern defines metaculture as “a modern discursive formation in which ‘culture’, however understood, speaks of its own *generality* and *historical conditions of existence*” (qtd. in Osborne 35; original emphasis). Metaculture may speak to its historical conditions of existence, but those who adhere to it are rarely consciously concerned with the actuality of its historicity. Peter Osborne elaborates, “Practically, it is claimed, this discursive formation has ‘an inherent strategic impulse’: namely, ‘to mobilize ‘culture’ as a principle against the prevailing generality of ‘politics’ in the disputed plane of social authority’. The subject and object [of metacultural discourse] are one and the same culture [...] but it is ‘split between norm and actuality’” (35). Thus, the imagined ‘wholeness’, or the longing for

‘wholeness’ that often comes with ideas of community and culture, and is embedded in populism, is in actuality fractured.

Indeed, the wholeness is *inevitably* fractured. The longing for wholeness brings with it the inevitability of exclusion. This is the mistake of much utopian logic. When American values carry with them the privilege of sanctity but can be utilized rhetorically and otherwise to defend or uphold a rather large spectrum of ideas, causes, and moral and ethical consequences, the fractures may become clear, but the longing for wholeness, the *insistence* of wholeness often remains. With the longing for wholeness comes the lamentations of fracture, the utopian longing to get America (back) on track.

The ‘Right’ Americanist Ideals

What does it mean exactly when someone states (and I use the word ‘someone’ because this idea is too ubiquitous to attribute to any single quote), ‘we need to keep people out of this country who don’t share our values’? Even within the starred and striped borders, freedom is not free for all, justice is far from blind, the rule of law is applied selectively and often with great prejudice, equality and liberty are also rather selectively applied (often in accordance with where a person measures in regard to the ‘virtue’ of economic capital that rewards those ‘living the American Dream’), and democracy is deeply compromised when capitalism is as American as apple pie.⁵²

Glenn Beck states emphatically in *Arguing with Idiots*, that “Capitalism hasn’t failed, greed has failed” (4). He argues that capitalism is an American-value reality and should be, because if capitalism is sick, it is only because of the thinking that “returns could be had without

⁵² Apple Pie is not inherently American. It is a Canadian ‘invention’. But this is the reality of dealing in illusion, identity, and patents.

risk” and that “put another way” people have “succumbed to greed” (Beck 4). Returns without risk is hardly a definition of greed. Indeed, it is not. Capitalism begets greed. Capitalism is a system built upon exploitation; that is its bottom line. The inner workings of capitalism in terms of political economy will be examined in further detail in later pages, suffice to say the capitalist gains by exploiting the labour of the worker. Trying to rationalize the conflation of capitalism, equality, and democracy is a perpetual paradoxical exercise of Americanism.

Indeed, the texts mentioned in Chapter Two’s Literature Review from Žižek, Adorno, Horkheimer, Bauman, Berman, and Chomsky, demonstrate the importance of being intellectually curious about the way things actually are, rather than disregarding inconvenient truths in favour of what might be considered an individual’s, or a nation’s emotional wellbeing. For instance, if increased competition and ‘choice’ driving down costs is simply an economic certainty (it is not), as Sean Spicer (for instance) claimed whilst championing the Trump administration’s Health Care reform, then who *in actuality* pays the cost? The capitalist? Not usually; and this is precisely why intellectual curiosity is warranted when contemplating certain economic scenarios rather than the ideological certainty that is often espoused and often practiced regarding various debates that require much more gradation than they are often given. Yet, again, binary, simplistic, black and white answers are too often the preferred response to difficult questions. If Americans, as part of their innate value system DNA, believe in open competition and the freedom of choice (both of which only actually apply in certain circumstances), then what are we talking about? Why are we debating Health Care as though it is a human right rather than an individual choice? End of discussion. Of course, the ‘end of discussion’ is an ideological shortcut to thinking. It is an anti-intellectual decision.

When Rush Limbaugh argues in *The Way Things Ought to Be* that liberalism is the ‘cause’, not the ‘cure’, that is the reason for America’s troubles, and that his solution is a return to the traditional mainstream American values that his *father* held to be true, we can see the binary, reductionist, fundamentalist, backward gaze that appeals to the populist notion (of tradition) repeated by so many people (ad nauseum) from one generation to the next: America is in crisis; make America great again. It is (relied upon and comforting) dystopian/utopian binary thinking and is fundamentalist in its narrowness, its blind spots, and its populism. Limbaugh states, “There cannot be a peaceful coexistence of two completely different theories of life, theories of government, theories of how we manage our affairs.” (Media Matters).⁵³ If this is secession-rhetoric, what does he expect will happen going forward? Is he imagining a successful, utopian society of entirely like-minded people on the same ideological path? If this is a statement of supposed fact, it is simply untrue. Households exist peacefully under the conditions he describes, let alone communities and nations.

While it may not reach the idyllic Limbaugh wishes for, *different* theories of life, government, and how we manage our affairs, exist within the very definition of democracy. Peaceful coexistence is a goal of democracy that is entirely processional, fluid, without end, yet one that is not only the aim and endnote of many views of Americanism but is also in the mythologized metanarrative of the ‘United’ States. The constant lamenting of divisiveness is a persistent problematic aspect of mythologized narratives and utopian aspirations that in turn leads to the corresponding rhetoric of what is *true* Americanism across the political spectrum. Yet, despite the cries of an America divided, much of the language is in itself divisive, self-serving, and uncompromising.

⁵³ This has been echoed more recently in Marjorie Taylor Greene’s call for a ‘National Divorce’.

Beck, for example, argues that the ‘soulessness’ in American capitalism exists as it does because it was “bred by a government that continually tries to step in to do the jobs that individual Americans should be responsible for” (4). This is a vague but very American-values idea: the importance of the rugged individualism of individual Americans. Yet, simply put, a government by the people for the people *is* an exercise of individual Americans being responsible for certain jobs. Moreover, is the government not made up, in part, by some individual Americans who came from the bottom and rose up to the top because of, among other things, the tenaciousness that is so valued? Politician and activist Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez would argue so: “The thing that people don’t realize,” she states, “is that wherever there is affluence, there’s an underclass. There’s a service class, and that’s what I grew up in” (qtd. in Hillstrom 5).

Laurie Collier Hillstrom’s biography of Ocasio-Cortez demonstrates, quite simply, a counterargument to the likes of Beck in that a) government, though corrupted by corporate thinking and the lineage of many of its participants, is also (obviously) made up by individual Americans, and b) that despite Beck’s argument that “[w]e have never solved problems efficiently from the top down; we solve them from the bottom up,” this is simply not a whole truth (Beck 4). Moreover, the bottom up, ‘self-made man’ resilience that makes significant change or ‘rises to the top’ of the socioeconomic paradigm of the American Dream is not often (or ever) an *individual* effort (that which I just suggested regarding tenaciousness notwithstanding).

Just as there are many works from the political right (such as Beck’s and Limbaugh’s) that argue what properly constitutes American values and Americanism in general, there are many works that challenge the dominant positions of the right in America. *Piety and Politics:*

The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom by Barry Lynn is exemplary of many of these literary works. Lynn argues that while moral values are imperative it is not the government's place to impose them. This argument exposes one of the many contradictions or paradoxes within right-wing Americanist orthodoxy. When it comes to many issues, socioeconomic ideas in particular, the argument from the right is for little to no government interference, 'small' government and free market fundamentalism (when it suits their interests—not when corporate bailouts are welcome). Yet, when it comes to morality policing, the argument is that not only is America a nation that must hold onto and exert its moral Christian values, it is government's place to do so. Lynn writes, "Religion has invaded our political system to such an extent that [...] politicians trip over themselves to talk about what their faith means to them, and no candidate or officeholder in his or her right mind dares to end a speech with any other phrase other than 'God Bless America'" (22-23).

Lynn is correct in his assertions, though any insinuation or conclusion that this 'invasion' is recent is misguided. Furthermore, these tendencies of including God in political rhetoric are not only for those on the right nor for only the religious. It is a sentiment that links America to righteousness and to metaphysical guidance and validation. Secularism contains many dogmatic ideals whether actually overtly Christian or otherwise, but these ideals exist in dominant discourse and common narratives because of the influence Christianity has had on American ethos. In other words, due to Christianity's intertextualization with Americanism, the behaviour, the espoused beliefs, and the rhetoric become compulsory whether or not one actually holds to said beliefs. But for a candidate on the right, regardless of their morality, their controversies, their sexual dalliances, their indiscretions (I would include here bigotry, hate-speech, and the like, if these things were not often helpful to candidates on the right), "[o]nly candidates who

submit to the Religious Right’s ideological litmus test—anti-legal abortion, anti-gay rights—can make it through the GOP primaries” (Lynn 22). While this assertion may not be *entirely* true, here we see again that morality is big government while the economy should be small government in the minds of the vast majority on the right.

However, Lynn also argues that for those who contest the idea that ‘under God’ should be in the Pledge of Allegiance and that ‘In God we Trust’ should be taken off of American currency, “this is a trivial issue” (112). It may be easy or tempting to think so, but Lynn drastically underestimates the fervency with which many people approach such issues. A Pledge of Allegiance to a flag is a rather fundamentalist thing to do and has echoes of the (cult-like, compulsory) communal reciting of the Christian Apostles Creed or the symbolism of Communion—the Lord’s Supper. It is not a trivial issue. ‘Under God’ was not in the pledge at its inception but was added in 1954, 68 years after its inception, however that recognition would be outside of the ideological realm of treating the Constitution as dogma and ignoring that amendments have been added, while amendments are then too treated dogmatically. The point is that language matters. Language holds power. Narratives matter, stories matter, *symbolism* matters. “‘One Nation Under God’: The System-Justifying Function of Symbolically Aligning God and Government,” by Steven Shepherd, Richard P. Eibach, and Aaron C. Kay, utilizing five different studies, puts forth the argument that

increasingly governments symbolically associate the nation with God when public confidence in the social system may be threatened and [...] associating the nation with God serves a system-justifying function by increasing public confidence in the system. In an analysis of U.S. presidential speeches, presidents were more likely to *symbolically* associate the nation with God during threatening times. [...] Among religious individuals,

referencing God in political rhetoric increased the perceived trustworthiness of politicians, compared to patriotic secular rhetoric [...] or simply priming the concept of God. [...] Finally, believing God has a plan for the United States attenuates the deleterious effect that perceptions of national decline have on system confidence.

(“Abstract”; emphasis added)

Meta-Dreams and Populism

If symbolism matters, which it does because all communication is symbolic (though I argue that symbols such as the flag, statues, and monuments hold far too much cultural capital in quite religious manners), then many of the (partly) fictionalized works from non-academic writers such as Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ‘72*, John O’Hara’s *Appointment in Samarra*, Kurt Vonnegut jr.’s *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, and Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (to name only a very few), are especially effective—in their use of symbolism, metaphor, allegory, and the like—in demonstrating the hideous apocalyptic underbelly of many of the narratives that the American Dream produces. The privileging of metanarrative thinking and rhetoric as well as the prominence of metanarrative itself in America is perpetually produced and reasserted by national ethos, militarization, capitalism, and metacultural ideas. Metacultural ideas, reified by implicit cultural policy and essentialist political rhetoric, in turn quiet dissent and contribute to an extremely sluggish lag in changing dominant discourse in America, especially in terms of populist reasoning.

Indeed, in response to the strength and prominence of metanarrative and populist reasoning and ideals, or the lack of the recognition of the strength of metanarrative (without ever naming it as such), and the anxiety that is induced when meta-thinking is disrupted, Hunter

Thompson writes that “[t]he mood of the nation,’ in 1972, was so overwhelmingly vengeful, greedy, bigoted, and blindly reactionary that no presidential candidate who even faintly reminded ‘typical voters’ of the fear & anxiety they’d felt during the constant ‘social upheavals’ of the 1960s had any chance at all of beating Nixon” (*Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* 442). William Stephenson, author of *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson’s America*, responds to Thompson by stating that George McGovern’s defeat to Nixon in a nation that “remained devoted to its masochistic appetite for [...] degrading corruption, oppression and paranoia” was thus inevitable (14). “After a decade of left-bent chaos,” Thompson writes, “the Silent Majority was so deep in a behavioral sink that their only feeling for politics was a powerful sense of revulsion. All they wanted in the White House was a man who would leave them alone and do anything necessary to bring calmness back into their lives” (*Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail* 442). Once again, we see the social actualities of the day needing the restoration that only a new administration can supposedly bring—a return to the true north of the moral compass. That was hardly what Nixon did, though he postured himself (as so many do) as precisely the person to make that happen.

Tom Wolfe’s *Bonfire* tells the story of racism and privilege in 1980’s New York and is important for many reasons if not only for the telling line, “Fear [remaps] the moral geography very quickly” (596).⁵⁴ Kurt Vonnegut demonstrates, in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, how socialism is equated to immorality, even insanity, in the American ideal. One passage reads, “The Senator said that the carrot and the stick had been built into the Free Enterprise system, as

⁵⁴ This is an interesting example given *Bonfire*’s intrinsically conservative theme that everyone participates in the same frenzy—that Black activists are Sharpton-esque hustlers and ‘justice’ is just aggressiveness. This does not counter my argument, but is only to say that conservatism—unwittingly or otherwise—often provides insightful social critique.

conceived by the Founding Fathers, but that do-gooders, who thought people shouldn't ever have to struggle for anything, had bugged the logic of the system beyond all recognition" (27). This is common Republican ideology and rhetoric, including the level-playing-field idea of meritocracy that lending a helping hand denies people of the struggle that they *naturally* deserve to handle themselves. Vonnegut's passage in *Rosewater* continues,

I see two alternatives before us. We can write morals into law, and enforce those morals harshly, or we can return to a free enterprise system, which has the sink-or-swim justice of Caesar Augustus built into it. I emphatically favor the latter alternative. We must be hard, for we must become again a nation of swimmers, with the sinkers quietly disposing of themselves. (27)

Part of the paradoxical logic of the neoconservative-neoliberal alliance, or of 'small government' arguments is that this type of binary reasoning that Vonnegut's character points to is utilized while *at the same time* morals are very much intertextualized with, and written into, law when it serves particular ideological interests. After all, Nixon was the 'law and order' president whose moral posturing and unethical conduct were quite at odds. The character in this passage from Vonnegut also reminds us of the perpetual nature of the backwards gaze, where a *return* to proper course is mandatory. Moral progress is believed to be found in the idyllic past. The character's Social Darwinist leanings are that of the sociological phenomenon of Functionalism—common in politically rightist Americanism.

Herbert Spencer, who applied the term 'survival of the fittest' in terms of supposed social realities, exemplifies this laissez-faire socioeconomic Functionalist approach (using some quite dubious terminology):

Fostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good, is an extreme cruelty. It is a deliberate stirring-up of miseries for future generations. There is no greater curse to posterity than that of bequeathing to them an increasing population of imbeciles and idlers and criminals.... The whole effort of nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better.... If they are not sufficiently complete to live, they die, and it is best they should die. (qtd. in Ravelli and Webber 40)

Quite backwardly, this is utopian logic: if we can clear the world of the weak and the stupid, we will enjoy a more harmonic whole. This is also privatizing logic—the pull-yourselfes-up-by-your-bootstraps American neoliberalist individualist tenet. It steers clear of systemic issues and puts all of the responsibility on the individual. Furthermore, it stakes claims of equality in a strictly binary virtue/immoral sociocultural economic scenario.

Conclusion

In neoliberalism, this socioeconomic scenario, pushing the American Dream to its limit, is considered, as Spencer suggests, ideal, but it makes for a rather un-democratic sociocultural paradigm. “Democratic politics once recognized its dependency on the people it governed and to whom it remained accountable” Giroux and Pollack assert, decrying the neoliberal state of things (200). The recognition they speak of has not disappeared completely; however, it has been hindered, compromised, by neoliberal socioeconomic policy, and by other factors historically as well. Giroux and Pollack continue, “As capital reigns supreme over global society, democratization, along with the public spheres needed to sustain it, becomes an unsettled and increasingly fragile project” (200). (It stands to be noted that democracy has been and always is unsettled and fragile, and should be recognized as such and treated as such.) “Meanwhile,” they state, “long-standing histories of racist and class-based exclusion—driven by colonial fantasies

that regard the racial ‘other’ as less than human or dismiss the unemployed worker as a disposable by-product of the capitalist order—continue to inform the withdrawal of moral and ethical concern regarding [...] these populations” (Giroux and Pollack 200). Not that Giroux and Pollack are incorrect in the prior passages, but here I argue they are entirely correct.

The lack of moral or ethical concern for certain parts of the citizenry is a continuum inherent in capitalism, at times and places and to certain populations more extreme than others. The prominence of metanarrative and metaculture in America has only ever more easily allowed for capitalist-influenced ideas and actualities such as this to persist, reproduce, and become intensified within the ebbs and flows of historical actualities. This is why the imperative question within Americanism—which the next chapter examines explicitly—in terms of equality, inclusion, ethics, social justice, and a host of other contingencies, is what does it mean to be an American?

Chapter Six

What Does it Mean to be an American? Essentialized Rhetoric, Law, Policy, and the Intertextualization of Christianity and Americanism (As well as a Trip to the Southern Border and Tales from a Bakery in Colorado)

Introduction

What it means to be an American is not a question always answered by birth, constitution, immigration, or other factual actualities, but frequently by belief personified in action. What it means to be an American is influenced by historical amnesia, creative nostalgia, and narratives that may influence, for instance, how people of colour measure up to metanarrative versions of Americanism proper. Many people will commit to the idea that equality is in the fabric of the nation's character, but if pressed they may also submit that their reasoning for inequitable behaviour and/or prejudice is towards un-Americanness (and immorality therein) rather than an issue of race. Yet, why was Obama targeted for not being American if not for the colour of his skin (or even simply his name)?

Populist political rhetoric, though not *necessarily* intentionally, provides the foundations for many people in many instances for ideological conviction—truth from the gut—to supersede historicity. One of the ways we can see this is in the manner in which individual morality rather than ethical conduct interferes with the rule of law in America. Whether the law is abused in racialized contexts, militarized contexts (torture and illegal detainment neither viewed as illegal but upheld by moral impulses and morally sanctified ideals), or in the War on Drugs, for example, wherein not only are ethics subjugated by moral posturing and morality policing, but in doing has cost millions of lives to the sufferings of imprisonment. Meanwhile, pharmaceutical companies legally (initially though some minor fines were later handed out) propagated an

opioid crisis that killed (and is killing) thousands. Drugs are treated as a health issue when convenient and as criminality when morally defended. Within all of these ethical and moral quandaries (and many more—including, somewhat ridiculously, baking a cake), some fundamental Americanist questions lie in flux: What is freedom in America? Who deserves it and who does not? And how does this fit into the question of what it means to be an American?

Proper Americanism

“One of the most persistent questions in U.S. history,” Leroy Dorsey correctly suggests, is “What does it mean to be an American?” (11). The questions that need to be asked, then, include why has this historically been such an important question? Why is it a question of ontological significance? Why is it fought over by the left and right with religious-like (and actual religious) fervour? And how does it still today so greatly affect policy both foreign and domestic? Some of those questions have been answered in previous chapters. Yet, in a nation of immigrants, a nation that is often in various circumstances extremely self-congratulatory for being a nation of immigrants, though simultaneously historically conflicted as to what to do with its immigrants, why is nativism such an incredibly contentious issue? Moreover, why does ‘what it means to be an American’ need to be incessantly defined on both the left and the right in essentialist terms?

We could instead ask: What does it mean to be a human being living in an imagined community within imaginary lines? Of course, there are issues of governance, laws, and citizenship which infiltrate and influence ideas of nationhood, and obviously, many would argue that those ‘lines’ are important in these regards. Indeed, many people kill and die for these lines and others like them, which is both distressing and frequently absurd. Part of the reason that what it means to be an American is such a persistent question is both because of, *and despite*, the

prevalence of Americanist metanarrative and the prevalence of metacultural ideals. Accordingly, it is important to critically examine issues that penetrate the core of ideas and ideals of individual character and of national ethos perpetually, religiously, and frequently in essentializing manners.

Expressions of the essentialized American character, derived from characteristics of essentialist and/or fundamentalist national ethos, permeate political rhetoric now, as they have historically, on both the political left and the right, frequently demonstrating the interconnectedness of Americanism and its Puritan Christian foundations, and thus similarities between the two even when distinct from one another. However, despite the readily available distinctions between Christianity and Americanism, they are often intertextualized upon an individual's conviction.

For example, regarding the early American conflict with Britain, David Weaver-Zercher writes that many “Christians recalled and rejuvenated the Puritan notion of chosen-ness, the idea that God had chosen America for a special mission and would thus support its cause. Over time, many Americans became convinced that resisting the British Crown was nothing less than a God-given duty” (16). In another example, pertaining specifically to political rhetoric mixed with religious content, Jacque Berlinerblau quotes George W. Bush who states, “Together we can share in the credit of making our country more prosperous and generous and just, and earn from our conscience and from our fellow citizens the highest possible praise: *Well done good and faithful servants*” (85; emphasis added). This type of language is what may be considered ‘devotional code’—an allusion to scripture, or a direct quote from scripture taken out of context. Those who are in the know, know precisely how to decode it, while those who are not, may not think twice about the precise wording of the rhetoric. In its intertextualization of Christian and

Americanist rhetoric, it is affectively effective either way. Devotional code provides the rhetoric with supplementary authority.

Providing expressions of the essentialized American character derived from characteristics of essentialist national ethos, Barack Obama states in his 2013 State of the Union address that the term ‘American’ “describes the way we’re *made*. It describes what we *believe*” (“Remarks of President Barack Obama”; emphasis added). The Apostle Paul utilizes similar language to describe the early Christians: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. [...] All the believers were one in heart and mind” (NIV Acts 2.44, Acts 4.32). The power of Obama’s and the Apostle Paul’s rhetorical usage is in its *homogenizing* force as it essentializes commonality, shared ‘make’, and shared belief. The rhetoric has emotional appeal—that is to say that it works toward inducing a response that may be emotionally and affectively charged and thus decoded in an emotional way rather than in a pragmatic, rational manner. The rhetoric’s power is in the very presumptiveness that it encourages.

Indeed, when Obama makes his assertion regarding Americanism, he does not, and needs not, even define what the ‘make’ or the ‘belief’ are meant to indicate. Instead, by utilizing idiomatic phrasing and a lack of rhetorical specificity for these seemingly undefined but implied categorical truths about what constitutes an American citizen and American belief, he can count on the vast majority of people *believing* that they know precisely what he means, or, they can presume for themselves whatever they want it to mean. Either way, the rhetoric conscripts people into a vocabulary that may seem to them all-encompassing. And if culture can be thought of as a “market of differences and similarities in taste and status within social groups,” rather than as a “whole way of life” as Raymond Williams describes culture, then rhetoric such as Obama’s, which has a long and prominent history in America, works to quiet multiple meanings and

differences in favour of the idea of *wholeness*, of a metaculture (Miller and Yudice 1, Williams 47).⁵⁵

Metaculture and metanarrative in America work not towards repeating the question of what it means to be a tried and true American per se, but reiterating normative understandings. As Dorsey suggests, echoing Benedict Anderson's assertions, "[A] community wants to imagine itself with a 'deep, horizontal comradeship' regardless of the 'actual inequality and exploitation' that certain groups suffer" (6). Accordingly, then, there is already a mythical or imaginary element that often comes with ideas and ideals of community ethos, both producing and sustaining, while being made even more prevalent when engaging in, metacultural and metanarrative understandings. Moreover, as Gramsci concludes, political questions may become "insoluble" when "disguised as cultural ones" (qtd. in Harvey, *A Brief History* 39). Therein, in large part, lies the ubiquity of essentialist Americanist references in American political rhetoric. When speaking of what America 'stands for', as a culture, which, again, has historically been and is still now an imperative aspect of American ethos, one can certainly purposefully cause people to disregard, or simply forget, the actualities of how America actually operates and what America actually does.

This is not to say that there is a cohesive metanarrative in America that counters divisiveness, and that Americans all just get along in the land of the free. That would be a ridiculous assertion. Most politicians utilize divisiveness in their campaigns and during their

⁵⁵ As mentioned in chapter one, metaculture has various definitions and connotations in different contexts. Here it is used to describe particular groups in terms of (supposed) shared belief, ritual behaviours, sense of community, customs, and the generality of manifestations of any or all of the aforementioned. This may sound like a definition of culture in general, but what makes it 'meta' is the 'supposedness' of all of the above, and the sameness implied therein. In this manner 'meta' hinders cultural progress as the supposed sameness works in tandem with the prevention of cultural progress or meaningful, beneficial cultural change.

potentially elected positions. Trump's narratives appeal to those, especially on the (alt-)right, who do not want Others on U.S soil, who want a cohesive (metacultural) community where outsiders are not welcome within the gates—or the wall, as it were. His rhetoric appeals to those who do not want government sullyng their notions of purity within their community and those who distrust the powerful, the media, and believe their system of democracy is irreparably flawed, tainted by voter fraud and the like. Indeed, the Trump example points to the disparate interpretations of what it means to be an American and thus to the disparity between metaculture and metanarrative and the actualities of the divisiveness that occurs within community, though that then in turn reveals the *appeal* of metaculture and metanarrative, as well as the longing for the supposed wholeness that would exist therein.

For example, why indeed these voters (followers, disciples) think that Trump is their 'everyman' has much to do with the difference-neutralizing power of the American Dream, while Make America Great Again works on many levels as it appeals to whatever glossy polish on the past the individual utilizes when employing the backward gaze, even as it is framed as forward looking, as progress. Much of Trump-speak is done as an endeavour to appeal to those who long for meta, for wholeness, for a return to the ideals of slaveholders (such as the founding fathers), and it appeals to the binary logic of exclusiveness. Not every Trump follower is from the alt-right, just as not every Trump supporter is racist or xenophobic. His supporters follow him for various reasons, economic, ideological, and otherwise; but all Trump supporters are guilty of upholding an agenda and rhetorical refrains that are, xenophobic, sexist, bullying, and white supremacist.

There are many reasons as to why Trump was elected, despite the efforts of those in the media and others who attempt to pin it down to a singular reason such as a racist America. There

is quite obviously systemic as well as individualized racism in America. It is both absurd and entirely necessary that there is a Black Lives Matter movement in America in the 21st century. When Trump's poll numbers increased as he implemented a 'zero tolerance' immigration policy which separates children and parents at the southern border for what amounts to first-time misdemeanor illegal entry—often at worst—and for what is frequently entirely legal asylum-seeking (under international law), it points to the racist heart and the racist history of many peoples' American values.

It is obvious, to those who are paying attention, that implementing this policy was (at least in large part) a kidnapping of thousands of children for ransom, in order to push the Democrats to fold to providing billions of dollars for the border wall and other concessions to immigration reform. Moreover, utilizing intertextual logic, the policy was justified by Attorney General Jeff Sessions who cited verses from the Christian Bible (found in Romans 13) that was often used to legitimize slavery, while (what should be unbelievable and easily discerned as dishonest but is not in Trump's America) the former President defended his policy by labelling immigrants and asylum seekers as violent criminals.

Meanwhile the many calls from the left and a few on the right that argue that what is happening is un-American and against American values, are guilty yet again of engaging in a whitewashed perspective of American history. There is quite a long history in America of precisely taking children from their families: native families, African-American families, and others. But when these histories are ignored or not dealt with in honest terms, historical amnesia can run amok, and it becomes entirely plausible that people believe that America is a country that would never do this. Yet, it is the supposed party of 'traditional family values' that are the ones who endorse and enforced this policy.

What does it mean to be an American? Historical Amnesia and Storytelling

Again, some stories get told more than others and are thus recognized more than others: Lincoln freed the slaves; this is a popular one. Slavery was abolished by government, but as Zinn points out it was “a government pushed hard to do so by blacks, free and slave, and by white abolitionists” (171). Moreover, although the end of slavery was brought about by governmental decree, “its end could be orchestrated so as to set limits to emancipation. Liberation from the top would go only so far as the interests of the dominant groups permitted. [...] Thus, while the ending of slavery led to reconstruction of national politics and economics, it was not a radical reconstruction, but a safe one—in fact, a profitable one” (Zinn 172).

Within the tenets of Americanism, even revolution is severely limited to non-radical reconstruction, and, made profitable. But the story sounds so much better when the details are left out of dominant narratives. Zinn points out another story that is seldom told. He writes,

It would take either a full-scale slave rebellion or a full-scale war to end such a deeply entrenched system [of slavery]. If a rebellion, it might get out of hand, and turn its ferocity beyond slavery to the most successful system of capitalist enrichment in the world. If a war, those who made the war would organize its consequences. Hence, it was Abraham Lincoln who freed the slaves, not John Brown. In 1859, John Brown was hanged, with federal complicity, for attempting to do by small-scale violence what Lincoln would do by large-scale violence several years later—end slavery. (Zinn 171)

While discussing the Hegelian conception of history, Laclau further demonstrates the holes in certain historical stories:

The basic premise is that the movement of historical events is governed by an inner logic that is conceptually apprehensible and conceived as a succession of dialectical reversals

and retrievals. The arrival of various peoples in the historical arena is the phenomenal manifestation of such logic. But there is a blind spot in this picture: [...] ‘peoples without history’. (*On Populist Reason* 162)

“[T]he whole vision of history as a coherent story,” he continues, “is [always] at the very least jeopardized” (Laclau, *On Populist Reason* 162).

Indeed, regarding Trump’s border policy, he rewrote history on the spot. After repeatedly stating that an executive order could not reverse the policy of tearing families apart, despite the fact that the policy was of Trump’s administration to begin with, Trump then changed his position and signed an executive order. What this essentially meaningless executive order does achieve, is letting the ongoing stories of families separated to be potentially quieted. It allows for the entirely possible actuality of families that may never be reunited, to be written out of history. It allows for the blind spots of ‘people without history’.

A group of protestors, primarily comprised of women, took to the Senate on June 29, 2018 in order to voice their displeasure with the Trump administration’s immigrant policy. What protests like this and others like it accomplish, potentially, is to keep certain stories in the ongoing narrative around immigration policy. However, much of the language regarding the debate is familiar and unproductive. When Pramila Jayapal, a member of Congress who was arrested at the rally responded to said arrest, she echoed a popular sentiment with those who opposed Trump’s policies: “[T]he US is better [than this]” (“Almost 600 arrested at Washington protest”). The president of American Academy of Pediatrics, Collen Kraft, stated too that “America is better than this” (Etheridge). Also responding to this protest, Democratic senator Jeff Merkley of Oregon stated, “These folks are out here fighting for the core principles of our nation, and I applaud them for it” (“Almost 600 arrested at Washington protest”).

‘America is better...’, ‘our core principles’, these are the vague and unhelpful rhetorical refrains that *each* side of the aisle repeatedly utilize in order to demonstrate that *their* American values are correct. When these types of nationalistic rhetorical tropes are wielded perpetually from each side of seemingly every issue, it becomes an elementary ‘I know you are by what am I?’ debate. (Actually, more accurately, it is ‘I know I am but what are you?’) It is essentializing rhetoric that cuts to the heart of the importance of being American and yet demonstrates little in the way of ethical outcomes. It allows for people of conviction, such as white supremacists, for example, to claim Make America Great Again as a nod in their direction.

But Trump was not elected on racism alone. Celebrity culture, the pervasiveness of ‘Reality’ Television, social media, the cult of personality, political corruption, hegemonic neoliberal ideals, a political left divided between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, corporate corruption, and capitalist politics, were all contributing factors. While much political commentary after Trump’s election win was dedicated to trying to pin this win on a single issue such as racism, this was a misguided manner in which to try to explain something that required nuanced investigation rather than reactionary binary explanations. It is the draw of cohesiveness, the desire for wholeness that drives much political rhetoric and thought, despite the fact that politics are inherently contentious, due in part to the compulsion within politics, and indeed one of its very definitions, as the desire, or the offensive ‘art’, of controlling one’s environment.

Rhetoric, Façade, Ideology, Conviction

Despite the wholeness, togetherness, and commonality that the previously mentioned rhetoric from both Barack Obama and the Apostle Paul attempt to sustain or incite, it only produces a *façade* of wholeness, of an imagined monolithic community, which is in actuality inevitably fragmented. The ‘United’ in United States, is a misnomer, while at the same time the

term produces, engages, and sustains an interest in being monolithic, uniform. This is, in part, where the intertextuality of Americanism and Christianity is entirely relevant as the United States shares these similarities with Christianity, for which there are countless versions despite the unity implied by the term.

The rhetoric used by Obama, the Apostle Paul, and myriads of others, specifically in political and religious contexts, is a declaration of inevitability, a declaration of Truth—two phrases utilized by John Ralston Saul to describe characteristics of any ideology (*The Unconscious Civilization*). However, I argue that when ideology becomes a declaration of inevitability, or of Truth, it has morphed into an essentialized version of itself. Ideology—which can be defined as views or beliefs regarding reality that in turn shape practice—permeates nearly everything; it influences the way we bathe, make a sandwich, take a walk, or drive a car. Ideology may influence and produce ‘inevitableities’, but it should, though seldom does, operate much more self-reflectively rather than dogmatically.⁵⁶

There is ideology, of course, in *conviction*. And it is often said that a strong characteristic of an individual is to be a person of conviction. In America conviction goes hand in hand with freedom. But a person of conviction without self-reflection, without being critically engaged with their conviction, has allowed ideology to become orthodoxy, dogmatic, or essentialist, or fundamentalist, and thus a declaration of inevitability, of Truth. Racists are people of conviction; murderers may be people of conviction. What sponsored George W. Bush’s desire to invade Iraq if not, in part, simple conviction? Falk writes, “The mobilization for war by the strongest country

⁵⁶ Again, Althusser is critical here in the formulation of imaginary relations insofar as he proposes correctly that “[i]deology represents individuals’ imaginary relation to their real conditions of existence” (qtd. in Irr). As Caren Irr states, “Here, ideology is defined by the relations it establishes. Ideology represents a relation to an existence, and that imaginary relation is the locus of the mediation between representation and reality. The imaginary sits at the center of ideology” (*An Althusser for the Twenty-First Century*).

in the world, around a patriotic creed based on a mixture of fear and anger resulting from the 9/11 attacks, convinced a majority of Americans that it was necessary for national security to project American power around the world” (59). That is (rather baseless) conviction at work, and it has been done again and again by the United States. Acting aggressively, and intervening in other countries’ affairs, for what are the supposed ideals of Americanism, has become, in part, American creed.

Yet, in regard to President W. Bush and his ‘interventions’, what should not be forgotten is that he is an Evangelical, and Evangelical belief subscribes to the rhetoric and the reality of apocalypse (and for Christians, Armageddon’s inception has long been located in the Middle East), wherein Others, as Evangelicals view them, “are evil, and we fight pure evil; if our bombs cause ‘collateral damage,’ that too is ‘the enemy’s’ fault for hiding behind women and children; if children starve there, if freedom is compromised here, that is too bad; we will not stop until evil has been annihilated” (Keller 123). This logic can be equally applied by ‘the enemy’, for such is the consequence when the conviction is that apocalypse is at stake and each side is convinced that God is on their side. Indeed, conviction may be all that those who condone or instigate horrendous acts have to uphold their worldview. Or, put another way, conviction is often the starting point and selectively applied signifiers of right(eous)ness are then utilized in order to uphold conviction.

The Rule of Law

Conviction is also what a fundamentalist holds onto and what essentialism both produces and sustains in the face of valid critique. For instance, as introduced above, the rule of law is frequently rhetorically wielded as a sacred entity (rather than correctly as a limited entity) in Americanism, as though the law can exist in a moral vacuum isolated from the fallibility of those

who create and carry out the rule of law, as though the law is isolated from systemic socioeconomic issues as well as issues of race and meritocracy, and paradoxically as though the law inherently upholds individual freedom. Obama—again utilizing essentializing rhetoric as well as rhetoric that affirms the idea of wholeness, imagined community, and the clichéd ideas of the monolithic unit—states, “Our unique strengths as a nation—our optimism and work ethic, our spirit of discovery and innovation, our diversity and commitment to the rule of law—these things give us *everything* we need to ensure prosperity and security for generations to come” (“Remarks of President Barack Obama”; emphasis added). But the rule of law is often carried out vastly differently depending on—among other variables—where one is measured by the barometer of the American Dream.

Within the narrative created by the prominence of the American Dream in national ethos—which Obama gives a nod to with ‘optimism and work ethic’—individual success (measured primarily if not exclusively in many instances in economic terms) is linked to virtue and failure is linked to immorality. Sartre suggests that in America there exists “the myth of liberty [and] perhaps nowhere else will you find such a discrepancy between people and myth, between life and the *representation* of life” (*Existentialism* 22; emphasis added). This gulf is due, in part, to the centrality of the American Dream in national ethos and its function ideologically under the longstanding presumption of egalitarianism, of opportunity for all. In actuality, the Dream functions as a moral barometer, and it is so hallowed and ideologically pervasive that it creates a nation of winners and losers wherein the systemic essentialized narrative of the quintessential American citizen is tethered to the capitalistic imperative of the Dream which delineates a specific version of freedom widely considered *innate* in America.

It is important to examine what evolves in the psyche of a nation when economic capital and imperative self-reliance are fundamental to national ethos, and to be conscious of the outcomes—the actuality of circumstance—in these regards. For example, in terms of the rule of law, the Obama administration demonstrates the mitigating factor of the American Dream when under its rule only one top banker (sentenced to thirty months in jail), and no one else responsible for the financial collapse and the ‘Great Recession’, was prosecuted for their crimes (Cohan). Similarly, in terms of American militarization and the law, enemies’ supposed crimes are of paramount importance, while America’s crimes are simply either their right to commit, or simply did not happen—effaced from history. In the case of the George W. Bush administration’s violations of international laws, Bush’s response was simply that he disagreed with those laws thereby negating, for him, any criminal responsibility.

America’s crimes, committed because of economic, ideological, and/or political interests can be forgotten, altogether ignored, or in fact never considered anything but righteous intention because reiteration of righteousness works to reify metanarrative. Yet, reasserting the metanarrative does not simply efface ‘imperfections’, or atrocities, but it actively *enables* them. “You have been a poor observer of life,” Nietzsche states, “if you have not also seen the hand that, ever so gently – kills” (*Beyond Good and Evil* 59). Reasserting the metanarrative works affectively to render certain realities innate, and others decontextualized and dehistoricized, mythological, or imperceptible, forgotten, erased. Righteousness is a powerful coercer; it can allow a preacher to be forgiven for that which they themselves have declared deplorable, and render a lesser sinner condemned for petty indiscretions.

Harvard University Professor Elaine Scarry argues in *Rule of Law, Misrule of Men*, “It may seem surprising that a fabricated universe [created by the lies of the Bush administration]

can bring about devastating injury, but, of course it is exactly the purpose of the real-world system of laws to prohibit such injuries, so it is not surprising that fabricated worlds lead to widespread bodily harm” (152). ‘Fabricated worlds’ juxtaposed against the ‘real world’ is an interesting theoretical and semantical choice as it points to the fact that there *are* fabricated worlds that bring about devastating injury perpetually, throughout history, such as constructed realities regarding race, class, sexuality, gender, empire, and two prominent discourses within American metanarrative: Nation and Christianity.

Scarry’s semantical choice presumes that there is, *in fact*, a real world within which the fabricated resides. But what this real world is exactly is something that must be examined critically, as is how exactly this ‘real world’ system of laws has factored in to the ‘widespread bodily harm’ of the supposedly ‘legitimate’ violent conflicts of the past and present. Should we really accept as an ethical starting point that there are civilised and uncivilised ways to destroy each other within the rules of law? Does any sort of idealism—the often unrealistic or unattainable pursuit of something resembling perfection, such as utopianism—erase the fact that while idealism *may* be peaceful, history has been proven to be violent? How do the ‘real world’ laws play out for the wrongly accused, the legally executed, for the poor, and the marginalized? How are the ‘real world’ laws activated upon those who ride the crest of the Dream? Is it in this ‘real world’ that murder is illegal unless it is state sanctioned or within the ‘rules’ of war?

Faith in the distinction that Scarry makes between the rule of men (“their beliefs, their preferences, their choices”) and the rule of law (“where beliefs, preferences, and choices are constrained by invariable and nonnegotiable prohibitions on cruelty and fraud”) is *naïve* (113). This too is the realm of essentialism. The *reality* within this ‘real world’, in this instance, is an essentialist place wherein certain rules, such as the rule of law, are perpetuated to pertain to a

certain Truth. Yet, the way the rule of law plays out in America often demonstrates that it is values rather than the rational, ethical execution of laws that take precedence. The law must be recognized as a *limited* entity, imperfect, and certainly not without prejudice.

The Cake: Freedom, Aesthetics, and Morality

The Masterpiece Cakeshop (circa 2012) is an interesting study with regard to the potential shortcomings of the law as a limited rather than flawless entity. The Masterpiece Cakeshop is a bakery in Colorado that refused to bake a custom commissioned cake that was requested by a gay male couple for their wedding. The case went before the Supreme Court. This case is not as black and white as it may appear for those on both sides of the aisle—those who believe it to be a simple issue of discrimination and civil rights, and those who claim it is about religious freedom. (The bakery refused service citing their Christian belief that homosexuality is sinful, and therefore baking a cake under these circumstances would be a blasphemous complicit endorsement of same-sex marriage.) Rather than simply being a First Amendment issue regarding religious freedom and discrimination versus civil rights, it is also “a case about the limits of free conscience, about artistic expression, and about when — or whether — religious beliefs should be confined to the pews (or synagogue, or mosque), or whether they must *by definition* find expression in the public sphere” (Burton; original emphasis).

One of the more interesting and problematic elements of this case is the issue of artistic expression. Jack Phillips, the owner of the bakery, did not refuse to sell existing items to the couple, but only refused to make the commissioned wedding cake. If, as Phillips argues, baking a custom cake is artistry, then the argument entails whether there should be “limits placed on artistic expression distinct from ordinary forms of customer service,” and whether a commercial transaction may mitigate artistry (Burton). “If cake decorating is an art,” *Vox* staff writer Tara

Burton suggests, then the bakery would be “creating celebratory art for a ceremony of social significance.” Therefore, ruling against the bakery “would set a precedent for forcing artists to express only that which the state deems acceptable” (Burton). Should government both sanction *and* put restrictions on artistic expression? And if so, where are the lines to be drawn and who answers this question? Would a ruling against the bakery then compel a painter to paint whatever it is one commissions them to paint regardless of, for instance, how vulgar they consider the content? Would a web designer, if so commissioned, be obligated to design a porn site against their will? While any ruling for the bakery could have tremendous negative consequences in terms of civil rights, such a ruling would also have consequential ramifications in terms of religious liberty in the public sphere.

I argue that to bake the cake is not in itself an endorsement of gay marriage nor an act of celebrating the union of the couple any more than providing the centerpieces or renting out the hall for the reception. The baker would simply be doing their job and could wash their hands of the whole episode if their moral stance dictated that compliance was comparable to complicity. The baker, Phillips, does not feel the same way, or is simply being obstinately discriminant. Yet, if a person who does not celebrate Christmas for religious reasons is employed at a grocery store and is asked to put out a sign that reads ‘Merry Christmas’ are they now complicit in the celebration of Christmas, or perhaps only if they are asked to create a decorative sign? Either way, if it is part of their job to do so, are they justified in refusing to comply on religious or moral grounds? And in all of these questions, where does freedom reside?

The case demonstrates that the law is not flawless but limited, as is the United States Constitution. As Burton points out, regardless of what the court “ultimately judges to be constitutional, no law can provide a perfect answer.” Perfection *is* an unlikely proposition in this

scenario. Moreover, when dealing with religious morality and the rule of law, as Frank Lambert argues, there is, in America, “a clash between the country’s secular laws, which reflect the tenets of liberal capitalism and the free exchange of goods, and the ‘higher laws’ that religious groups cite to condemn certain goods and services offered in the marketplace” (7). Thus, the rule of law too often *is* the ‘misrule of men’ (and any other gender Scarry omits in her phrasing), especially when—paradoxically, in light of the conflict between secular and religious ideals—the law is treated as a moral, ethical, essentialized, and essentializing entity, as something pure, and in the context of this discussion, as simply an American reality, a hallowed tenet of ethos.

In America, the amount of money spent on the military, the commonness of militarization in dominant discourse and its place in national ethos, and the overzealous, increasingly privatized punishing state too often lead the ship, thereby putting faith in the purity of law into the category of being a classist, often racist, and certainly a privileged assumption. As Falk argues, “If justice rather than declared law is to be the *moral* measure of world order, then the proper test is the response to human suffering and the privations of the weak” (52; emphasis added). Certainly, this is not simply an issue pertaining to America. The rule of law is flawed worldwide. However, in terms of Americanism, it is yet another example of something ambiguous, even abstract, being treated as something pure, true, and of essentialist ethical and moral American Values.

Morality, Ethics, Militarism, and ‘Drugs’

Regarding morality, as George Lakoff suggests, “Many people can only project their capacity to feel onto someone else if they also project their values onto them” (115). Projected

values, or projected morality, reduce pragmatic and situational ethical action. Such values fasten ethics to ideology and dogma, rather than to social justice. Ethics, alternatively, must adhere to the rational examination of moral impulses. Morality both “binds and blinds,” as Haidt suggests, because “when a group of people make something sacred, the members of the cult lose the ability to think clearly about it” (28). Utilizing the term ‘cult’ belittles Haidt’s point, however, as ‘cult’ is commonly associated with the fringe, while believers of ‘sacred’ norms are frequently at the center, within hegemonic sociocultural norms. George W. Bush appealed to hegemonic morality to great effect after 9/11 when he frequently utilized binary rhetoric of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ that “implied a moral universe on which *all* Americans could agree” (Aikman qtd. in Espinosa 491; emphasis added).

Sacred American ideals, which are frequently reduced to inconsistently adhered to, de-historicized, reductive and simplistic rallying cries of what are actually rather ambiguous ideals—freedom, democracy, progress—are nevertheless often utilized to eschew ambivalence, positioning ‘Truth’ as self-evident and unchanging, even as these values are malleably applied. While ethics may exist for some in an entirely static realm linked to individual morality, American values, which are also rhetorically wielded in static form, are nonetheless often situational. This is not to say that American values are situational, pragmatic, and *ethical*, but rather that they function *unevenly* instead of being encompassing as they are often imagined to be, therefore frequently causing widespread harm due to notions of purity, equality, and ethnocentricity.

In terms of *individual* morality, when one’s individual identity is steeped deeply in national American identity, it can produce the type of patriotism that allows one to accept, for instance, that it may be a perfectly moral assumption and a fundamental aspect of national ethos

that the “United States possesses the capacity to prescribe and enforce [...] global order [...and n]o other nation or group of nations (and certainly no supra-national institution) can be entrusted with that role” (Bacevich, *Washington Rules* 20). This type of imperialist worldview has led to countless atrocities on the part of the United States, in the name of American values and righteous intention and intervention. Never mind that there are many arguably ‘righteous’ battles, or at least more righteous battles, that the United States declines to intervene in militarily as it is entirely selective as to where its self-appointed ‘global leadership’ status regarding military might is relevant. (Perhaps consider the many conflicts in African regions over the past decades, which seemingly offer no economic or security incentive to the U.S., as examples in this regard.)

The newly popular (and supposedly politically correct) rhetoric of Republican politicians in America is that ‘We are not the world’s policeman’. But the phrase is dropped into surrounding rhetoric, and historical actualities, that suggest, or overtly champion, the notion that whether or not America is the world’s police officer per se, it is certainly America’s right to intervene wherever and whenever it sees fit. “[We cannot] send signals of weakness around the world,” Jeb Bush asserts speaking on foreign policy during a Republican debate, “Without the United States, nothing seems to work” (“Transcript of the Republican Presidential Debate”). The reasons for America’s military interventions are often overly simplified, framed in binary terms such as good versus evil, progressive ideals versus the backwardness of the Other, or quite explicitly in the age old ‘God on our side’ rhetoric, as when during his 2000 presidential campaign George W. Bush stated that “our nation is chosen by God and commissioned by history to be a model to the world of justice” (qtd. in Domke 63). This type of ideological construction, detrimentally in many cases, conflates individual morality and nationalistic

morality with ethics, both conceptually and in the actuality of the way ethics are applied in practice.⁵⁷

This ideological logic does not only apply to militarism but to many areas pertaining to social justice. For instance, Ray Manzarek, the keyboard player for The Doors states incredulously,

Hallucinogens are still criminal. The ‘food of the gods’ is illegal. The keys to the doors of perception are against the law. Their ingestion is an illegal act. The mere growing of a peyote plant is illegal. Using LSD therapy with convicts, drug addicts, and alcoholics is illegal. The great therapeutic tool of LSD that was proven so effective in case after case of psychological maladjustment has been taken away from the doctors of the mind by the fundamentalist, conservative guardians of our public morality. [...] No medical research. And certainly no looking behind the veil. No breaking on through to the other side. Just booze and cigarettes and guns. [...] The American way. (332)

The War on Drugs is a matter that deserves plenty of critical thought. But it is often instead subject to kneejerk morality policing rather than thoughtfulness, while many dollars and lives have been spent in pursuit of actual policing and policy. “If we fight this war as a divided nation,” George H. W. Bush states, once again insinuating that his morality should be all Americans’ morality, and/or that a singular American morality should apply to the (united) citizenry, “then the war is lost. But if we face this evil as a nation united, this will be nothing but a handful of useless chemicals. Victory—victory over drugs—is our cause, a just cause. And with your help, we are going to win” (qtd. in Crothers and Lind 126).

⁵⁷ Again, ethics, if it is to have any meaning in terms of social justice, must be kept separate from individual morality. For instance, one might think it is morally repugnant that an individual take illegal ‘drugs’. But that does not mean that a draconian ‘war on drugs’ is an ethical response to the moral stance.

'Drugs' is an encompassing term which lacks quite necessary distinctions and too often disregards the problematic aspects of certain legal medications and overenthusiastic (profitable) prescribing practices. The FDA, prescriptions, addiction, and 'street drugs' do not all exist in isolation of one another. As Manzarek points out, 'booze, cigarettes, and guns' should then likely be included in any categorical denial of what individuals may be allowed to consume or to operate in order to recreate and re-ascertain perception, or in order to potentially produce violence and death. It is an odd thing to legitimize, legislate, and licence morality and then build ethical assumptions upon it. But in the United States this is also entirely common and *normal*.

"A textbook definition [of drugs]," John Curra writes, "gives the impression—incorrectly, as it turns out—that drugs have uniform and universal characteristics that make it possible for them to be classified as drugs" (334). Curra continues, "The naming of some substance as a drug or a drug of abuse is a highly relative, value-laden, culture-specific, often personal judgement, and it cannot be separated either from the sociocultural context or from who is doing the defining" (334). Furthermore, when dealing in personal judgement, values, morals, and ethics, being *uncomfortable* with something does not equate to that something being immoral.

For instance, one may think it is morally repugnant to abort a fetus, but that does not mean that an ethical response to this chosen morality is denying a woman's right to govern over her own body. One may be uncomfortable with certain issues of gender and sexuality, but while that may influence one's individual morality it does not correlate to ethical allowances or prohibitions. In every case, in every ethical quandary, technology, human 'enlightenment', nuance, and the evolution of human thought, ought to enter the equation. When ethics can be thought of in terms that are not inherently linked to individual morality, and thus to individual

identity, they can be discussed in a manner that is not constrained within binary oppositions wherein moderate opinions and arguments may be accused of being extreme in one way or the other on each side of every issue, often linked (in this context) to the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to being American. We frequently hear the opposite: “2016 is not just a choice between Republican or Democrat,” states Sen. Marco Rubio in the 2016 New Hampshire ABC News debate, “It is a referendum on our identity as a nation and as a people” (“Transcript of the Republican Presidential Debate”). When individual identity is rooted in national identity, even seemingly benign areas of thought and practice, such as patriotism, can produce the type of moral certainty that allows for the normalized extremism and normalized acceptance of much of America’s military endeavors, including (but not at all restricted to) Obama’s drone strikes, Reagan’s South American interventions, the Bush administration’s response to the terrorism of 9/11, and public support for wars, torture, and the acceptance of ‘collateral damage’.

America’s military activities, or political activities, or economic activities, or policies in general do not always have the support of the masses. Policy does not require widespread public support, although it is often framed by politicians as though the public support is solidified, harnessed, and unwavering. Addressing the nation in 1989, then President H.W. Bush asserts, “*All of us* [the American people] agree that the gravest domestic threat facing our nation today is drugs” (qtd. in Crothers and Lind 124; emphasis added). Surely there must be a dissenter or two in the audience? He continues, conflating ethics and his own moral stance, erasing distinctions at times by utilizing the term ‘drugs’ as an encompassing term, whilst enabling the oft hegemonic, and/or hegemony-reinforcing narratives of mass media:

In short, drugs are sapping our strength as a nation. Turn on your evening news or pick up the morning paper and you’ll see what some Americans know just by stepping out

their front door: Our most serious problem today is cocaine, and in particular, crack. [...] This stuff is poison. Some used to call drugs harmless recreation; they're not. Drugs are real and terribly dangerous. (Bush qtd. in Crothers and Lind 125)

Drugs may be quite real as Bush states, but his dystopian outlook is not in every case as dire nor as encompassing as his rhetoric suggests. Moreover, when he does make the distinction between crack and cocaine, it is precisely this distinction that caused black culture and poor communities to find themselves at the center of the War on Drugs, while white suburbia enjoyed (enjoys) a much more relaxed environment for its dalliance with cocaine. There *was* a rather catastrophic crack-cocaine epidemic in New York in the 1980s affecting “[w]orking-class and ethnic-immigrant” communities wherein “[r]edistribution through criminal violence became one of the few serious options for the poor,” but “the authorities responded by criminalizing whole communities of impoverished and marginalized populations” (Harvey, *A Brief History* 48).

While it is important to make distinctions between different ‘drugs’, it is also important to examine socioeconomic and sociocultural patterns that lead to a prominent use of certain drugs. Conflating all mind-altering chemicals into a singular category (‘drugs’) (with the frequent exceptions of food, intoxicating drink, non-intoxicating drink, caffeine, nicotine, prescription drugs, etc.) is absurd. Moreover, mass incarceration for non-violent drug related crime (such as holding or ingestion) that disproportionately affects marginalized communities is equally absurd, yet widely accepted despite the supposedly inherent *freedom* (legal policy aside) afforded to all Americans.

Conclusion

This chapter began with asking what does it mean to be American? It has examined how multiple factors—law, militarism, morality, ethics—promote *the illusion* of there being a coordinated response to the search for meaning (and the meaning of what it means to be an American in particular), and how American freedom is situated within these contexts. Exposing this illusion has demonstrated the conflictual consequences of legitimizing morality from a top-down authoritative position and then writing morality into law. Sociocultural justice suffers and ethics are secondary to that with which those in power are comfortable with morally, often in accordance to intertextualized Christian and American values. We can see that legislating morality, pre-identified by personal taste, distaste, and un-comfortability, leads to inequality and violence. Paul Thomas Anderson’s film, for example, which examines American capitalism and American Christianity, sums up in its title the residual (one might say inherent) violence that is subsequently produced by the values within these discourses: *There Will Be Blood*.

A public habit, or implicit cultural policy, does not generate ethical law that can be applied in any national sense, and when laws are presented as American (and Christian) cultural policy they fall prey to the interpretations of the distortions of rhetoric which is too often accepted as truth. The idea of freedom as a policy rather than a preference falls prey to the same political forces of rhetorical deceit. Therefore, the next chapter explicitly examines ‘freedom’ in America and in doing so demonstrates that much like utopia, freedom is frequently misunderstood both conceptually and in the actuality of circumstance, while it also becomes a rather exclusive and exclusionary club. This is especially true as freedom in America is intrinsically tied to a capitalist ethos.

Chapter Seven

Freedom and Subversiveness within Capital Constraints

Introduction

Freedom is an idea, issue, concept, ‘reality’, that earns its own time and attention outside of these pages. But freedom is also a supposed sacred American truism. It has been stated (specifically by Kris Kristofferson in “Me and Bobby McGee”) that freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose, in which case there is freedom not only in gain but in loss. It has been said too that some people are so poor that all they have is money—insinuating that freedom is not attained by achievement of material resources.

Though an incredibly thorny concept, freedom is often thought of in rather simplistic terms within Americanism: freedom of religion (sort of), freedom of speech (somewhat), and especially freedom to achieve and freedom to fail. In what circumstances one’s freedom is trampled by another’s freedom is highly contentious and inherently problematic terrain. When freedom of religious belief comes up against secular ideas such as the separation of church and state, there too is the intersection and internal contradictions of a seemingly simple idea: ‘We live in a free country’. Yet, when freedom is intrinsically linked to the capitalistic American Dream, then it is incumbent, by its defining terms, that one’s freedom trample another’s.

Capitalism is Just Another Word for...Freedom? Consumerism and Subversive Aesthetics within its Constraints

Within the sociocultural paradigm of the American Dream, America is the land of opportunity, a level playing field free to all who apply as Americans, which in turn provides citizens with this ultimate freedom. What has become of this notion is the neoliberal reality of deregulation and an ever-growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor, the ‘1% and the rest’, the successful and all others who failed supposedly according to their own doing. When

such a disparity is created within the citizenry between success and failure, between those who live out the American Dream and those who do not, violence is a widespread result of such an ethos. Along with racialized divisions, LGBTQ+ discrimination, and other prejudices, the American Dream demarcates “the demographic valuations of who is grievable and who is not, whose lives ought to be preserved and whose can be expunged or left to die” (Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* 116).

A basic starting point of understanding the social relations underpinning capitalism rather than fetishizing its effects, in the context of Americanism, can begin with the de-fetishization of the American Dream. Indeed, emphasizing the supposed utopianism of the ‘Dream’ component is key, as class history is ugly, violent, and dystopian actualities frequently follow utopian aspirations. Insofar as capitalism is not simply a political economy reality but one of sociocultural realities and actualities, postmodernism and queer theory bring forth subversive counternarratives to Americanist capitalist metanarrative by offering nonviolent incrementally plausible, possible, and actual sociocultural change. Marginal lives, subcultural and countercultural resistance can be revolutionary in their ideology even if not necessarily in actuality, but nevertheless offer resistance to capitalism within capitalism’s constraints.

The ‘culture industry’—defined by Adorno and Horkheimer as an entrepreneurial mélange of essentially media sameness wherein culture is *bound* by capitalist enterprise—is an important example. While there is a paradoxical element to the mélange of cultural output and industrial emphasis, popular culture does provide options outside of maintaining the status quo of hegemonic norms. Art, *aesthetics*, can provide alternative ways to examine ‘reality’, can separate facts from fiction, and therefore make the distinction that belief is not reality, only an element of it, while facts in certain circumstances can be vulnerable, such as the actualities of hegemony

and the forces that maintain that reality. If capitalism is not simply a reality of political economy, then Cultural Studies and Critical Theory can demonstrate the fallibility of capitalism as an encompassing reality that is inextricably bound to freedom and can ‘pull back the curtain’ on the illusions and paradoxes that certain intertextualities produce and sustain.

The often-uncovered paradox between ideals of liberalism and freedom and the welcomed sacrifice to capitalism from a nation bound by a Christian/capitalist legacy produces and sustains a societal tendency to violently fear freedom in case people start exposing the weaknesses in the logic brought about by examining the paradox. That exposition would in itself for many people, be a betrayal, an act of weakness, and a sign of lack of faith. The conditions of culture that inform and sustain capitalist neoliberal political and economic order undermine, limit, or stifle entirely, much willingness in America ‘proper’ on the part of the working class to challenge the exploitation of capitalism generally, and capital specifically, because of the centrality of capitalism in national ethos, especially as it pertains to notions of freedom, the fetishization of national identity in America, and the prominence of the Horatio Alger narratives of the American Dream, despite the rarity of their occurrences.

Subversion and Submission within the Culture Industry

If capitalism is not only an economic reality but a sociocultural reality, inextricably linked with dogmatic notions of proper Americanism, inevitably the utopianism of Dream ethos includes dystopian actualities for those who do not measure up. If capitalism is linked to freedom in fundamentalist Americanist manners, then cultural freedom unavoidably comes up against the restraints of capital. We can see this in the way the culture industry plays out wherein certain types of media placate and de-politicize the masses providing happiness through consumption, through capitalist practices. ‘Culture industry’ is a somewhat ironic, contradictory, and

oxymoronic term. It is a circular idiom: culture produces industry produces culture. But if culture is bound by capital and capitalism as the supposed embodiment of American freedom, where is freedom to be found within capitalist restraints?

When cultural policy is “embodied in systematic, regulatory guides to action that are adopted by organizations to achieve their goals,” then within the confines of capitalism *especially*, cultural policy is “bureaucratic rather than creative or organic” (Miller and Yudice 1).

Consider Hollywood, Toby Miller and George Yudice suggest: film and television are crucial to

US balance-of-trade figures [...] and ideological transfer. Hollywood is often cited as a case of a truly open market in which cultural creativity exists outside state policy.

[However] the US Department of Commerce produces materials on media globalization that focus on both economic development and ideological influence problematizing claims that Hollywood is a pure free enterprise and that Washington is uninterested in blending trade with cultural change. (Miller and Yudice 36-37)

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the culture industry subjugates the individual by producing a rather futile mystified sociocultural paradigm wherein the odds of drawing a winning lot in life are “so minimal for each individual that it is best to write it off at once and rejoice in the good fortune of someone else, who might just as well be oneself but never is” (116). They argue that the culture industry creates and maintains a sociocultural, socioeconomic realm wherein individuals consume a world fabricated by monopoly. In turn, individuals ‘produce’ their identity through the consumption of all matter of things that are in actuality disposable and devoid of originality. I argue that the postmodern world and postmodern aesthetics do indeed allow for important *degrees* of difference, including positive ground-breaking *failure*, and thus culture is not entirely devoid of originality insofar as ‘originality’ may

be more loosely defined as that which breaks from dominant norms and conventions rather than thought of as something entirely new that carries with it no pre-existing elements of (original) culture. Nevertheless, the proliferation of capitalism is also the proliferation of ideological constraints insofar as, for example, “self-interest maximization is not compatible with egalitarian intention,” while the “vision of another world” may be relegated to being simply and *only* ideological (Kelly 303, Žižek, *Like a Thief* 211).

Yet, this is precisely why it is important to note that neither the arguments by Miller and Yudice, nor by Adorno and Horkheimer are, entirely hermetic. The culture industry does indeed produce sameness, and Hollywood is driven by capital. But aesthetics, the arts, entertainment, are realms that produce, at times, important cultural change. Where I do not agree with Adorno and Horkheimer is in the degree of sameness, or in the lack of potential counternarratives within the culture industry. Adorno argues that “[i]n all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan” (*Culture Industry* 85). Yet, there are degrees of separation from sameness and from hegemony (although counterintuitively and at the same time often *within* hegemony) produced by the culture industry.

There are many instances when entertainment, or the arts and aesthetics, challenge the status quo, even if they would not register on Adorno and Horkheimer’s radar in terms of what they think actual difference or change looks like. These instances (albeit after the time of Adorno and Horkheimer’s writing), be it *Playboy* magazine, the Beat writers, Lenny Bruce, *Family Guy* or *All in the Family*, an independent film, *Never Mind the Bullocks* or *Nevermind* are all explorations of freedom from within constraints—cultural acts of defiance (to varying degrees) within the constraints of the culture industry. They are examples of that which is outside of the

hegemonic norms of their times, and they push the culture industry further towards alternatives to the prevailing (accepted) norms of their historical moments. These examples (and many others) demonstrate that which can attack “hypocrisies that [govern] polite society [...] tripping society of its protective armor [...] giving public expression to private thought” (Rorabaugh xiv).

The film industry is an especially odd and paradoxical realm of art and culture and commerce as there is often a tremendous amount of financial investment and expected profit in films, while at the same time there are incredible artistic statements and counternarratives to norms that may be produced. These films and the (counter)narratives therein may not be (instantly, obviously) revolutionary, but are potentially that which importantly fails to dwell entirely within hegemony. There exists in many aesthetic and artistic endeavours, subtlety, increments of deviation, that are often a valid way to challenge hegemony; they often offer difference but in *familiar* packages. One need only partake in a brief study of the history of cinema—indeed a strange and sometimes validly artistic industry which is bound by capital, but also, at times, variably challenges safe and contemporary hegemonic conceptions of reality.

While it is not as empty and devoid of divergence as it may be criticized as being, the culture industry still must be examined critically. American freedom when located within the confines of capitalism, wherein products are fundamentally produced for consumption, produces not individuals as subjects, not the customer who is king, but individuals as *objects*. In objectifying the individual, capitalism colonizes the individual insofar as the subjugating force of capitalism produces individuals that are objects in the midst of other objects, identities that are dislocated, located in commodities, in nonbeing, having had their originality (assuming that it is conceivable that originality is possible, or at least plausible) ripped from them, predetermined, presuming to find the ‘self’ in fetishization.

Yet, this is one of the paradoxes of capitalism and conspicuous consumption: the self is often presumed as having some sort of internalized essence (or originality) that is then to be outwardly signified by manifestations of desire, and thus we are subjective beings. Still, the *void* of desire is just that—emptiness, lack. Fixity, or the fixed self, is the attempt to fill that void thereby producing the “terrorizing dimension of the pressure to choose—what resonates even in the most innocent inquiry when one reserves a hotel room (‘Soft or hard pillows? Double or twin beds?’) is the much more radical probing: ‘Tell me who you are? What kind of object do you want to be? What would fill in the gap of your desire?’” (Žižek, *First as Tragedy* 54).

“The culture industry,” Adorno writes, “misuses its concern for the masses in order to duplicate, reinforce and strengthen their mentality, which it presumes is given and unchangeable” (*Culture Industry* 86). Again, I agree, but not in a totalizing manner. Hegemonic ideology, as Žižek argues, “directly mobilizes [...] lack to sustain the endless process of consumerist ‘self-re-creation’” (*First as Tragedy* 55). Here I argue that re-creation is not the issue within many cultural circumstances, but instead *reassertion*: Who am I? I am this particular couch, this particular car, this particular city. I only *recreate*, if perhaps I miscalculated in the first place, and hopefully, this time, I am even more fully realized, or perhaps, I will adapt. But if we do recreate, and when we perpetually reassess and/or reassert in these manners, capital benefits.

Citing Weber, Bauman argues that if the “ethical principle of the producing life [is] the delay of gratification, the ethical principle of the consuming life would be about the *fallaciousness of resting satisfied*” (*Does Ethics Have a Chance* 148; original emphasis). “The major threat to a society that announces ‘customer satisfaction’ to be its motive and purpose,” Bauman continues, “is a satisfied customer. To be sure, the ‘satisfied customer’ would be a

catastrophe to herself or himself as grave and horrifying as it would be to the consumerist economy. Having nothing more to desire? Nothing to chase after? Left to what one has (and so what one is)? [...] Such a condition [...] would be called boredom” (*Does Ethics Have a Chance* 148).

This cycle of pacification and conspicuous consumption is only intensified by the proliferation of neoliberalism. In his critique of the grip of the globalized neoliberal condition, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* Bauman asserts that “in a society of consumers the pursuit of happiness tends to be refocused from *making* things or *acquiring* them to *disposing* of them—just as it should be if one wants the gross national product to keep growing” (157; original emphasis). If there is freedom in having nothing left to *lose*, there is precious little freedom in this socioeconomic cultural scenario. The norms of consumption are productions of, and concessions to hegemony, produced by ‘experts’ and “economically intertwined” interested parties, which Adorno and Horkheimer suggest provide the “appearance of competition and choice,” while the “relentless unity of the culture industry [also] bears witness to the emergent unity of politics” (97, 96). “Sharp distinctions,” they argue, “do not so much reflect real difference as assist in the classification, organization, and identification of consumers” (Adorno and Horkheimer 96-97).

Their assertion is correct in many instances and certainly within mainstream consumerist hegemonic paradigms, and moreover this is quite satisfactory for many people who take comfort in classification, organization, and identification, which is precisely how the system reifies itself. However, Adorno and Horkheimer, though they claim to, do not present a totalizing actuality. As Rancière states, “The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them” (19). In

terms of postmodernism and emancipation within constraints, Halberstam writes, “Postmodernism [...] cannot simply be reduced to the cultural formations that accompany a new mode of capitalism; [...] this kind of reductive reading of culture misunderstands the potential for cultural production to exceed and resist economic imperatives” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 98). Exceeding and resisting economic imperatives are acts of defiance and deviation within hegemonic norms; they are moments of freedom from within capitalistic constraints.

Conclusion

Freedom is an ambiguous and rather abstract concept in many ways, but freedom as a compulsory aspect of capitalism lessens the abstraction and the ambiguity and offers a hegemonic way for people to define it more concretely. Thus, as the culture industry provides ‘happiness’ within the confines of capitalistic freedom, metaculture further solidifies freedom as an implicit cultural Truth—a truth that is not without limitations to be sure, but an idea that appears to be concrete common sense in implicit cultural policy.

This chapter has examined some subversive elements that exist within the constraints of capital. American freedom is signified by the capitalism of the American Dream, American Democracy, and American Exceptionalism, but in each case, and frequently within policy itself, freedom in general and especially the freedom of Others—whomever that Other may be at any given moment—is constantly in flux and in question often because of capitalistic consequences. Accordingly, the following chapter examines how economic policy and cultural policy intersect, demonstrating that political economy is much more than simply economic policy but is inextricably integrated with sociocultural production and practice.

Chapter Eight

Capitalism and its Discontents: The Power, Precarity, and Exploitation of a Cultural and Economic American Paradox

Introduction

In *Cultural Studies and Political Economy: Toward a New Integration*, Robert E. Babe describes the often-strained relationship between the fields of Cultural Studies and Political Economy. He states that few would deny “at least some interactivity between culture/cultural artifacts and the economy/polity [and yet] in the scholarly fields of communication and media studies, there has been, famously, a split – indeed, an at times bitter rift – between those analyzing the economic, financial, policy, and power dimensions of cultural production and practice” (Babe 4). Yet, as Herbert Schiller asserts, “Cultural, no less than automobile, production has its political economy” (qtd. in Babe 232). It is imperative, in general, but certainly in this specific study of Americanism, that there be an integration of Cultural Studies and Political Economy, operating under the premise that discourse is intertextual and must be examined as such.

As Marx demonstrates, historical and social understandings are requirements of political economy. More contemporarily, York University Professor Greg Albo suggests that political economy should be about the social limits of capital and the historical limits of capitalism. Furthermore, the intertextuality of discourse, when left uninvestigated, tempts the failure of recognition and acknowledgment that seemingly disparate discourses, such as, for example, heteronormativity and capitalism, or nationalism and religion, are, or can become, intertwined in various manners. The most destructive of these manners is dogmatism. The lack of recognition

of intertextualization therefore potentially, and in actuality, strengthens each discourse as normative, and thus also as reified common sense in public consciousness, in metaculture.

Categorical oppositions, or those which are framed as such—for instance economic discourses such as capitalism and socialism, or nationalistic discourses including what might be considered American or un-American—can, in their oppositional posturing, veil ambiguity. Such indistinction can further disallow the recognition of, for instance, the actual (potential) fluidity of hegemonic cultural ideology while silencing critique of the staticity of certain socioeconomic policy. Capitalism, especially in its neoliberal form, proceeds rigidly in theory and in predisposition despite inherent instability.

Simply Capitalism and Simple Democracy

If a duality of classes dominates a social structure—labour and capital on opposite (though fundamentally intertwined) poles of capitalist society—then in its most basic structuring, capitalism is a system that thrives on domination and simultaneous exploitation. As Marx asserts, “[T]he rate of surplus value depends, in the first place, on the degree of exploitation of labour-power” (415). Or, as Harry Braverman states, “[T]he working class is first of all raw material for exploitation” (261). Moreover, Fine and Saad-Filho conclude that “capitalism is the most *destructive* mode of production in history. Capitalist economics are chronically unstable because of the conflicting forces of extraction, realisation and accumulation of surplus value under competitive conditions” (85; original emphasis). Yet, if a “public good,” as Melissa Aronczyk defines it, is “an object of democracy, encouraging collective participation from its citizens and procuring *just* and *equitable* rewards for the benefit of all,” then how and why does capitalism maintain its juggernaut on the public, specifically in this case in America, where liberty, equality, and democracy are (supposed to be) tenets of national ethos? (43; emphasis added).

This is a paradox of Americanism: capitalism is fundamentally linked with democratic American principles, and in the form of the American Dream, is linked culturally with the *idea* of America itself. This contributes to the pervasive, yet insidious, hidden subtext within America's sociocultural-economic paradigm wherein the absence of illusion becomes cynical and the absence of violence is not only treated as unavoidable, but in many instances as immoral.

Democracy is widely considered intrinsically American, a central tenet and utopian promise of American ethos, and a fundamental norm inherent of freedom. Yet, democracy and capitalism are not terribly compatible. If democracy is to be achieved in a more potent realizable form, the advance towards it is, as Laclau suggests, "a long march which will only be completed with the elimination of class exploitation" (*Politics and Ideology* 108). However, the elimination of class exploitation would be a surprising and indeed absurd accomplishment within a capitalist system that fundamentally thrives on domination and exploitation.

The "universal presupposition of politics," or of democracy, may be widely considered to be grounded in the notion that we are all equal (Rockhill 3). Yet, equality is not "a goal to be attained but a presupposition in need of constant verification," while democratic emancipation is "a random process [unable] to guarantee the absolute elimination of [...] social inequalities" (Rockhill 3). Never mind, then, the complications that ensue when a society's base (both in ethos and in actuality) is capitalism, thus subjugating, to a large extent, its superstructure. If politics is power, and may be described as the effort to control one's environment, then capitalism is both advantageous for many and inescapable and inequitable for everybody insofar as capitalism is the underlying blueprint of Americanism. Fine and Saad-Filho write,

[I]t can be seen that capitalism is an exploitative class system that is far from free, whatever the degree of equality before the market. [...] For the existence of profits,

interest and rent indicates that capitalism is exploitative; as a consequence, unemployment, economic crisis, vast inequalities, environmental degradation, and so on, become as transparently visible as the inability of the meek to inherit the earth or eat pie in the sky when they die. (24)

This is hardly a description of freedom, equality, and democratic ethos. Yet, it is ever so quietly correct.)

In reference to, and in part in opposition to, Laclau's suggestion, democracy is a 'march' that must never be completed, or considered to be completed, as it is by definition perpetually in process, fluid. Democracy is often treated in America as a rather static entity that simply exists and in fact can be delivered, militarily, to other nations. Nevertheless, an ongoing process attempting to reduce class exploitation as a step towards a more fully realized democracy could be considered an elemental starting point. As such, we can recognize, in this case, why there is a culturalized, often naturalized, *compulsion* in America for metanarrative, and for policy (implicit and otherwise) and rhetoric that legitimizes metaculture in order to repress paradox. Rancière argues,

Democracy is [...] falsely identified when it is associated with the consensual self-regulation of the multitude or with the reign of a sovereign collectivity based on absorbing the particular to the universal. It is, in fact, less a state of being than an act of contention that implements various forms of [...] political process that [resist] judicial litigation and [create] a fissure in the sensible order by confronting the established framework of perception, thought, and action with the 'inadmissible'. (84-85)

He continues, "A community of equals is [...] a presupposition that can never in fact lead to the establishment of an egalitarian social formation since the logic of inequality is inherent in the

social bond. A community of equals is therefore a precarious community that implements equality in intermittent acts of emancipation” (Rancière 83). When bringing a Cultural Studies outlook to Political Economy, we can see that a free and equal united society is an absolute myth in America and is a myth of American capitalism and of the American Dream. Yet, equality is a myth that is reified in and through metanarrative and metaculture despite the many paradoxes therein.

Political Economy in a Culture of Dreams

Capitalism has its own hidden internalized paradoxes, including the idea of scarcity in abundance. Simply put, this is the idea that there is not enough to go around, when, indeed, there is. The paradox is hidden by the same socialized (though often quite subconscious) reality that it also produces: the more one has the more one *needs*. Once one becomes accustomed to a certain lifestyle, it is rather unseemly to have to live with less, while at the same time, as the lifestyle becomes more expensive there is more money spent on maintaining that lifestyle. As the houses get bigger, the expenses add up—first a dust rag and a vacuum cleaner, then a hired cleaner, then better groceries, then a chef, a nicer car, another car, more taxes, greater property maintenance, and so on. Possessions require more possessions. Once one has a two-car garage, going back to a one car garage may not only be an ego-crushing downsizing, but where on earth are you going to put your other car? This is not an entirely definite sociocultural reality, but it is both a cultural attitude and actuality that capitalism reifies, and one that capitalism thrives on: a cycle of ordained, ‘proper’, insatiable, consumption.

The pressure of acceleration—which is imperative, innate even, in capitalism—produces the consumerist need to participate in a perpetual cycle of “buy it, use it, chuck it out” (Bauman, *Does Ethics have a Chance* 147). The unemployed—the ‘labour reserve army’ as Marx phrases

it—contribute poorly to this process, and are thus, especially in neoliberal capitalism, disposable consumers. Typically, “[t]he poor vote in much smaller numbers than anyone else,” as Judt suggests, “[s]o there is little political risk in penalizing them” (36). Harvey posits that neoliberal theory “conveniently holds that unemployment is always voluntary” (*A Brief History* 53). Yet, “[u]nder conditions of capitalism,” Braverman writes, “unemployment is not an aberration but a necessary part of the working mechanism of the capitalist mode of production. It is continuously produced and absorbed by the energy of the accumulation process itself” (267). The unemployed labour reserve army are expected to be at the ready when needed for production as “a mass of human material always ready for exploitation” (Marx 784).

The systematic acceleration of capitalism and the state of inherent crisis therein, means that instability reproduces itself upon the labourer within the anarchy of production. Thus, precarity for the proletariat increases with capitalist accumulation, while stability for the capitalist depends on labourers’ precarity. Therefore, precarity is always being produced, only its degree is uncertain. Capitalism does not simply depend on labourers’ precarity, but, again, it thrives on it, as disposability—as it pertains to both the poles of production and consumption—is imperative to production of the surplus of both labour and capital. The cycles of labour and unemployment, or ‘labour interrupted’, ironically work to reify the rigidity of social forms specific to capitalism, such as, for instance, the legitimacy of the hierarchical relationship between the capitalist and the labourer, and thus the relationship between accumulation and disposability.

For the capitalist, with accumulation comes the development of the productiveness of labour. Or, put another way, increasing accumulation requires increased efficiency, and as such, labourers are displaced or replaced by the mechanization of industry. The mechanization of

industry produces a relative surplus of population available for employment, bringing into existence the labour force required by capital in its new incarnations. As the mechanization of industry produces a relative surplus of population available for employment (at lower pay rates it should be stated), “[i]ndependently of the limits of the actual increase of population, [this process] creates, for the changing needs of the self-expansion of capital,” the aforementioned “mass of human material always ready for exploitation” (Marx qtd. in Braverman 265). Thus, the working class is made an appendage of capital even when not directly engaged in the labour-process. Marx asserts that

if a surplus labouring population is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis, this surplus-population becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalistic accumulation, nay, a condition of existence of the capitalist mode of production. It forms a disposable industrial reserve army, that belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost. (784)

As *certain* as the process of capitalist production, proletarianization, and stimulation of labour surplus is, potentially, in terms of accumulation for the capitalist, it is a cycle of increasing uncertainty and precariousness for the proletariat. Moreover, with repeated manifestations of this cycle, labour tends to pile up in generally less mechanized areas of accumulation that are less susceptible to engineered improvements in labour productivity (Braverman). Braverman notes,

Wage rates in these ‘new’ industries and occupations are held down by the continuous availability of the relative surplus population created by the steadily increasing productivity of labor in the machine occupations, [which] in turn encourages the

investment of capital in forms of the labor process which require masses of low-wage hand labor. (265-266)

The very process of the creation of surplus labour links low wages to, for instance, service work—considered ‘unproductive’ work from a Marxist point of view, i.e. “not creating surplus-value in the capitalist production process”—while in turn reifying the common sense of exchanging low wages for service work independent (in actuality) of the knowledge of the process itself (Fisher and Fuchs 36). As political economy affects sociocultural realities and actualities, we can see how the cycle of reification that operates within the process of capitalism itself is intertwined with how sociocultural realities, such as the cultural ‘reality’ of the American Dream, reify the myth of the political economic imperative of hyper-capitalism in Americanism.

The cycle of capital works to reify myth and axiomatic meta-ideals of American national identity, while the citizenry buys into the myth as a *symptom* of the cycle, and into the culture which reproduces it. As Marx argues, “every social process of production is, at the same time, a process of reproduction. [And the] maintenance and reproduction of the working class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital. But the capitalist may safely leave this to the worker’s drives for self-preservation and propagation” (711, 718). “Individual consumption,” he continues, provides “the means for the workers’ maintenance and reproduction” (Marx 719).

Consumption then, is tantamount to freedom, which is also linked to individual identity. Capitalism produces choice, but the individual agency with regard to choice and the perception of variety is not all that it seems as capitalistic enterprise in fact produces a distinct lack of originality. As Adorno and Horkheimer suggest, distinction within consumption depends on fetishization, which is the process, the act, of attributing mystified qualities to things beyond

their strict utility (*The Culture Industry*). The very process of capitalism itself also becomes fetishized especially when discourses such as patriotism, capitalism, militarism, religion, and freedom become intertwined, upholding one another intertextually.

As such, the argument for laissez-faire economics is inextricably linked to often rather simplified ideas regarding freedom. Freedom in this regard, as Bauman asserts, “comes as part of a package deal with inequality: my freedom manifests itself in, and is measured by, the degree to which I manage to limit the liberty of others who claim to be my equals” (*Does Ethics Have a Chance* 37). Marx argues,

Capitalist production *of itself* reproduces the separation between labour-power and the means of labour. It thereby reproduces and perpetuates the condition for exploiting the labourer. It incessantly forces [the labourer] to sell [their] labour-power in order to live, and enables the capitalist to purchase labour-power in order that he may enrich himself. [The labourer’s] economic bondage is both brought about *and concealed* by the periodic sale of himself, by his change of masters, and by the oscillations in the market-price of labour-power. (401; emphasis added)

“Capitalist production,” Marx continues, “under its aspect of a continuous connected process, of a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus value, but it also produces and reproduces the capitalist relation; on the one side the capitalist, on the other the wage labourer” (401). Whether money or commodities or means of production, capital is labour—labour performed in the past—while living labour is capital and represents the potential of capital.⁵⁸ The process of capital, again, does not simply produce commodities, but reproduces

⁵⁸ In *Capital*, Marx brings to political economy a Hegelian understanding of history as process, values in motion, tension and counter-tension, dialectics, instability, an understanding of a sociocultural, socioeconomic paradigm wherein the individual and the surrounding society exist in a state of fluidity. Marx dispels the faith of the supposed

itself, and socially reifies the culture that is within the throes of capitalism, whilst necessarily thriving on class division—which is also reified as a reality of freedom within capitalism. The working class has “nothing but its power to labor, [and] sells that power to capital in return for its subsistence” (Braverman 261). Thus, freedom, agency, and choice are not at all what they appear to be in a capitalist sociocultural paradigm especially as they pertain to public choice ideology regarding consumption, American Dreams, level playing fields, and political economy(s).

As Harvey suggests, “The assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking, and it has long dominated the US stance towards the rest of the world” (*A Brief History* 7). Such a stance is indeed self-referential. Berman writes, “The bourgeoisie and its ideologists have never been known for their humility or modesty,” yet they need not “lose much sleep” over their “drive to exploit people [or] to treat them purely as means or (in economic rather than moral language) as commodities” for they consider themselves the “‘Party of Order’ in modern politics and culture” (98-99). The ‘Party of Order’ exploits the American Dream for all that it is worth as an inherent American Truth central to national ethos. In the hyper-capitalism of America, despite the frequent claims that the American Dream is about ‘hard work’, the person who is ‘self-made’, and the Dream’s supposed prerequisite of ‘playing by the rules’, self-interest is generally

harmony of the oft misused, repurposed, and misinterpreted, idea of the Smithian invisible hand. Though often taken out of context as a reference to the purity of laissez-faire economics, the ‘invisible hand’ of the market working to sustain itself has become, for proponents of neoliberalism, axiomatic. Marx also demonstrates the flaws in the Ricardian ahistorical view of capitalism wherein social relationships are naturalized and eternal, and neoclassical theory—and its current incarnation of neoliberal theory—which proceeds with rigid presuppositions and (pre)determined closed systems of explanation, all of which lack proper social context and thereby produce dogmatic blueprints independent of specific context.

correlated to “maximized economic advantage” and pursued “with minimal reference to extraneous criteria such as altruism, self-denial, taste, [...] or collective purpose” (in actuality though seldom rhetorically), while the freedom to make money is frequently confused with freedom itself (Judt 35).

*The American Dream and the Neoliberal ‘Inevitability’*⁵⁹

The American Dream is so ingrained in the psyche of the nation as the epitome of a rather narrow understanding of freedom and as a barometer of American morality that its ideology has quite unsurprisingly evolved into the free-market free-for-all of neoliberalism and the public’s widespread acceptance of it. This evolution is not however devoid of strategy and purposeful manipulation. The ideologically paradoxical alliance of neoconservative and neoliberal values that solidified during the Reagan era further dogmatized free-market fundamentalism and furthered the consumerist agenda by narrowly defining ‘freedom’ through the lens of religion, cultural nationalism, and the liberty of consumer choice in order to garner the consent of the masses. Harvey argues that the effect of the alliance between big business and neoconservatives that ushered in the proliferation of neoliberalism worked to “divert attention from capitalism and corporate power as in any way having anything to do with either the economic or the cultural problems that unbridled commercialism and individualism were creating” (*A Brief History* 50). Harvey correctly claims that “[n]ot for the first, nor, it is feared,

⁵⁹ Hochschild summarizes the central tenet of the Dream succinctly: “My success implies your failure” (17). Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson suggests, “There is always a reason, *in the man*, for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money” (qtd. in Atkinson 629; original emphasis). The gulf between ‘virtuous’ and ‘immoral’ Americans is only exacerbated with neoliberalism, which pushes the Dream to its limit, locating freedom quite singularly within consumer capitalism, whilst utilizing utopian rhetoric in order to reassert ruling class power, and thus enabling a rather dystopian reality for many people. Neoliberalism is basically a version of laissez-faire capitalism in which mass privatization and free-market fundamentalism are not only implemented, but are considered by ideologues, in this context, to epitomize the most ‘properly’ interpreted American version of capitalism.

for the last time in history has a social group been persuaded to vote against material, economic, and class interests for cultural, nationalist, and religious reasons” (*A Brief History* 50).

The neoconservative/neoliberal alliance intertwined conservative politics and economic liberalism thereby demonstrating the intimate relationship between culture, politics, and economics while also confirming the importance that Political Economy and Cultural Studies are not to be at odds. In the case of this often-paradoxical alliance between conservatism and big business, it is precisely a coming together—an intertextualization—of cultural, political, religious, and economic interests in order to serve the monopolistic aspirations of each side. The political conservatives of the alliance are not exclusively Christian, though certainly Christianity is the loudest voice to be heard in this respect. The persuasive ideological vein of Christianity (including Evangelicalism and Prosperity Theology among others) that preaches self-reliance in order to ‘find’ God’s grace, authoritative morality, and the freedom to find yourself accountable for your successes and failures in this life or the next is precisely that at which the alliance aims its intentions.

Material and economic interests are frequently intertextualized with cultural, nationalist, and religious ideals in America to both the benefit and detriment of class interests, often championed by both the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ therein, in the name of American freedom and American equality and upheld by the liberty that is supposedly inherent in capitalism. (This again, points to the integral relationship between Political Economy and Cultural Studies and Critical Theory.) Pat Robertson’s earlier stated view is that capitalism encapsulates freedom as both a Christian and an American ideal. This notion is representative of the ideology of freedom within the neoconservative/neoliberal alliance, which works to produce and sustain a hyper-realized version of the American Dream in cutthroat free market fundamentalism, and a vague

and discriminatory biblically-based morality policing that incorporates capitalist, religiously inflected patriotism in defence of the free market as an inherently righteous American value.

Good Like God?

Allan Geyer, Professor Emeritus of Political Ethics and Ecumenics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., states, “The rank and file of the Religious Right have been particularly susceptible to the economic buccaneers’ pretence that the conservative [economic agenda] is more about culture—faith, flag, family, sex—than about economy: a highly pious distraction” (46). But this ideological *distraction* that Geyer is suggesting is not so much a misunderstanding or a susceptibility to pretence so much as it is a willing forwarding of another’s agenda (religion, culture) for the interests of one’s own (capital). It is also a willing amalgamation of agendas that are not entirely contradictory (though somewhat paradoxical, but disguised from being as such with ideological acrobatics), yet are nonetheless coercively, strategically, complementary.

The neoconservative/neoliberal alliance came together to challenge Marxian and Weberian ideas by convincing Americans that capitalism “neither impaired the moral capacity of any individual nor contradicted the moral standards of modern society” (Livingston 12). The alliance was/is set on framing capitalism as the ultimate realization of moral standards and modern society. As Eric Foner, an American historian at Columbia University, writes, “Christian conservatives fully embraced the free market economics of libertarian conservatives. The Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the self-styled Moral Majority, proclaimed that ‘the Word of God in both Old and New Testaments’ offered a justification for ‘capitalism and free enterprise’” (317). Falwell’s Moral Majority preachings, as Susan Friend Harding suggests, are “Protestant political sermons [lamenting] the moral condition of a people, foresee[ing] cataclysmic

consequences, and [calling] for dramatic moral reform and revival” (161). According to Falwell then, people need to smarten up in accordance with Bible-based and (oddly) capitalist-based morality, by taking responsibility for oneself and all others as a nation under God, or suffer God’s righteous, apocalyptic consequences. When the “logic of apocalyptic overdetermination [...] prevail[s],” Keller states, “[t]he ‘spiral of violence’” cannot be broken (123).

The interconnectedness of discourses at work in the neoconservative/neoliberal alliance work to uphold one another as the distinctions between them dissolves in the process, thereby leaving the public with simply a supposedly moral, ‘progressive’, socioeconomic, sociocultural ideology. In other words, the wool is not being pulled over the eyes of the religious right nor by neoconservatives and neoliberals quite as Geyer suggests. There is a purposeful intent on the part of the religious conservatives and neoliberals to fuse religion, capitalism, and culture together. This is the fundamentalist/essentialist draw of wholeness, and thus in Geyer’s defence, those not ‘pulling the strings’ are indeed susceptible to powerful ideological influences however illusory they may actually be. Brown writes,

Neoconservatism [valorizes] power and statism, and when those energies are combined with the moralism and the market ethos, and when a public is molded by the combination of these energies and rationalities, a fiercely *anti-democratic* political culture results. This is a culture disinclined to restrain either statism or corporate power, and above all one that literally comes to resent and even attack the classic principles and requirements of constitutional democracy. (*American Nightmare* 710; emphasis added)

Brown’s assessment points to the incompatibility, and even discordant opposition of two tenets of Americanism—democracy and capitalism. Therefore, regarding the ‘inevitability’ of neoliberalism, this culture that Brown describes should not be a stretch of the imagination to be

met with any amount of incredulous reaction in an intensely capitalist nation wherein democratic principles are already besieged by their own internal anti-democratic impulses of national ethos. These impulses, historically, laid the groundwork for the proliferation of neoliberalism wherein conservative notions of morality are fundamentally linked to anti-democratic impulses often in the name of Christianity and Americanism, and regarding the latter, in the very name of democracy.

Freedom Ideology vs. Freedom Actuality

While there are powerful figures morally posturing the neo-alliance, as their ideological constructs proliferate in practice and as they are (willingly or otherwise) accepted and lived with by the masses, we can see how one might support policy that is to the detriment of oneself, one's class interests, and thus to the detriment of the interests of family and freedom. This support/acquiescence occurs precisely because of the ideological posturing of 'family' and 'freedom'. This is ideology over pragmatism. It is intertextuality at work. It is tapping into metanarrative impulse(s), and it is implicit cultural policy at work. The success of the alliance's aligned interests is due to various discourses upholding one another in rather *absolutist* manners, but the actuality is that the discourses are strengthened by their pliable, selective, intertextual application. For example, in order for neoconservatives to support the neoliberal turn they "excoriated the interventionist excesses of a so-called 'liberal elite'—thus greatly muddying what the term 'liberal' might mean" (Harvey, *A Brief History* 50). Meanwhile their political base could be mobilized through the supposed positives "of religion and cultural nationalism and negatively through coded, if not blatant, racism, homophobia, and anti-feminism" (Harvey, *A Brief History* 50).

“The problem that the alliance presented,” Harvey states, “was not capitalism and the neoliberalization of culture, but the ‘liberals’ who had used excessive state power to provide for special groups (blacks, women, environmentalists, etc.)” (*A Brief History* 50). The conflation of interests at work in the alliance infringe upon freedom *in the name of freedom* demonstrating the violent fear of (certain types of) freedom for the trepidation of revealing the underlying paradoxes. This fear of freedom exists because of the potential disruption it brings to narrow, qualified, mystified, fetishized, versions of freedom produced by a culture bound by industry, by capitalist enterprise, and industry that then (re)produces culture by appealing to the impulse of implicit cultural policy acquiescence to reified ‘realities’ of metaculture.

When the culture is such that an exploitative economic system is considered fundamental to national ethos, and when the divisiveness (rather than the much-lauded inclusiveness) of the American Dream is pushed to its limit in neoliberalism as a systemic expression of freedom, the individual may very likely be culturally coerced into willingly supporting systematic, systemic oppression as *patriotic* duty. Yet, the freedom of the market demarcates Us/Other dichotomies which often produce, and are produced by, essentialist features.

Neoliberalism Again...

In terms of the American Dream perpetuating an essentialist moral socioeconomic paradigm (through metacultural ideas regarding capitalism, neoliberalism, laissez-faire economics, etc.), Michael Novak—an American Roman Catholic philosopher—writes that “[t]here is strong consonance between the virtues required for successful commercial and industrial practice and [...] natural moral virtues” (qtd. in Livingston 12). Not only does this type of thinking reinforce the false righteousness of the capitalist imperative, it also leaves to the blind spots of dogma the hollowness of materialism, the degradation of community, the hypocrisy of

claims to equal opportunity, the selfishness of the lucky, privilege, not to mention ‘rational’ market decisions that do the public great disservice. Novak not only mistakenly attributes ‘natural moral virtues’—an incredibly problematic essentialist phrasing in terms of, among other things, attributing a naturalness to moral virtues whatever they may be—but he attributes virtue to economic success, which is precisely one of the problematic aspects of American Dream ideology wherein meritocracy is presumed to be blind and thus considered inherently just. Novak insists further that the “the most profound of economic motives is almost always—and must necessarily be—family-oriented” (qtd. in Livingston 13). This statement ignores the selfishness and greed that capitalism disseminates. Economic motives may often be family-oriented, but that they must *necessarily* be, is a lie of neoconservative didactic perpetuation.

Similar to Novak, Milton Friedman states, “As liberals, we take freedom of the individual, or perhaps the family, as our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements” (12). However, in terms of Christian conservatives embracing free market economics, Foner argues that “the Christian right’s definition of freedom owe[s] far more to the idea that genuine freedom mean[s] living a moral life—voluntarily if possible, but if necessary as a result of coercion” (318). Here Foner points to the misguided neoconservative idea that government is, and should necessarily be, an instrument of moral guidance and an enforcer of morality rather than an instrument of ethical conduct. This type of thinking also disengages from the acknowledgment that freedom is not freedom when coerced or when enforced. Regarding freedom and the coercion of capital, Marx writes, “[t]he Roman slave was held by chains; the age-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads” (719). It is ironic then that Friedman states that political freedom “clearly came along with the free market and the development of capitalist institutions. So also did the political freedom in the golden age of Greece and in the early days of the Roman

era” (9-10). In doing, Friedman helps demonstrate that the ‘invisible threads’ that Marx speaks of are often stringently ideological and willfully adhered.

As demonstrated above, the dogma of capitalism itself is sustained, in part, within the very process of capitalist production and consumption, as the ideological success of capitalism’s socialization is making individuals *want* to do what the system needs them to do in order for it to reproduce itself. In other words, capitalism *reifies its own dogma*. Bauman writes, “The secret of every durable—that is, successfully self-reproducing—social system is the recasting of ‘functional prerequisites’ into behavioural motives for actors” (*Does Ethics Have a Chance* 149). In capitalism, consumption is the prerequisite of those who are not ‘social outcasts’ (Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance*). In capitalism, and therein, consumption, *allegedly*, is freedom. Yet, as Fromm asserts, with the introduction of capitalism comes “freedom from traditional bonds,” providing the individual with a “*feeling* of independence,” even as the same individual may in turn be marked by new feelings of being “alone and isolated, filled [...] with doubt and anxiety, and [driven] into new submission and into compulsive and irrational activity” (*Escape from Freedom* 103; emphasis added).

Also mentioned earlier, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that culture, within the confines of capitalist enterprise, “infect[s] everything with sameness” (94). While Brown argues that a “layer of depoliticization is added to the contemporary American context by the saturation of every feature of social and political life with entrepreneurial and consumer discourse, a saturation inaugurated by capitalism in its earlier modality but taken to new levels by neoliberal political rationality” (*Regulating Aversion* 18). If we put any stock into these assessments (leaving aside for the moment the problematic totalizing aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis), then

freedom and dignity as defined within the confines of neoliberal capitalism are in actuality something entirely different socially and culturally speaking.

How do we reconcile such a paradox? I argue we do not. Instead, we recognize it for what it is. Yet, this paradox does become reconciled by those who choose to ignore that it is paradoxical in the first place. So how do we understand this reconciliation? Harvey suggests (essentially providing a summation of Gramscian theory),

For any way of thought to become dominant, a conceptual apparatus has to be advanced that appeals to our intuitions and instincts, to our values and our desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit. If successful, this conceptual apparatus becomes so embedded in common sense as to be taken for granted and not open to question. (*A Brief History* 5)

Capitalism *is* common sense in America. For many people, so are various other Americanisms especially those of essentialist and fundamentalist value. Such ideas become solidified when ‘intuitions’ and ‘instincts’, ‘values’ and ‘desires’, become naturalized to the individual, to the party, to morality, and within ethical cultural considerations. The valorization of capital does indeed, as Fromm asserts, bring with it isolation, anxiety, and submissiveness to compulsive and irrational activity.

Marx writes, “The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorization of capital” (644). The valorization of capital *is* a patriotic act in America. Consider George W. Bush’s post-9/11 comments when he suggested that a trip to the mall is a patriotic endeavour (Fox). Marion Grau cites Baudrillard when she suggests that “meaning in the consumerist emporium of late capitalism ‘is produced by endless, symbolic exchanges within a dominant code, whose rhetoric

is entirely self-referential” (26). She then asks, “Might this narcissistic self-referentiality of neoliberal reasoning account for at least part of the perplexed queries of ‘Why do they hate us so much?’ in the wake of September 11?” (Grau 26). Grau responds to her own question by stating, “It seems to me, that the self-referentiality of Western-style market economy, its hysterical and hypochondriac mentality, [...] and the denial or inability to see the larger connections, ramifications, the history, and contextuality of that same economic approach are closely related” (26). Intertextualities are lost on many people, and this is perpetuated by intertextuality itself.

The success of the neoconservative/neoliberal alliance, in part, demonstrates the overstated shift from religious authority to secular authority in America, the over-valorized ideal of the separation of church and state, while at the same time demonstrating the pull of essentialism and/or fundamentalism both within religious and presumed secular understandings. Furthermore, the hegemonic value of Christian ideals allows for neoconservative values to infuse neoliberalism with authority, with the merit of an Absolute normativity. It is not too much to say that the normality and the intertextual symbolism of ‘In God We Trust’ being printed on the national currency helps to facilitate the success of the neoliberal/neoconservative alliance in terms of the sacredness of certain essentialist understandings. Again, the privileging of essentialist ideals produces and sustains the understanding that humanity is comprised of naturally occurring subdivisions, such as, for example, rich and poor, and the role of labourer and of capitalist which may then be construed as exemplifying the very essence of the individual.

These subdivisions are displayed in the utter imperative of neoliberalism to contain or completely destroy trade unions under the premise of the sacredness of individual liberty. For example, in Britain in the 1980s Margaret Thatcher developed

a fierce determination to have done with the institutions and political ways of the social democratic state. [...] This entailed confronting trade union power, attacking all forms of social solidarity that hindered competitive flexibility (such as those expressed through municipal governance, and including the power of many professionals and their associations), dismantling or rolling back the commitments of the welfare state, [and] the privatization of public enterprises (including social housing). (Harvey, *A Brief History* 22-23)

Reaganomics applied similar techniques.

Also, in similar ideological fashion, during the height of labour tension at his studio, Walt Disney, a supporter of right-wing groups and producer of campaign ads for the Republican party, gave a speech to a group of employees telling them that the solution to their dispute lay not with the labour union, but in tenacity and hard work: “‘Don’t forget this,’ he told them, ‘it’s the law of the universe that the strong shall survive and the weak must fall by the way, and I don’t give a damn what idealistic plan is cooking up, nothing can change that’” (qtd. in Schlosser 37).

Control and maintenance of labour as well as increasing exploitation are absolute imperatives of neoliberalism, while “the restoration or formation of class power,” as Harvey argues, “occurs, as always, at the expense of labour” (*A Brief History* 76). As neoliberalism intensifies the precarity of the labourer and of the labour reserve army,

It is precisely in such a context of diminished personal resources derived from the job market that the neoliberal determination to transfer all responsibility for well-being back to the individual has doubly deleterious effects. [...] The social safety net is reduced to a bare minimum in favour of a system that emphasizes personal responsibility. Personal

failure is generally attributed to personal failings, and the victim is all too often blamed.

(Harvey, *A Brief History* 76)

This is quite simply a hyper-realized neoliberal version of the American Dream—the essentialist/fundamentalist moral and economic separation of the sheep and the goats.

Neoliberalism is a fundamentalist doctrine insofar as it relies on the presumption of the *purity* of the market and valorization of individual choice. But it is also inherently, and paradoxically (when considering the premise of individual liberty and choice), suspicious of democracy, instead integrating state decision making, often under the guise of deregulation, into the dynamics of capital accumulation and the networks of class power.

Neoliberalism, in the context of Americanism, can be viewed as a realized inevitability—if I can use the latter term without hyperbole and without subscribing to a totalizing logic, whilst recognizing the forces that coalesced quite consciously and strategically in order to bring about neoliberal actualities—of mythologized narratives of American capitalism. These narratives are, or have become, an extension of the myth of rugged individualism and exceptionalism that have contributed to the metanarrative in America wherein freedom is one's for the taking rather than the birthright, or the right of the citizenry 'proper', it is claimed to be. At the same time, capital purchases freedom by exercising exploitation, and the labourer is left to being exploited and precariously balancing on the edge of potential disposability in a socioeconomic position disguised as, or purported to being, freedom. Therefore, violence is an inevitability of neoliberalism, whether that violence occurs through moral evaluations that it is everyone's individual duty to survive by their own determination(s), or the more direct violence of exploitation.

Grievability, Violence, and God

Judith Butler asks, “What leads any of us to seek to preserve the life of another? [W]hat establishes as morally justifiable the refusal or failure to preserve a life[?]” (*The Force of Nonviolence* 67, 68). She again (as with her grievable/ungrievable lives dichotomy) comes to the conclusion that “we invariably make some assumptions about what counts as a life” (*The Force of Nonviolence* 67). Butler writes,

[I]f institutions were structured according to a principle of the radical equality of grievability, that would mean that every life conceived within those institutional terms would be worth preserving, that its loss would be marked and lamented, and that this would be true not only of this or that life, but of every life. This would [...] have implications for how we think about health care, imprisonment, war, occupation, and citizenship, all of which make distinctions between populations as more and less grievable. (*The Force of Nonviolence* 76).

These types of considerations of implications do not have a place in neoliberal free-market fundamentalism nor in neoconservatism which ascribes to a black and white moral universe wherein good must conquer evil. In a very real manner these considerations have no place in many forms of Christian fundamentalism wherein, again, the foundation upon which dogmatic ideology is built is the separation of the sheep and the goats, the saved and the damned, the eternally grievable and eternally ungrievable. Therefore, if good must conquer evil, there will always be ungrievable lives of many sorts. Not only will there always be ungrievable lives, but what divides the grievable and ungrievable is essentialist, fundamentalist, and God-sanctioned, and that includes, according to the scriptures, God-sanctioned violence. There will always be blood.

Regarding God-ordained violence and the like, in Peter Hedges' novel *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, Gilbert, the twenty-four-year-old protagonist who resents living in a smalltown and also resents what he considers the small-mindedness of those who dwell in the town, interacts with a woman at the grocery store where he works wherein the woman tells Gilbert "God forgives you your sins," to which Gilbert responds, "And I forgive him his" (144). This demonstrates a strange and again paradoxical arrangement within certain Christian beliefs wherein in the smallest infraction from a human being may be thought to be an incredibly sinful act. Indeed, there is an existing acceptance in some Christian thought (including Calvinist traditions such as the Christian Reformed Church—often referred to as the CRC) that a sin is a sin and therefore all sins are equally sinful,⁶⁰ while the infractions committed by God, 'acts of God'—murder, genocide, torture, eternal damnation, complete intolerance by God for God's own creations—are infallible. This produces a quite subconscious effect on the faithful: they forgive God of his sins under the premise that God's will is perfect.

If God is infallible, perfect, yet each human being is born fallen, sinful, wherein does redemption lie and who serves it out, who deserves it, and who does not judge lest ye be judged? It is mythology within mythology—mythology justified by mythology. Within this reality, as some human beings forgive God and God forgives some human beings, ungrievability is an absolute essentialist inevitability. Intertextualize this reality with the reality of the cutthroat capitalism of neoliberalism and "we invariably make some assumptions about what counts as a life," and thus taking care of one another is not exactly a priority or even, in terms of social welfare (among other things), a proper moral and ethical choice (Butler, *The Force of*

⁶⁰ James 2:10 states, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (NIV).

Nonviolence 67). Indeed, in terms of neoliberalism specifically, ‘rational’ market decisions often have little to do with bettering the public.

Yet, in America, the supposed beacon of democracy and equality, garnering the consent of the citizenry to support neoliberal ideals that are disadvantageous to so many people is, to some degree, and quite counterintuitively, as simple as tapping into the national ethos of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Despite the American cultural emphasis on rugged individualism and individual success and failure, the fundamental divide between capitalist and labourer, and the fluid divide between the labourer and the (unemployed) labour reserve, there is a paradoxical acquiescence of much of the citizenry to be a part of a monolithic unit—loyal, patriotic, free, United, Americans—producing, to some degree, an ‘emergent unity of politics’ as Adorno and Horkheimer phrase it. While it may not look like it to many who cling to party lines, what exists in this sociocultural paradigm is a somewhat depoliticised (insofar as it concerns the ostensibly benign acquiescence by the citizenry) conflation of intertextual interests, epitomized by the adoption of fundamentalist forms of Americanism such as neoliberal capitalism.

Vision / Division

We are left with another American paradox. There exists unwavering loyalty to party, (including staunch support for Trump, for example, despite, well, everything he has said and done), and much steadfast support for neoliberal economic policy because of the longing for a singular vision of a united America. But the longing for a singular vision of what America is, and what American values are, produces the idea of intense divisiveness that has both always existed but is perhaps not as divided as many may think. Case in point: we have a culture wherein metanarrative sustains faith in capitalism and faith in the Dream which in turn produce an idea of *sameness* in accordance to a level playing field which supposedly inevitably produces just

results. This is a socioeconomic cultural paradigm wherein industry influences cultural policy implicitly and otherwise. If industry and culture are inherently linked, then it is important to examine where freedom lies and to what degree it can be manifested. Thus, we need to remember that capitalism is not purely an economic reality but must be understood as a *complexity* of intertextual relations.

What is yet another paradox of the neoliberal/neoconservative alliance, is that while the neoliberal side of things is about opposing government regulation pertaining to issues within the economic realm, when it comes to government intervention into issues of morality, there is a push for more interposition from the neoconservative side: more individual restrictions assessed and implemented by government, more judgement, more prevention and punishment. For example, corporate welfare—which, though not coined as such on the right, is government financial intervention, such as Obama’s corporate bailout of automobile manufactures—is considered reasonable, just, and necessary for economic equilibrium in certain cases. Yet, many of the same (wealthy) capitalists and neoliberals who are okay with the government helping large corporations (and this can be done via deregulation as well, and deregulation *is* government intervention), are entirely ideologically opposed to welfare for the individual and for families. Welfare is thought to be immoral and unethical as it imposes upon the individual’s duty to morally solve their own privatised issues. The blind spots of dogma play an imperative part here as free-market fundamentalism allows for exceptions, just not for the individual, even though the corporation has (at least some of) the rights of an individual as it has been provided with the characteristic of personhood in America.

It is entirely ironic—as the actual meaning in this case is the complete opposite of the literal meaning, in terms of how ‘government overreach’, for example, is defined—that while

there is a push to let the market do its pure and just thing for society, that same society cannot be trusted to do the right thing without governmentally enforced moral restrictions. Providing people with some degree of economic sustenance if they did not ‘earn it’, which is positioned as unethical, is also considered in this context to be antithetical to the ideal of the Dream and its current neoliberal actualities. Those less fortunate who are ‘asking for a handout’ are assumed to actually need some serious morality training, which often comes in the manner of the ‘tough love’ approach of ‘God helps those who help themselves’. What is often not considered, or simply not cared about, is the *violence* of non-intervention imposed upon individuals who need (and/or seek) help.

“Throughout class history,” as Jameson suggests, “the underside of culture is blood, torture, death and horror” (5). The increased privatization within neoliberalism intensifies the polarity between wealth and poverty, success and failure, those who are ‘virtuous’ enough to deserve freedom and those who are too ‘weak’ or too unscrupulous to handle it, and thus those who *enjoy* freedom and those who merely *survive*, or, indeed, those who do not survive: ‘our’ utopia, ‘their’ apocalypse.

As Harvey asserts, mere survival is not freedom (*A Brief History*). Further, Bauman writes that concepts of responsibility and responsible choice that used to reside in the “semantic field of ethical duty and moral concern for the Other” have been “shifted to the realm of self-fulfillment and calculation of risks” (*Does Ethics have a Chance* 95). Again, as Harvey states, the “assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market [...] has long dominated the US stance towards the rest of the world [while the] word ‘freedom’ resonates [...] widely within the common-sense understanding of Americans” (*A Brief History* 7, 39).

Therefore, capitalism and its current neoliberal actualities are often framed in rather utopian

terms such as the inherent human freedom of free-market enterprise, the supposedly innate rationality and even *purity* of the market, and in the too-infrequently adhered to supposedly inherent altruistic elements of capitalism such as trust, cooperation, and the common good. But as Judt suggests, “Markets do not automatically generate trust, cooperation or collective action for the common good. Quite the contrary: it is in the nature of economic competition that a participant who breaks the rules will triumph—at least in the short run—over more ethically sensitive competitors” (38). This is a recipe for violence.

Indeed, Žižek argues that

the US is ‘trusted’ as the safe and stable centre, so that all others [...] invest their surplus profits in the US. Since this trust is primarily ideological and military, [rather than] economic, the problem for the US is how to justify its imperial role – it needs a permanent state of war, so it has to invent the ‘war on terror’, offering itself as the universal protector of all other ‘normal’ (not ‘rogue’) states. (*Like a Thief* 92-93)

On a smaller scale (than world domination), for those who triumph in America, it rarely matters that rules may have been broken along the way as acquisition of capital stands in for virtue. The lack of accountability individually and ideologically during the ‘Great Recession’ exemplifies just how little the ‘rules’ matter. (It should be noted too that the dissipation of the Occupy movement—which was a response to the Great Recession—a year after its birth speaks, in part, to the authoritative persuasiveness of metanarrative and of metaculture.) The ideals that are perpetually reasserted in these regards are of the nativist variety wherein ontological naturalness, essentialism, and essence, are in actuality *earned* by some and lost by others, thereby affirming the existentialist contention that existence precedes essence. Nevertheless, due to the centrality of the Dream in American ethos, it is widely believed that “success results from actions and traits

under one's own control," or in other words, that essence precedes existence—a troubling moral proposition that carries devastating, wide-reaching effect (Hochschild 30).

As Brown suggests, when every feature of social and political life is saturated with “entrepreneur and consumer discourse” (a feature “inaugurated by capitalism [...] but taken to new levels by neoliberal[ism]”), and when “every aspect of human relations, human endeavour, and human need is framed in terms of the rational entrepreneur or consumer, then the powers constitutive of these relations, endeavours and needs vanish from view” (*Regulating Aversion* 18). When power vanishes from view, so too do politics. Culture, then, is elevated over politics, and political motivations become thought to be motivations of culture. Thus, what can be described as the ‘culturalization of politics’ is a reductionism that produces and sustains populist, essentialist ideas.

There can be little doubt that capitalism, and therein the winning narratives of the American Dream, are absolutely central, essential, to Americanism and thus to the nation's ‘brand’ as well as to the individual identities of much of the citizenry. Suffice to say that America is a staunchly capitalist nation in which even the idea of universal health care is thought by many people to be fundamentally un-American because of the intense linkage of capitalism, patriotism, and Americanism, and the ideological *version* of liberty and freedom that is dictated by hegemonic norms, practices, and indeed the *brand* of America itself. Brown writes, “An identification of belief, attitude, moral fiber, and individual will with the capacity to make world history is the calling card of the biographical backstories and anecdotes that so often substitute for political analyses and considerations of power in American popular culture” (*Regulating Aversion* 18). Indeed, it is not overstating matters to say that Americanism is a nationalism built upon “a child's view of history and politics: idealist, personal, and replete with heroes and

villains, good values and bad” (Brown, *Regulating Aversion* 18). Intertextualize this mythical version of history and politics in Americanism and the groundwork is laid for the virtue of capitalism in national ethos and the supposed inherent freedom within.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in various manners and examples in this dissertation thus far, when capitalism, or neoliberalism and neoconservatism, or Christianity in varying forms, become intertextualized, *metaphysical* truth is attributed to the system of capitalism. Insofar as capitalism is naturalized within Americanism, so too may the interwoven discourses of neoconservatives and neoliberals become naturalized by the proliferation of, and simultaneously the inherent social reproduction of, neoliberalism, which utilizes “both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism” (Harvey, *A Brief History* 42). Thus, just as the process of capitalism itself reifies its own logic, intertextualized ideological constructions are sustained and reproduced and naturalized within the very process of capitalist production and consumption. This is so because capitalism is not *purely* an economic reality but must be understood as a complexity “in which economic, political, military, technological and other determinations – each endowed with its own logic and certain autonomy – enter into the determination of the movement of the whole” (Laclau, *On Populist Reason* 230). As such, intertextuality, though oft undetected, or sometimes unintentionally (or intentionally) instigated, is key to capitalist proliferation as well as the faith in its imperativeness arguably especially when linked with nationalism. Freedom, a complex concept widely simplified, is also a key component of this intertextualization.

Freedom, though entirely compromised by capitalism, is thought to be *fulfilled* by capitalism. As Marx suggests, “the worker *belongs* to capital before he has sold himself to the capitalist” (723; emphasis added). Furthermore, neoliberalism accelerates renewal of sale and oscillations in the market-price of labour, while the capitalists’ certainties are increased by thriving on the labourers’ precarity, including the increasing daily pragmatic uncertainties for the labourer and the labour reserve army therein. As such, the increasing disposability of the citizenry, in terms of unemployment and flawed consumerism, then ironically makes the bondage of the labourer more concealed as the ‘freedom’ of exploitation is all the more appreciated, and the entire process becomes *naturalized*. This process then, through its reproduction and reiteration works to reify ‘organic law’, implicit cultural policy, which in turn works to pacify the citizenry insofar as it seems to make little sense to mess with common sense—eternal, natural, Truth—which in this case provides moral certainty regarding the ‘freedom’ of capitalist relations.

The paradox lies too in this: as Baudrillard suggests, capitalism “is a sorcery of social relations, it is a *challenge to society*, and it must be responded to as such” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 15; original emphasis). Indeed, Marx writes,

[T]he rule of the capitalist over the worker is the rule of things over [humankind], of dead labour over the living, of the product over the producer. For the commodities that become the instruments of rule over the workers (merely as the instruments of the rule of *capital* itself) are mere consequences of the process of production; they are its products. Thus at the level of material production, of the life-process in the realm of the social – for that is what the process of production is – we find the *same* situation that we find in *religion* at

the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object and *vice versa*. (990; original emphasis)

Therefore, when the capitalist ‘sorcery of social relations’—which, as Baudrillard correctly suggests is a *challenge* to society—produces a response to that challenge that is inadequate, or non-existent, the ethical quandaries are problematic and vast, especially when rather than a challenge, the Americanist nationalist response to capitalism is that it is synonymous with freedom.

This chapter has demonstrated that when national ethos is fundamentally linked to capitalism, and when this idea is socially reified by the practice of capitalism *itself*, many paradoxical elements of that ethos are kept hidden as the absence of illusion, is, again, altogether cynical. The absence of violence as immoral within a staunchly capitalist society comes, in part, from within the paradoxes of capitalism itself. The freedom to commit and to allow violence is very much related to the illusory aspects of freedom as a Truth of capitalism reified through organic law / implicit cultural policy.

The following chapter examines other manners in which organic law or complicitly complacent acquiescence to implicit cultural policy is made ‘reality’ such as through public panoplies. Examples of these public panoplies include sporting events, Fourth of July fireworks, and the celebration of American military victories such as Osama bin Laden’s murder or George W. Bush’s ‘Mission Accomplished’ proclamation after the invasion of Iraq which was framed as a supposed deliverance of the Iraqi people from tyranny and the distribution of freedom and democracy to Others. In doing, I demonstrate how democracy becomes fetishized as it is conflated with encompassing ideas of freedom whilst also intertextualized with violence and illusion (quite ironically) as evidence, as proof, of its supposedly inherent goodness. Yet, (as

Chapter Seven introduced to this discussion) the following chapter also demonstrates that there are many strategies, lifestyles, and lives being lived that are examples of subversive disruptions to accepted natural realities that exist within socioeconomic and sociocultural constraints.

Chapter Nine

Implicit Cultural Policy: Naturalized Hegemony and Opposing Subversiveness including Postmodern and Queer Disruptions

Introduction

The belief in democracy as a solidified, pure, righteous American Truth brings staticity to a perpetually fluid actuality. This belief fetishizes democracy including often—and especially—the *act* of voting, thereby treating democracy with an irrational commitment to something that is inevitably flawed and continually in motion—not simply an uncontaminated and pleasant reality of American policy. Fetishizing democracy is what leads to ‘revolutionary’ ideas like the March on the Capitol wherein the implicit freedom of casting a vote was considered to be invalidated while Trump quite easily led his followers to believe that their rights as American citizens had been violated, not by providing facts to authenticate his claims but by tapping into, with simplistic rhetorical refrains, the idea that their democratic freedoms had been desecrated.⁶¹

Negativity towards policy, both foreign and domestic, can often be simply dismissed as cynical or un-American by politicians, while ‘freedom’—cultural, religious, political, or otherwise—can be an “instrument of coercion” (Butler, *Frames of War* 107). Harvey writes, “The word ‘freedom’ resonates so widely within the common-sense understanding of Americans that it becomes ‘a button that elites can press to open the door to the masses’ to justify almost anything” (*A Brief History* 39). When freedom is reduced to a simplistic rallying cry for the masses, it often takes on essentialist connotations, or, put another way, it becomes a dogmatized

⁶¹ The challenge of the results of the 2020 election does not diminish the fetishization of voting but reinforces upon the public that voting, which for much of the citizenry is the ultimate of patriotic democratic endeavours, participation in something magical and pure, was sullied.

version of itself, and in doing, works to disregard its own actual ambiguity. Furthermore, as Butler asserts,

If the prerequisites of the polity require either cultural homogeneity or a model of cultural pluralism, then, either way, the solution is figured as assimilation to a set of cultural norms that are understood as internally self-sufficient and self-standing. These norms are not in conflict, open to dispute, in contact with other norms, contested or disrupted in a field in which a number of norms converge—or fail to converge—in an ongoing way. [...]his groundwork only functions if it is uniform or integrated, and [...] desideratum is required, even forcibly, for something called modernity to emerge and take hold. [...] We can already see that this very specific sense of modernity entails an immunization against contestation, [and] that it is maintained through a dogmatic grounding. (*Frames of War* 108)

In this regard, staunch American capitalism—wherein the free market is lauded as an imperative aspect of American freedom in general, while democracy and capitalism are thought to be, or treated as though, inextricably intertextually bound to one another (though neoliberalism largely escapes democratic influence)—overcomes “the logic of totalizing normality and adopt[s] the logic of erratic excess” (Žižek, *First as Tragedy* 126).

Importantly, however, this does not mean that cultural norms cease to exist; indeed, erratic excess becomes imbedded as a cultural norm. Excess is capitalism’s driving force, and with it, exploitation. It is worth mentioning again that “the rate of surplus value depends, *in the first place*, on the degree of exploitation of labour-power” (Marx 415; emphasis added). If exploitation is a necessary function of capitalism, it certainly goes beyond the exploitation of labour-power. Like the colloquialism of the web that deception weaves, capitalism works

likewise; the exploitation of labour-power travels outwardly. Therefore, inevitably the public's welfare in many instances suffers.

Regarding public concern, Chomsky argues that the issues that the public *are* interested in, simply do not arise on the electoral agenda (*Interventions*). Though only a truth in part, when this happens (or does not happen as it were) the insidious authority of metanarrative maintains its dominance, and metaculture—which can be described, in part (along with previous indications of definition), as a discursive formation with an “inherent strategic impulse to mobilize ‘culture’” wherein cultural principles are considered the legitimate form of social authority—maintains the status quo (Osborne 38). Chomsky adds “The population has been carefully excluded from political activity, and not by accident. An enormous amount of work has gone into that disenfranchisement” (*Interventions* 97). Therefore, we see not only the often-hidden implicit authority of metanarrative, metaculture, and therein dominant ideology, but also ‘official’ top-down power structures. Chomsky points out that “[d]uring the 1960s the outburst of popular participation in democracy terrified sectors of privilege and power, which mounted a fierce countercampaign, taking many forms, until today” (*Interventions* 97). Nixon wiretapping and threatening to deport John Lennon for his quite public stance against the Vietnam war is one ‘minor’ example. But it is not only top-down oppressive power that can work to diminish democracy. That is, in part, the enduring power of metanarrative and the *strategic* mobilizing impulse of metaculture. Power acts in a multiplicity of manners beyond those which may be traditionally thought of as authoritative.

Implicit Policy

Accordingly, while political elites produce rhetoric and policy that sustains metanarrative discourse, implicit cultural policy enables said rhetoric and policy by sustaining metaculture.

Implicit cultural policy can be located in language, narratives, discourse, events, activities, performances, and public panoplies such as the nationalistic pre-game ceremonies at sporting events or the nationwide ‘pep rally’ that broke out after the news of Osama bin Laden’s murder, to cite two exaggerated and yet oddly normative examples. As implicit cultural policy “prescribe[s] and shape[s] cultural attitudes and habits over given territories” thereby producing and sustaining ‘organic laws’ which come to represent dominant public consciousness, and thus too, in America, implicit policy also preserves the nationalistic metanarrative, quelling concern regarding the ambiguity of liberalism and freedom, whilst upholding the rigidity of capitalism and militarism (Ahearne 141). The ‘soft’ power of implicit policy works affectively to reify metacultural understandings that adhere to essentialist tendencies by providing belief with seduction and force. And, again, as Mulhern suggests, the “subject and object [of metacultural discourse] are one and the same culture,” but it is “split between norm and actuality” (qtd. in Osborne 35).

Yet, the divide between norms and actualities is frequently dismissed in order to sustain cohesive, structured, normative, systemic interpretations of the significance of American identity and American values. The paradoxes of norms and actualities are kept hidden, in part, by the faith in the *brand*—which is semantically different than the term ‘metanarrative’ but not altogether different in meaning in this context—of Americanism itself, the brand of the nation. Aronczyk suggests that

by employing the symbolic resources and resonance of nationalist discourse which perpetuate the nation-state as a necessary frame of identity, allegiance, and affiliation, nation branding maintains and extends the nation as a legitimate entity. [...B]y fitting discussions of the nation into categories that privilege a particular kind of collective

representation over diverse expression, nation branding affects the *moral* basis of national citizenship [...] consciously highlighting certain meanings and myths while ignoring others. (64; emphasis added)

Brands seek *loyalty*; and in many ways this particular brand, America, demands loyalty and tempts faith in its favour.

Loyalty is often matched with “a corresponding hatred of traitors,” and what defines a traitor can be highly subjective (Haidt 140). In terms of loyalty to the brand of the nation, and loyalty to implicit cultural policy, outsiders may be invited in, assuming their loyalty is sufficient and thus a relapse to their ‘past life’ would be a betrayal. When communities “are brought under the jurisdiction of the state and into the orbit of mainstream economy and culture,” Brown argues, “individuals abstracted from ethnic, religious, or other subnational orders are converted into citizens on the condition that the belief world from which they hail be excluded from legitimate public discourse” (*Regulating Aversion* 93). While this is correct in many respects, it may seem, generally speaking, to be overstating matters, though Brown’s assessment is certainly true, to a large extent, within the confines of Americanism.

Suffice to say, we may be tolerant of one another within a certain culture, but the incoming Other must be loyal in order to receive the ‘generous gift’ of tolerance. Haidt points out that conservatives tend to feel much stronger about, and do a better job than liberals, strategically utilizing what he refers to as the ‘Loyalty foundation’ (within the broader context of ‘the moral foundations of politics’), citing as just one example the title of conservative Ann Coulter’s 2003 book, *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*.

Implicit Policy and the Pep Rally

An oddly normative moment of the soft power of implicit policy and intense loyalty to country that momentarily bridged the gap between left and right was demonstrated on the night that Osama bin Laden's murder was announced. The reaction was a spontaneous 'pep rally' that took place nationwide. Fans at ballgames started chanting 'America', people gathered at Ground Zero in song, and many people took to the streets in order to participate in public panoplies of jingoistic patriotism celebrating the death of an enemy to America. Penn State *USA Today* blogger Haley Blum offers her version of events:

The 'Star-Spangled Banner' broke out every couple of minutes in different parts of the crowd, creating mixed-up musical canons of U.S. pride. Even the toilet paper rolls flying across the sky, getting tangled in the tree branches lining the street, seemed like an eloquent expression of the beauty of our country's freedom. All I kept saying was, 'This is amazing.' And it was. [...] At one point, the Boss' 'Born in the U.S.A.' blasted from speakers. [...] It felt like I was at the most patriotic 'AMERICA F*** YEAH!' concert ever. And it probably was. But after witnessing this whole beautiful, patriotic mess, I started analyzing it. Were we taking this too far? What about the possibility of retaliation attacks? [...] Who is going to clean up the street, lined with the makeshift confetti and other assorted trash, tomorrow? (Sometimes I think too much about things....) At the end of the night, I am in awe. [...] And I don't know any of the answers to the questions above. [...] But, right now, I do know that I'll always remember feeling like a part of an amazing, joyful whole. The impulsiveness of every tweet, chant and confetti toss was attached to an intense emotion that might defy any sort of rational post-riot (er,

celebration) analysis. In the moment, we were just proud to be Americans. (Bloom, Haley)

The death rally Americanizes self-righteous murder; it works to gloss over the actuality of circumstance in the name of something violent, yet pure and pleasant, as well as an abstract, ambiguous, and fragile notion of freedom considered innate, righteous, and concrete. Butler writes, “If freedom is one of the ideals we hope for, it will be important to remember how easily the rhetoric of freedom can be deployed in the name of the self-legitimation of a state whose coercive force gives the lie to its claim to safeguard humanity” (*Frames of War* 135). She continues,

Without critique of state violence and the power it wields to construct the subject of cultural difference, our claims to freedom risk an appropriation by the state that can make us lose sight of all our other commitments. Only through [...] a critique of state violence do we stand a chance of finding and acknowledging already existing alliances and sites of contact with other minorities in order to consider systematically how coercion seeks to divide us and keep attention deflected from the critique of violence itself. (Butler, *Frames of War* 135)

Coercion may divide, but as the bin Laden Pep Rally demonstrates, violence can unite, especially when critique is a dirty word, even an abhorrent suggestion.

Interestingly, in terms of lack of critique and critical thinking, repurposing Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” as a patriotic anthem ignores the ambivalence of the character in the song who experiences the horrors of war and then returns home only to find he cannot find a job after ‘serving’ his country in Vietnam. But in her blog Haley admits the celebration was not a moment

worthy of ‘over-thinking’ only a moment to be immersed in the festivity of the death of an American foe. Her logic exposes the underlying anti-intellectual logic of jingoistic patriotism.

The celebration of bin Laden’s death demonstrates in many respects how violence and illusion are situated in American culture. Haley refers to the ‘joyful whole’ that she experiences, and this wholeness is precisely the illusory aspect of metaculture. Wodak et al. write, “Discourses of national identity constructed by residents of any given state will always contain or imply both cultural and political elements” (5). As such, the bin Laden pep rally is culturally relevant in terms of disseminating metacultural understanding, while at the same time the celebrations reflect present cultural norms regarding political discourses of national identity. In terms of the semantic content of cultural discourse, Donal Carbaugh writes, “[A]s people communicate with each other, they are saying things literally about the specific subject being discussed, but they are also saying this culturally, about who they are, how they are related, what they are doing together, how they feel about what is going on, and about the nature of things” (174). As cultural discourse recognizes meaning as an “ongoing commentary that is immanent in actual communication practices,” the celebrations, and certainly Haley’s commentary, are both culturally active and reactive, both reflecting and propagating a violent nationalistic sense of freedom (Carbaugh 174).

Alternatively, regarding the event of bin Laden’s murder, Chomsky writes,

We might ask ourselves how we would be reacting if Iraqi commandos landed at George W. Bush’s compound, assassinated him, and dumped his body in the Atlantic.

Uncontroversially, his crimes vastly exceed bin Laden’s, and he is not a ‘suspect’ but uncontroversially the ‘decider’ who gave the orders to commit the ‘supreme international crime differing only from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the

accumulated evil of the whole' (quoting the Nuremberg Tribunal) for which Nazi criminals were hanged: the hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of refugees, destruction of much of the country, the bitter sectarian conflict that has now spread to the rest of the region. [...] The imperial mentality is so profound, throughout western society, that no one can perceive that they are glorifying bin Laden by identifying him with courageous resistance against genocidal invaders. It's like naming our murder weapons after victims of our crimes: Apache, Tomahawk... It's as if the Luftwaffe were to call its fighter planes 'Jew' and 'Gypsy.' (*My Reaction to Osama bin Laden's Death*)

This type of entirely necessary analysis desacralizes America and American violence, thereby providing grievability to the ungrievable Other, and it disempowers those who do not believe power can be taken from them. Accordingly, this type of analysis is also in danger of producing disillusion. In the minds of many, too many questions and critical examination only work to fracture the 'joyful whole' that was (re)produced and reified at the pep rally, where nobody (supposedly) was celebrating for the left or the right; they were only Americans pure and simple.

Democracy and 'Other' Narratives: Subdivisions and Subversions in a Consumerist Culture

While ideological differences may be glaring at times between the left and the right on evenings that lack an 'America Fuck Yeah' party, the way in which each side navigates the system can, again, be quite similar. For example, both Democrats and Republicans who run for office have historically, and overwhelmingly continue to be, funded by "similar concentrations of private power" while political candidates are "creatures of the public relations industry, which keeps the public out of the election process" (Chomsky, *The Disconnect in US Democracy*). As such, the practice of democracy in a nation that frequently claims to have the patent on democracy is not at all a fully realized version of itself.

Genuine democracy, as Giroux and Pollack point out, “recognizes individuals’ responsibility to further a general interest in equality, justice, and freedom, not merely to advance [...] narrow self-interest” (79). But too often the public’s task is considered to be “to focus attention on the candidate’s ‘qualities’ [rather than] policies” (Chomsky, *The Disconnect in US Democracy*). Certainly, when Republican political discourse, as it did in 2016, reaches the point of mocking the candidates’ physical features and speculated anatomical shortcomings, policy—sometimes touched upon but not frequently described with any actual necessary substance—is absolutely secondary to character. This is not to say that politics is entirely devoid of issues or issue-oriented activism. It is to say that metanarrative understandings about what America is or is not, and how a candidate portrays Americanist qualities, how they embody the American values that voters deem *their* American values, plays a significant role in diminishing a more fully realized democracy in a country that touts democracy as its inherent good, and indeed acts as though democracy is a forcibly exportable good. At the same time, metacultural impulses provide and maintain the illusion of American sanctity.

There will always be counternarratives. There will always be subcultures of resistance and grassroots movements that over time may bring significant change. But challenges to dominant discourse in many ways cause metanarrative and proponents thereof to double down, to reassert. The inherent lag in changing discourse is made more sluggish when despite the centrality of the American Dream, and therein rugged individualism in national ethos, there is a self-imposed cultural historical determinism in the same ethos that works to naturalize individual acquiescence to be a part of a monolithic unit. Metanarrative and metacultural logic work towards reifying the reassuring presumption that “culture is a uniform and binding groundwork of norms” rather than, as Butler suggests, “an open field of contestation” (*Frames of War* 108).

As 'Old Glory' symbolically suggests, citizens are united as long as they are brave, free, and have bombs bursting in air. This is not an assertion of the individual ideals of each and every American, but a reality of *Americanism*.

To say that there is a lag in changing and/or shifting discourse simply means that there is seldom, if ever, a sea change in public consciousness when it comes to dominant understandings of accepted norms. While as well, there will always be strong kneejerk resistance to change that is perceived to be un-American. This is especially true in environments that privilege a lack of questioning, that reward rhetorical repetition, and that encourage acquiescence to tradition and to canonical reified universals that are depended upon rhetorically to summon normative understandings of Truth. Indeed, this is precisely what is a destructive, divisive, *and* difference-neutralizing facet of essentializing Americanist ethos. For instance, when Hillary Clinton was asked, directly, explicitly, what *American foreign policy* is exactly, her answer was that the metanarrative is to be reasserted: "We have not been telling our story very well. We do have a great story. We are not perfect by any means, but we have a great story about human freedom, human rights, human opportunity. And let's get back to telling it—to ourselves first and foremost—and believing it about ourselves and then taking that around the world. That's what we should be standing for" (qtd. in Beinart).

The only need to tell a better story is if the story belies actualities. For Clinton to express the importance of *storytelling* as America's foreign policy first and foremost, says a lot about America's foreign policy. It speaks to an underlying *crisis of accuracy* that underpins metanarrative and speaks to the essentialization of Americanist narratives in general. For example, with regard to the George W. Bush administration's lies and justification for war in Iraq, Chomsky comments, "The administrations claims are so outlandish that it's very hard to

expect people to stick with them unless you keep repeating them” (*Imperial Ambitions* 32). He continues, “It’s the same if you’re trying to sell cars. That’s what you have to do. If you’re trying to turn people into mindless consumers so they don’t interfere with you while you’re reordering the world, you have to keep at them from infancy” (Chomsky, *Imperial Ambitions* 32).

Chomsky’s analogy of political imperial fallacies and consumerism is apt not only because they are analogous, but because in a capitalist culture saturated with consumerism—a sociocultural condition that is pervasive and perpetual—consumerism, politics, and war can become intertextually intertwined consciously or unconsciously, and in a manner that is psychologically conditioning. As Adorno argues,

Culture – as that which goes beyond the system of self-preservation of the species – involves an irrevocably critical impulse towards the status quo and all the institutions thereof. This is by no means merely a tendency embodied in many cultural structures, but rather a protest against the integration which always violently opposes that which is qualitatively different. [...] The fact that anything at all thrives which is different and which is not to be turned into cash illuminates the prevailing praxis in all its dubiousness. (*Culture Industry* 100)

Žižek remarks that “the structure of the universe of commodities and capital in Marx’s *Capital* is not just that of a limited empirical sphere, but a kind of socio-transcendental *a priori*, the matrix which generates the totality of social and political relations” (“Afterword” 75; original emphasis). Thus, when George W. Bush advised the nation to go shopping in order to recover from 9/11, his advice was actually quite apt, all things considered. That advice engages metanarrative logic and a culture of often unquestioning loyalty to established traditional truths.

The dominant understandings of the purity accorded to the founding fathers, the metaphysical quality afforded the constitution, and the supposedly divinely ordained ways of ‘In God we Trust’ capitalism in America, produce and sustain a sociocultural paradigm wherein the backward gaze towards ‘traditional’ American Values makes moral progress extremely difficult and renders the possibility for change on a grand scale terribly hindered.

Consider the gun debate(s) in America. The stakes for those who oppose any changes in gun laws are consumer-based, consumer-biased, and founded in a constitutional amendment made in the late 18th century. Furthermore, along with the *power* of the backward gaze, ‘beacon of light’ ambition produces more than a penchant for framing global issues as needing military solutions. Immanuel Kant questioned if there was ever true ethical progress in history, concluding that there was no clear proof but that we can “discern signs which do indicate that it is possible” (Žižek, *First as Tragedy* 106). However, when the backward gaze of traditionalism is employed in rather glossy, romantic, selective, and amnesiac manners, ethical progress may be stagnant, regressive, and reductive. Cornel West states,

Of course, America is a romantic project. The [...] city on the hill, and all this other mess of lies and so on. I say no, no, America is a very fragile democratic experiment predicated on the dispossession of the lands of indigenous peoples, and the enslavement of African peoples, and the subjugation of women, and the marginalization of gays and lesbians. [...] It has great potential, but this notion that we had it all, or ever will have it all, has got to go” (*Examined Life*).

So, when Ben Carson—and politicians pander to this idea overwhelmingly—speaks as though there is such a thing as the DNA of a nation, or the DNA of national ethos as it runs through the essence of the true American, asking “Is this America anymore? Do we still have standards? Do

we still have values and principles?” and then states, “Our strength is actually in our unity,” one might wonder where this romantic notion of values and unity comes from if not from simplistic, metanarrative understanding, or, a purposeful and pandering utilization of rhetoric for the hopeful purpose of political gain by indulging in an imaginary and amnesiac backward gaze (“Transcript of Republican Presidential Debate”).

Values, and therein morality, should be empathetic and non-egocentric. Yet, in terms of egocentricity, policy, and empathy, image—the *anxiety of appearances*—overrides actualities far too frequently in America while perfunctory rhetorical tropes are batted about thereby distracting the less-discerning public from the actuality of not only the crisis underlying the rhetoric, but from what is actually happening. What are the actualities of America determining, militarily, what another nation’s freedom and democracy should look like? We need not look too deeply to know the answer. Democracy in Iraq, and many other places where America has intervened, did not then simply “emerge like a waterfall bursting to life during a spring thaw” (Sapiro 1). But the actuality of the consequences (primarily, but certainly not only, for the Other) of militarily promoting or ‘delivering’ supposed freedom and democracy around the world historically whitewashes metanarrative, which is trusted by many as containing essentialist truths, while the actuality of circumstance is belied in an appeal to certainties in the face of nuance, negativity, and uncertainty.

The lie of capitalism, on the other hand, is, of course, the level playing field. I am not arguing that capitalism is entirely *inherently evil*, but it is regularly unethical, indiscriminate while simultaneously discriminatory, and violent, in its historical execution. Capitalism operates in insane manners. Work ethic alone—though many have tried to suggest whilst utilizing binary

logic—does not come close to answering questions of moral capitalist practice and the vast ethical quandaries existing among the rich and the poor and within rich and poor divisions.

Revolution or Dissention? Regarding Subdivision and Subversion (and Che Guevara)

This dissertation is not an outright condemnation of capitalism. And I am certainly not offering any sort of utopian solutions. There are plenty of those types of commentaries existing already, and the revolution is nowhere in sight, nor would it be welcome or victorious in America if it were. I do not regard revolution, in a Castro-‘Guevarian’ sense to be the necessary project to achieve change, but rather that human ideas and human thought are revolutionized by incremental pushback against the authority of hegemonic ideas.⁶² College students around the world may wear their Che Guevara t-shirts and necklaces and cover dorm room walls with the posters that they purchased at the University Student Centre, but capitalism wins out in those scenarios as well—as does metanarrative and collective historical amnesia.

The face of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara appears on t-shirts of white, middle-class, suburban teenagers and on the walls of university dorm rooms with such frequency that a significant disconnect has developed between what Che’s life was about and what his likeness symbolizes. Che’s celebrity loomed large during his lifetime, became mythical after his death, and his face alone has come to embody rebellion, individualism, revolution, heroism, socialism, utopianism, radical egalitarianism, and even peace. Yet his life story reveals immense contradictions with his legend. Though Che’s likeness has become that of a guerrilla militant rock star, what he symbolizes and who he actually was is at times terribly contradictory. He took pleasure with combat, was capable of carrying out cold-blooded executions, rejected individuality, and

⁶² To be fair this is a classical liberal notion.

restlessly pursued militant adventure to his death. The myth that has been perpetuated has overshadowed the facts of Che's life and narrowed the collective memory of him to that of a social saviour.

Whether as a symbol of rebellion, anti-Americanism, socialism, or simply nonconformity, the individual who wears his image on their t-shirt, or bears his likeness on their bedroom wall, uses it as is desired. In doing so, they often irresponsibly ignore that there is something darker and murderous behind the image. History has often framed his story with both willful bias and ignorant devotion that have obscured the facts and made him into hero, a saviour, a martyr, a Christ, contradicting what the man, the ideologies, and the life lived were actually all about.⁶³

Che Guevara provides a potent example of the symbolic realm superseding actualities. Che was a doctor-turned-warrior who became a symbol for plenty of things that are often ignorant of actual history. It is yet another instance of simplifying narrative from something complex into something meta. This is what Trump has somehow gotten away with for all of his incompetence, idiocy, and contradictions of GOP tradition: he is a symbol for whatever people want him to symbolize. Laclau argues, "An empty signifier [...] is not just a signifier without a signified – which, as such, would be outside signification – but one signifying the blind spot inherent to signification, the point where signification finds its own limits, but which, if it is going to be possible at all, has to be represented as the *meaningless precondition of meaning*" (*Rhetorical Foundations* 64; emphasis added).

⁶³ While the persecution complex can be related to apocalyptic thinking, the saviour fixation is both utopian and apocalyptic. In either case illusion, blind spots, are required.

What Laclau is speaking to is not an insignificant or frivolous issue. This is at the axis of reality and actuality, mythology and superficiality, and at the core of privilege being rewarded to the posturing of certainty and the denials of paradox. “The true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love” Guevara states (qtd. in Vargas Llosa). As well, he is on record saying that “[h]atred [must be] an element of struggle; unbending hatred for the enemy, which pushes a human being beyond his natural limitations, making him into an effective, violent, selective, and cold-blooded killing machine. This is what our soldiers must become” (qtd. in Vargas Llosa).

Violence aside, for the moment, it is not the contradictory nature of his language that is the problem here necessarily. It is within all of us to have duality of thought, and that in and of itself should not be regarded as essentially problematic. The problematic aspect of the legend of Che Guevara and subsequent respect and admiration afforded him, is the frequent public acceptance of the former statement’s sentiment and the disregard or ignorance of the latter. Trump does the same thing, publicly, over and over, telling lies and contradicting himself while his supporters remain loyal.

Marcuse writes, “The slogan ‘let’s sit down and reason together’ has rightly become a joke. Can you reason with the Pentagon on any other thing than the relative effectiveness of killing machines—and their price?” (133). Perhaps this is precisely what Che reasoned he was up against and thus took to similar, though different, philosophy and correspondingly violent (re)action. Marcuse continues,

The Secretary of State can reason with the Secretary of Treasury, and the latter with another Secretary and his advisors, and they can all reason with Members of the Board of the great corporations. This is incestuous reasoning; they are all in agreement about the basic issue: the strengthening of the established power structure. Reasoning ‘from

without' the power structure is a naïve idea. (133)

Reasoning *to* the power structure may be naïve. But reasoning outside of the power structure is of the utmost importance.

As it has been demonstrated in this dissertation thus far, lack of recognition (of power structures for instance) leads to reification, and thus recognition is paramount. Recognition is precisely what brings about change (recognizing the problem without necessarily knowing the solution). We need to know the power structure and demonstrate its immense faults. This will not change everything immediately and may never change some things at all, but in recognition lies potentiality; it allows for modification and it is of principal importance. Marcuse asserts, “[The power structure] will listen only to the extent to which the voices will be translated into votes” (133). Is this not precisely why recognition is needed? Is this not why Bernie Sanders is important not for winning the vote but for running the race and introducing new language into the popular lexicon? Is this not why someone like Trump could appear to be an outlier simply for being childish and unprofessional, unpresidential and thus appealing to many people precisely because they did not consider him to be a typical politician, while being at once terribly misunderstood and easily understood at the same time, being simultaneously offensively accurate and a misguided understanding of what American values are or should be? The citizenry did indeed vote for change with Trump, but they stared straight into the existing power structure that appeals to populism, that of high school prom kings, of celebrity apprentices, and of what they imagined was not the power structure, not politics as usual, not corporate, but is in actuality nothing if not about corporate rule and political power.

The evils of capitalism should be recognized in order for corrective transformations—cultural, societal, and individual—whatever they may be, to take place. While the detrimental

effects of capitalism are plenty, with a heavy socialist bent and proper regulations—which is more than we can hope for in the context of Americanism—capitalism could proceed in tandem with a massive reduction in the harm it causes. There is plenty in capitalism to find abhorrent and requiring reform or to be exorcised entirely, but a realist must be wary of what many would regard as extremism or radically leftist ideas and be reasonable about the possibilities for reform and the incremental shifts that must be made in both in capitalist economic practice and ideology.

In this regard, Laclau uses the example of an economic strategy such as the “nationalization of [...] basic industries” and argues that it is simply the “technical way of running the economy, and if remains so it will never become an *ideology*” (*Rhetorical Foundations* 17; original emphasis). “How does the transformation into the latter take place?” he asks (Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations* 17). He responds to his own questions thusly:

Only if the particularity of the economic measure starts to incarnate something more and different from itself – for instance, the emancipation from foreign domination, the elimination of capitalist waste, the possibility of social justice for excluded sections of the population, and so on; in short, the possibility of constituting the community as a coherent whole. That impossible object – the fullness of the community – appears here as depending on a particular set of transformations at the economic level. This is the ideological effect *strictu senso*: the belief that there is a particular social arrangement that can bring about the closure and transparency of the community. (Laclau, *Rhetorical Foundations* 17; original emphasis)

Laclau adds, “But let us remember that this illusion is a necessary one. The argument should be understood as presenting ideology as a dimension of society that cannot be repressed, not as a

critique of ideology” (*Rhetorical Foundations* 17). “There is ideology,” Laclau concludes, “whenever a particular content shows itself as more than itself” (*Rhetorical Foundations* 17). We can recognize that American capitalism is much more than simply an economic system. It is more than itself. It *is* ideology. And it is immensely ideologically lacking in social justice especially in its neoliberal form.

While these passages from Laclau were mainly written by him in order to make distinctions regarding ideology, he proposes that communities strive for a coherent wholeness that is nonetheless unattainable, while also demonstrating that ideology is embedded in capitalist economic policy as its content inevitably ‘shows itself as more than itself’. Moreover, Laclau writes, “[T]he effect of the logic of equivalence is to impoverish meaning: this explains how thinness can proceed out of thickness” (*Rhetorical Foundations* 24). The seemingly (for some people including many Americans and including American ethos in general) intertextual relationship of capitalism and freedom is a thinning out of what should be more dynamic thinking. Capitalism as freedom is thin, while capitalism thickened is, among other things, a war machine, a social burden, a hegemonic separation of the sheep and the goats considered ethical, just, fair, and moral.

The Subversiveness of Postmodernism and Queerness in Capitalism

The neoliberal logic reigns supreme for the moment, and though the postmodern condition has offered plenty of anti-hegemonic remedies to capitalism’s evils, it has been mistaken by many of its critics to be a contributing factor to neoliberal economics. Neoliberalism and postmodernism are not a single coherent condition, nor an inevitability of one another, as some, including Jameson suggest, or posture theoretically and semantically; indeed,

postmodernism and neoliberalism each undermine the other for better and worse. Halberstam addresses postmodernism, queer theory, and capitalism in these respects:

[Queer theory provides] new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have clear but not essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects. [...Q]ueer refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time. ‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance. ‘Queer space’ refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics. Meanwhile, ‘postmodernism’[...] takes on meaning in relation to new forms of cultural production that emerge both in sync with and running counter to what Jameson has called the ‘logic’ of late capitalism. (*In a Queer Time and Place* 6)

She continues, “[P]ostmodernism [is] both a crisis and an opportunity—a crisis in the stability of form and meaning, and an opportunity to rethink the practice of cultural production, its hierarchies and power dynamics, its tendency to resist or capitulate” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 6).

In other words, postmodernism and queer theory find their opportunity precisely in crisis—not in the internal, perpetual daily actual practical crises of capitalism per se—but in producing counternarratives to classical notions of progress, success, and production. Moreover, postmodernism works to delegitimize axiomatic understanding. And neoliberalism is, for many people, a manifestation of freedom that is entirely axiomatic. It is no coincidence that the language around the topic of neoliberalism includes the ‘purity’ of the market, ‘free market

fundamentalism’, and the ‘invisible hand’ (and, of course, *language* creates and contributes to narratives, discourse, and hegemony). Yet, neoliberalism governs through investments in fetishized freedom, while postmodernism and queer theory defetishize Truth.

Postmodern and queer discourse point towards a Hegelian understanding of history insofar as the world is constituted by ideas, and change is perpetual, and thus the logic of our understanding gives us formal understanding. This understanding is not rooted in being, or not being, but in becoming. Becoming is process, and process means that no conventional assumption is unchanging, no seemingly harmonious social norm is armed with enough depth to be self-sustaining. And if nothing in these regards is unchanging, if no social concepts should escape being subject to contradiction and negation, then uncertainty is always present, in the present, which is never static but always becoming or unbecoming.

Accordingly, Deborah Britzman makes the correct assertion that “gay and lesbian demands for civil rights call into question the stability and fundamentalist grounds of categories like masculinity, femininity, sexuality, citizenship, nation, culture, literacy, consent, legality, and so forth” (212). Britzman summates the issue(s) that queerness calls into question as the “epidemic of signification” (212). Similarly, in *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*, bell hooks asserts the importance of ‘positionalities’ within postmodern discourse(s) that are “shaking up the idea that any of us are inherently *anything* – that we *become* who we are” (210; original emphasis). Furthermore, Butler argues that the ‘unity’ of gender is

the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform [while] the presumption [...] is that the ‘being’ of gender is *an effect*, an object of a genealogical investigation that maps out the political parameters of its construction in the mode of ontology. To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or

artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ as oppositional. (*Gender Trouble* 43; original emphasis)

‘Artificiality’, ‘real(ity)’, and ‘authenticity’ are also contentious issues when it comes to postmodernism.

Daniel Boorstin, for example, argues that the “moral” response to postmodernism is “uncompromising: we must stick with the hard distinction between reality and artifice, self and image, and substance and surface, and decry the incessant spread of inauthenticity and illusion” (qtd. in Sternberg 432). Yet, what open investigations of authenticity and illusion offer, and what presumably frightens Boorstin, is the potential realization that that which was thought to be authentic is not, and that which was thought to be real is illusion.

The shortcoming in Boorstin’s argument then, the paradoxical thought that his position is grounded in, is the embrace of ‘hard distinctions’. If he actually makes hard distinctions, where he seeks reality he may find artifice, and where he seeks the self he may find image, performance, the construction of identity, unoriginality, and inauthenticity. The self, insofar as it pertains to identity, emerges only “through the mediation of its established categories [...] because for people to identify themselves in a particular way, that concept of identity must have [in all likelihood] *already* existed” (Cabrera 34; original emphasis). Put differently—and thus akin to Sartre’s summation of existentialism that existence precedes essence, as well as his assertion that “every truth and every action imply an environment and a human subjectivity”—Cabrera states, “subjects do not preexist the categories that define their identities. Identities are not the sum total of the personal attributes that belong to subjects, rather, attributes are defining and constituting elements of the identities of those who are said to have or bear those attributes”

(Sartre, *Existentialism* 18, Cabrera 41). This understanding suggests that meaning “is not independent of genesis” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia* 43-44).

In other words, the self that Boorstin may find when seeking ‘hard distinctions’ will have more to do with what he believes it is than anything resembling innateness with regard to authenticity. Postmodernity, simplified, as Lyotard states, is an “incredulity toward metanarratives,” and this incredulity is in part “a product of progress in the sciences” (xxiv). As science may take questions away from us by providing previously unknown understanding, it also imposes questions upon us if it disposes of former narratives, and thus postmodern discourse and queer theory, as does science, embrace questioning.

Admitting that ‘hard distinctions’ are not eternal nor exempt from questioning is simply a frightening prospect for many people, but one that if disregarded allows for the naturalization of many oppressing discourses, especially if we ignore the historicity of discourse. For instance, Foucault locates the moment in which homosexuality was transformed discursively, and subsequently in normative terms, from an act to a much more encompassing identity: “The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality” (*The History of Sexuality* 43).

For some people, many of these aspects of definition are not that problematic; indeed, many who identify as homosexual would welcome the act being also understood as an aspect of identity, if not, as Foucault suggests, in such a totalizing manner. But when one is defined from without, by dominant sociocultural discourse and then by those who believe and abide to the stringent, encompassing ideas of the ‘nature’ of a person, it can be entirely debilitating,

colonizing, and, more metaphorically, disheartening. Fanon writes, “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation” (18). We can remove Fanon’s assertion from the confines of a literal historical interpretation of ‘colonization’ and from ‘nation’ to understand that what he is stating applies to cultural and societal subjugation, in various terms, including discounting those perceived against dominant discourse as Other.

The intention of Butler’s landmark inquiry, *Gender Trouble*, seeks to understand “the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation [of illusoriness or artificiality, and real and authentic] and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of ‘the real’ and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization” (43). As I write these words, I am tempted to think that this is generally well understood in many respects. However, to conclude that the recognition of cultural configurations—and therein the recognition of, for instance, hybridization and heterogeneity as subversive aspects of postmodernity, queer theory, and queer lives—offers an ‘upper hand’ ideologically, would be to romanticize the sociocultural position of those oppressed by the actual effects of domination and marginalization. As Fanon suggests, the marginalized are perpetually subject to the shadows of pretext (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Yet, when we question what constitutes the self, question the narratives, discourses, and ideologies that form identity, this is a necessary, responsible, self-reflective act with which to question the cultural value of tradition, ideology, or of hegemony, that are too often presumed to hold substantiality. Ignoring the potential fallacy of ‘hard distinctions’, on the other hand, is morally questionable inaction.

Jameson argues that what we are left with then, in postmodernity, is the disorienting “mysterious charge of affect” (Jameson 28). However, ‘affect’ offers a change in capacity. “You are only ever in the present in passing,” Massumi states, and when you ‘affect’ something, “you are at the same time opening yourself up to being affected in turn, and in a slightly different way than you might have been the moment before. You have made a transition, however slight. You have stepped over a threshold. Affect is this passing of a threshold” (*Politics of Affect* 4).

Therefore, in affect is liminality, which I maintain is a condition of human existence in general. In affecting and being affected, we can see the uncertainty and superficiality that fractures Truth and demonstrates the cracks in fundamentalist ideas of depth, certainty, and stability.

The Depths of Superficiality

Superficiality, in regard to affect, again, works conceptually as well as pragmatically, and often affectively, to problematize notions of metanarrative and of metaculture. Certainly, there are casualties of postmodernism, but to reduce its complexity to, for instance, the potentially negative ‘realities’ or actualities of the incessant utilization of binaries (such as authenticity and simulacra), or to assume that the perceived negative qualities of these issues are entirely tragedies of postmodernism, is to vastly oversimplify the debate. Superficiality, for instance, can pertain to mimesis of ‘reality’, or to the simple notion of style over substance, but it can also signal the death of God, and the demystification of meaning (which, it should be reiterated, is precisely what is unsettling to many critics of postmodern discourse).

Superficiality should not be only understood as synonymous with ‘depthlessness’, as counterintuitive as that may seem. Instead, superficiality may be better understood as antonymous to the notion of grand universal truth. As Angela McRobbie argues, postmodernism “is

much more than an overstylized posture adopted by those who can afford to abandon politics. Instead it is a way of marking out a new set of convergences and divergences around certain critical questions about the society in which we live” (66). Thus, one of the common lamentations regarding postmodernism and its convergences and divergences is that of the collapse of high and low culture wherein high culture is frequently associated with depth and certain hegemonic norms and low culture with superficiality and lack of substance.

For instance, Christopher Norris deems postmodernism to be an “impoverished narrative of loss [which is] intellectually bankrupt” asserting also that it is “a willful rejection of the prevailing idea that critical intelligence and rational thought allow the serious thinker to separate truth from illusion and reality from ideological mis-recognition” (Snipp-Walmsley 419). Similarly, in Roger Scruton’s conservative defense of high culture, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Modern Culture*, he argues that the “unrealities of fantasy,” which according to Scruton are a fundamental condition of our postmodern condition, “penetrate and pollute the world” (67). He writes,

[High culture] cannot survive the triumph of fantasy, cynicism and sentimentality. For these re-focus our emotions. They cheapen our endeavours, by directing them away from what is serious, long-term and committed, towards what is immediate, effortless and for sale. A common culture dignifies people, by setting their desires and projects within an enduring context. It makes the spirit believable and commitment sincere, by providing the words, gestures, rituals, and beliefs which moralise our actions.

(Scruton 67)

Yet high culture is certainly not the sole superior producer of morality. And what is more, what exactly is the commonality that Scruton longs for? Surely it is not with the company of those

who cheapen his endeavours? Evidently, Scruton is forgetting that there are those who are among *the low* that in time become a part of high culture—consider many artists originally rejected only to then eventually be accepted (often posthumously) as worthy of commercial success—i.e. the recognition of their ‘genius’ by those who would have, like Scruton, despised their original presence. The commonality he seeks is within an exclusive moralizing community.

Postmodernism effectively, rightfully, releases morality and ethics from static, conventional, bourgeoisie categories. Moreover, the collapse of high into low culture in the postmodern condition works to challenge the “political and intellectual formation of modernity” thereby scrutinizing the “pillars of thinking which have supported the project of modernity” (which includes, as Fanon might attest, many ‘serious’, ‘long-term’, and ‘committed’ uncivilized attempts at civilization) (McRobbie 62).

When the authority of the ‘rituals’ and ‘beliefs’ that work to moralize our actions are thrown into question, we can recognize that the deeper ‘reality’ that informs these beliefs frequently pertains to Žižek’s ‘temptation of meaning’, which involves the mystification and fetishization of meaning. We can recognize too the fallacy of, and the danger in, subscribing to the idea that the nation you reside in produces an identity requirement, or that religion requires rejection of non-subscribing identities. Fromm, in the Freudian tradition, argues that the “common fantasy satisfactions have an essential advantage over individual daydreams: by virtue of their universality, the fantasies are perceived by the conscious mind as if they were real. An illusion shared by everybody becomes a reality. The oldest of these collective fantasy satisfactions is religion” (*Dogma of Christ* 20).

Knowledge is comprised of systems of thought which become controlling, socially legitimated, and institutional. Fromm writes, “Social stability depends relatively little upon the

use of external force. It depends for the most part upon the fact that [humankind] find themselves in a psychic condition that roots them inwardly in an existing social situation” (*Dogma of Christ* 14). Postmodernism and queer theory reveal the cracks in the roots, in the systems of thought, while neoliberalism, or the logic of late capitalism, exploits the potential for systems of thought to produce capital.

Acknowledging that a capitalist, neoliberal, globalized society coexists with postmodernity is not a concession to Jameson’s argument regarding postmodernity and the logic of late capitalism, insofar as postmodernity and neoliberalism may co-occur without the latter being an inevitability of the former. Indeed, Harvey argues that what postmodernism did was create conditions of culture that may have allowed for neoliberalism’s proliferation, but this coming together of different realities, so to speak, happened as a rather conscious concerted effort by parties interested in neoliberalism’s proliferation who managed to hijack postmodern ideals such as individual freedom and “utilize a practical strategy that emphasized the liberty of consumer choice, not only with respect to particular products but also with respect to lifestyles, modes of expression, and a wide range of cultural practices” (*A Brief History* 42). Harvey writes,

Neoliberalization required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism. As such it proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called ‘post-modernism’ which had long been lurking in the wings but could now emerge full-blown as both a cultural and an intellectual dominant. This was the challenge that corporations and class elites set out to finesse in the 1980s. None of this was very clear at the time. (*A Brief History* 42-43)

So, while I am tempted to suggest that neoliberalism is the ‘terrible accident’ of postmodernism, just as Sedgwick suggests that HIV/AIDS is the terrible accident of homosexuality—wherein in each case the latter is not responsible whatsoever for the former—the neoliberal agenda has been much too overt in targeting its victims for me to cling to this analogy. Nevertheless, market deregulation may be a terribly unfortunate rationality within the postmodern condition, but, again, is not an inevitability, or even symptomatic of postmodernism, just as HIV/AIDS is not, and was not, an inevitability of, or symptomatic of, homosexuality as much of the early genocidal overdeterminations of HIV/AIDS discourse would have had us believe. Indeed, as stated, Harvey describes the linkage of postmodernism with neoliberalism as a “challenge that corporations and class elites set out to *finesse*” (*A Brief History* 42; emphasis added).

Brown (citing Marx), points out that bourgeois rights are rendered necessary, in part, “by naturalizing the egoism of capitalist society, reifying the ‘frenzied movement of the material elements’ of this society as the nature of [humankind], thereby masking social power and mistaking its effects—atomistic individuals—for its wellspring and agents” (*Regulating Aversion* 114). Postmodern discourse and queer theory rightfully problematize naturalization and reification, while the juggernaut of neoliberalism, or the logic of late capitalism, was brought about by powerful ideological influences working in concert with one another in order to coercively naturalize free market fundamentalism as a principal freedom, which subsequently becomes a socially reified understanding, as contestation and negation are interrupted by, quieted by, hegemonic logic. It helps, of course, that Americanism and therein the American Dream and its capitalist understandings, had already primed the American public to not only associate consumerism with individual freedom, but to intertextually render that association a presumably innate aspect of Americanism.

Without Cultural Studies and Critical Theory, regressions towards the imperative of capitalism and the dogma of the American Dream are inevitable. If the Dream is the ideal which is thought by many to be the very soul of the nation, then the soul is devastatingly corrupt. Semantics aside (good, bad, soul, evil), Cultural Studies and Critical Theory need to be a part of good governance and a part of political economy, while investigative examination of capitalism and its ‘for better or worse’ aspects must be interrogated. As Fine and Saad-Fihlo argue, “[T]o breathe analytical and explanatory life into competition, economic crisis and globalisation, and go beyond mysticism, we must start with a clear understanding of the social relations underpinning capitalist production, rather than fetishise its effects” (23).⁶⁴

Revolution, Reification, and Life in Between

In America specifically, the idea of an uprising against capitalism, which Marx perceived as a general inevitability, would have to penetrate the pervasive, fetishized, normalization of us/them dichotomies pertaining to the essential character of the American, and so too the un-American, inextricably linked to capitalist endeavour and idealized by the dogma of the Dream. The discourse of American nationalism itself, perpetually persuades the working class to cheer their own subjugation and to participate in their exploitation *as an expression* of the nation’s

⁶⁴ Conspicuous consumption and the commodity fetishization therein are fundamentally linked to personal fulfillment, to happiness, and to individual identity within a capitalist sociocultural paradigm. This link helps to quell public concern about the public good, specifically in this case in America, regarding the rather astonishing paradox between endless pronouncements about liberalism and freedom and the insidious culture of ritual and sacrifice to the erratic excess of the addictive gods of capitalism and militarism. Giroux writes, “Mass [pragmatic] uncertainty accompanies the endless bad news about neoliberal capitalism with its downsizing and contract labor policies, its gutting of social provisions, and its contempt for the public good” (*Beyond the Spectacle* 6). He continues, “Economic uncertainty coupled with the fear of random violence now provides the conditions for more prisons, besieged cities, gated communities, galloping intrusions on privacy, increased surveillance, and the emergence of a police state” (Giroux, *Beyond the Spectacle* 6). Happiness, in America, is often thought to be achieved through *earned* success. But the manners in which it is earned—militarily, economically, or otherwise—are often beside the point, while the definition of success is too often linked to ideals of ‘winning’, of power, and within the philosophical realm of ‘might is right’.

freedom. In doing, the citizenry confirms Adorno and Horkheimer's assertion that "the defrauded masses cling [...] to the myth of success [insisting] unwaveringly on the ideology by which they are enslaved" ("The Culture Industry" 59). This is not to say that all are 'duped' per se, though the *affectiveness* of national ethos is a powerful coercer. As Adorno suggests,

No matter how reified [...] categories are in reality, [they are not] totally reified. [...]

Therefore, the spontaneous consciousness, not yet totally in the grips of reification, is still in the position to alter the function of the institution within which this consciousness expresses itself. For the present, within the liberal-democratic order, the individual still has sufficient freedom within the institution and with its help to make a modest contribution to its correction. (*Culture Industry* 130-131)

Therefore, there are moments like 'Occupy' and there are grassroots movements, and countercultures, and subcultures of resistance. But the potential for anything remotely resembling a sea change in terms of the capitalist imperative in American national ethos, and thus a significant change of policy, is perpetually quieted by the reification of that which is considered *permanent* (American, Capitalist) ideology, and ideology which is insidious and yet simultaneously present, visible, and anxiously reiterated. As Adorno states, the potential contributions to correction are *modest*.

"The trouble with capitalism," Berman writes, is that "it destroys the human possibilities it [purportedly] creates. It fosters, indeed forces, self-development for everybody; but people can develop only in restricted and distorted ways," which reduces the potential for the 'spontaneous consciousness' of which Adorno speaks (95). While it is true, as Pierre Bourdieu asserts, that "the state molds mental structures and imposes common principles of vision and division [and] it thereby contributes to the construction of what is commonly designated as national identity,"

organic laws, policed by implicit cultural policy—the culture’s policing of itself in accordance to reified ideals that pass as organic—also shape the citizenry, and often work to quiet the potential for dissent (qtd. in Wodak et al 29).

Within implicit cultural policy we find the underlying ideological reasoning which supports the right(eous)ness of capitalism: it is a system that provides freedom, choice, and incentive. We are free to be as rich or as poor as we choose, and we choose because there is incentive to choose. Social inequality, then, becomes recognized as the result of will and the lack of will and work ethic rather than systemic oppression. It is a nice dream for the ‘winners’. Marx argues that it is impossible to create moral power simply by paragraphs of law (*Capital*). Thus, ‘organic laws’, and/or ‘implicit’ cultural policies work because identity is often “value-rational rather than instrumental rational” (Appadurai 15).

Resistance and Commonality, Deviance and Ordinary

There is resistance in subcultural movements, whether they be overtly political or artistic or otherwise. In postmodernism, for example, or queer lives and queer communities, or in other marginalized lives pertaining to race for instance, we do see at times the ways in which we can demonstrate “the potential for cultural production to exceed and resist economic imperatives,” and resist that which pertains to, and that which are, longstanding organic laws, precisely because postmodernism and marginalized lives challenge organic laws, or hegemonic norms, in various (also organic) manners (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 98). Organic, in this context, is not synonymous with ‘natural’ but instead meaning that which has a mechanism(s) all its own that disturbs prevailing norms simply by *being or becoming*, by simply existing.

Organic resistance, in this context, is similar to the organic laws that Marx speaks of, which are implicitly dominant norms not necessarily governed by law (though that too is often

the case), but governed by their *history* as norms, their reified nature as hegemonic understandings. Yet, organic actualities that challenge organic laws are contradictory to organic laws; they are not norms but subversive actualities that do not exist as active protest necessarily, but simply exist, and in doing, are in themselves a form of resistance. For instance, homosexuality, in its *existence*, Foucault states, “threatens people as a ‘way of life’ rather than as a way of having sex” (qtd. in Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 1).

I argue that both are threatening to many people—homosexuality as a way of life and as a way of having sex—as just the idea of the latter can make many people deeply uncomfortable, and in doing its existence (whether in one’s imagination or realized otherwise) taps at the precise nerve where being uncomfortable with something equates, for many people, to that something being immoral. In the mere existence of homosexuality, heteronormativity is challenged to some degree. It is the ‘way of life’ scenario, however, that effectively, organically interrupts the status quo, or what is *considered* to be the status quo, or the hegemonic norm, for many people. The resistance found in marginalized populations and in subcultures and subcultural activities need not be movements of conscious, purposeful struggle, *necessarily*, for they are resistant nonetheless organically, just in being, or, in more Hegelian terms, in becoming.

Dialectics—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—need not always work through conscious force insofar as pertaining to, for instance, an organized revolutionary front. Of course, organic resistance is not always enough, and often is not. Certainly, I do not intend to romanticize what is for marginalized populations very real and constant struggle for merely existing. But existence in being, or in becoming, or unbecoming, is part of change; it is incremental, and it is a starting point, and in postmodern times it is frequently much more than simply a starting point.

Again, *all* communication is symbolic, and therefore, fundamentally interpretive. Therefore, recognizing context is paramount. In certain contexts, certain things become ordinary, regular, normal, naturalized. This, in part, is what provides people with the idea of community and of (shared, collective) culture. Different cultures may be defined as bringing different meanings to the same events, as Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott suggest, but these meanings become constrained by norms, by what is accepted and expected *en masse*, by what becomes ordinary. Therefore, 'ordinary' is a trait that Raymond Williams includes in his definition of culture. What is ordinary becomes ordinary as it is reified over time by reiteration and (the failure of) recognition. Within these constraints, culture is established through 'organic' occurrences, through laws, and through implicit and explicit sociocultural policy.

Culture, as much as it is and certainly should be contested terrain, works to *stabilize* meaning, and to create hegemonic norms that are organized within society and resistant to contestation. Hegemonic norms are areas of meaning where power is very much at work, and that which is considered outside of ordinary and accepted norms is that which is also considered deviant. That which deviates from ordinary, normal, common sense is therefore not included in the vast consensus that is garnered to be (consciously or otherwise) within hegemony, and thus, is that which is quite often considered immoral. Marcuse writes,

In a society based on alienated labor, human sensibility is *blunted*: men perceive things only in the forms and functions in which they are given, made, used by the existing society; and they perceive only the possibilities of transformation as defined by, and confined to, the existing society. Thus, the existing society is *reproduced* not only in the mind, the consciousness of men, but *also in their senses*; and no persuasion, no theory, no reasoning can break this prison, unless the fixed, petrified *sensibility* of the individuals is

'dissolved,' opened to a new dimension of history, until the oppressive familiarity with the given object world is broken—broken in a *second alienation*: that from the alienated society. (71-72; original emphasis)

A regard for history, and historicity, includes the study and acknowledgement of change over time. It is the study of dialectics, of changing discourse, of the recognition of the *lag* in changing discourse, the recognition of the power of norms, and the recognition of the *misidentification* of deviance. One need only examine the change, and the lack of change, regarding the rights and acceptances of certain populations throughout history in order to recognize the hold that normativities and hegemonic norms have on so many people. We can recognize the grip of the stories that have been told and the discourses that people are folded into—race, gender, heteronormativity, etc., and we can see the discomfort and unease that so many people feel when meeting with difference.

The absence of critical awareness of one's own potential lack of engagement with one's individual conviction, or lack of critical engagement with society's organizational aspects, its laws, governance, and its norms, allows not only the acceptance of the power dynamics within media, culture, and society as they are, but also the acceptance of normalized aspects of culture as natural. Hegemonic norms are substantiated because of the lack of agency and access for many individuals and populations, and the oft-considered obviousness and ordinariness of the distribution and continuance of the provisions of power for those already privileged. Cultural norms are maintained by the unwillingness on the part of many people to not only recognize privilege but to relinquish any aspect of that privilege. The ignorance of the ideological origins of an individual's conviction, or simply the lack of recognition of ideology, which so often

passes invisibly and uncontested both within and without the individual, also maintains the stability of sociocultural common sense.

Queer Ideas and Aesthetics

When the *ordinary*, is contested within accepted culture, this, in part, is how change may occur. Again, this is the importance of postmodernism, of queer lives, of difference, of subculture, even at incremental levels that do not come close to revolutionary intentional proactive action and purpose necessarily. When being, and/or becoming, or unbecoming, contests the ordinary, we can recognize not only the occurrences of changing norms historically, the importance of changing norms, the removing or weakening of constraints that existed previously, but also the lag of changing discourse. For instance, the changes that the Civil Rights protests brought about in the 1950s and 1960s in America (specifically though not exclusively) were part of a process that was initiated much earlier; yet the protests were extremely important in that historical moment as well as for the future of the nation and the world. However, even today we still unfortunately need to have the movement of Black Lives Matter, because while incremental change did indeed occur decades ago, and in some historical considerations drastic change did occur those decades ago, the lag in shifting discourse demonstrates itself to be a *perpetual* hindrance. This hindrance is made all the more prevalent when dealing with essentialist thinking and when this type of thought and supporting rhetoric are privileged.

In a culture that often espouses its tenets as essentialized truisms, the idea that organic forms of resistance could be without *specific* end-goals, necessarily, and without end-goals that are equally as (supposedly) concrete as the problematic actualities that are being challenged, recognizing a problem without producing some sort of encompassing solution is often a much better approach, or at least a logical pragmatic starting point. Again, often it is critical to start

with the problem rather than the solution, for beginning with the (potential) solution is precisely what may lead to utopian-apocalyptic ideas, tendencies, and/or characteristics. One of the criticisms of the Occupy movement was that it did not have an active encoded agenda, i.e. an agreed upon list of demands. But that was where much of its strength existed. Occupy pointed to out problematic aspects of society without a collective solution thereby allowing for an inclusive environment wherein all could agree that *things need to change*.

Solutions require critical thinking, of course, but we can think about problems without knowing the solutions. Criticism is a way forward to a solution or at least to a betterment, especially when some sort of (what may be considered a) utopian totalizing solution is not only naïve but problematic in and of itself, for utopianism can be quite hopeless, and potentially destructive. Critique—different from criticism per se in this context—need not be a tearing apart of ideas but an open analysis, a thoughtful engagement. Critique should not stop when it is believed that a solution has been reached—for that is staticity which is always problematic. Massumi suggests,

[T]he way that a concept like hope can be made useful is when it is not connected to an expected success – when it starts to become something different from optimism – because when you start trying to think ahead into the future from the present point, rationally there really isn't much room for hope. [...] It seems such a mess that I think it can be paralysing. If hope is the opposite of pessimism, then there's precious little to be had. On the other hand, if hope is separated from concepts of optimism and pessimism, from a wishful projection of success or even some kind of rational calculation of outcomes, then I think it starts to be interesting – because it places it in the present. (“Full Text Interview”)

In other words, the endpoint itself can be extremely disruptive—disruptive in a negative sense, not in the sense that it is corruptive to hegemonic understandings, to the current state of things at any given time—insofar as the focus on the ends can deplete the potentially necessary means. Massumi continues,

[In] every situation there are any number of levels of organisation and tendencies at play, in cooperation with each other or at cross-purposes. The way all of the elements interrelate is so complex that it isn't necessarily comprehensible in one go. There's always a sort of vagueness surrounding the situation, an uncertainty about where you might be able to go and what you might be able to do once you exit that particular context. This uncertainty can actually be empowering – once you realise that it gives you a margin of manoeuvrability and you focus on that, rather than on projecting success or failure. (“Full Text Interview”)

Therefore, queer lives, for instance, challenge heteronormative understandings in their very existence, not necessarily by overtly dismantling, contesting, or changing ideas about marriage and laws about civic unions that have become normative in dominant understandings. Indeed, one might question why a queer couple would want to partake in a heteronormative institution such as marriage, which has a patriarchal, corrupt, immoral, unethical, and destructive history.

Indeed, the pursuit of a heteronormative solution, such as same-sex *marriage* as a solution to what is an issue of civil rights, may not be an ideal solution at all, in terms of adopting an institutional and ideological framework (‘marriage’—frequently a religious ceremony) that has, again, historically been patriarchal, inequality-stricken, exclusive, and has allowed for slavery, violence, and rape. In other words, rather than recognizing issues of inequality and then seeking equal rights in the form of a heteronormative institution fraught with

issues itself, why not, in recognizing the problematic aspects of each side of the issue, seek a remedy largely devoid of these problematic hegemonic aspects—even if in name alone?

Aesthetic Marginal Resistance

It is important to question that when marginality enters hegemony, what is the consequence of assimilation? For instance, in terms of subcultural deviance from hegemonic norms, punk rock has historically been the “stylized and ritualized language of the rejected” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 153). What happens, then, when punk enters the mainstream, when punk becomes homogenized, when punk becomes a hit Broadway show? Certainly, the argument can be made that it loses the potency of its original resistance—for better *and* for worse. Bringing a hegemonic, normal, present-day thesis, and a deviant or immoral antithesis into a synthesis may be regarded by some as progress and by others as sellout, compromise, complacency.

As well, while most underground or subcultural movements often dissipate or become a parody of themselves, they do offer sites of resistance that do not need to be revolutionary at all in order to be ‘successful’, or indeed need to be successful at all in order to affect change. Success is often the downfall of relevant subcultural activity. Indeed, I argue that America (with its humble beginnings and subsequent overly flatteringly progressive perception of its defiantly successful democratic version of itself) has also become a parody of itself.⁶⁵ Subcultures represent change in their being, in their becoming or in their unbecoming. They are change in their *temporal* nature, in their *uncertainty*. “Subcultures,” Halberstam writes, “provide a vital critique of the seemingly organic nature of ‘community,’ and they make visible the forms of unbelonging and disconnection that are necessary to the creation of community” (*In a Queer*

⁶⁵ See, among many other examples, Marjorie Taylor Greene.

Time and Place 153). Precisely; so, what happens then when the subculture is a success? It is often absorbed or coopted by the mainstream, by hegemony. As such, much subcultural critique is to be found, instead, in ‘failure’, in remaining outside of hegemonic sociocultural norms.

Halberstam suggests that capitalism “requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain losses for others” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 88). The first rule of capitalism is that surplus value requires exploitation. Thus, Halberstam is interested in “anticapitalist, queer struggle, [...] the refusal of legibility, and the art of unbecoming, [...] art without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 88). “The queer art of failure,” Halberstam writes, “turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 88).

If ‘reality’ is for many people (either shaped by or in its entirety) what is sold to them, both literally and figuratively, by monopoly, hegemony, dominant discourse, then what lies outside of their reality is deviance, failure, immorality, and thus in immorality we can sometimes locate the greatness, the righteousness of humankind. In a Christian context, those who are considered (unforgiven) sinners, hell-bound ungrievable souls, rather than simply being a counterpoint to righteousness they may instead be that which demonstrates piety to be disdainful and religiosity to be deplorable. Was not Jesus, in his time, according to the scriptures, considered immoral, subversively dangerous and threatening to the reigning hegemony? He was murdered, martyred, and failed in the eyes of many, even including his closest followers insofar as he never brought the revolution he promised, or that those who followed him believed was promised. As Halberstam suggests, we can “recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce

to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded *already* in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (*The Queer Art of Failure* 88).

Two of the greatest mistakes or misconceptions of the 1960’s counterculture in America were a) believing that the movement was more ideologically and culturally articulated and cohesive than it was, and b) believing it had immediate revolutionary potential to transform certain societal structures and transform public consciousness. The counterculture simply demonstrated the ability to dissent in large numbers—in various manners from the supposedly frivolous to the more seriously civic-minded—to traditional values thereby producing, *causing* change, however incremental, by *failing* to live up to the hegemonic standards of the times. In 2016/17’s historical moment, while many Bernie Sanders supporters believed, and many still believe, that revolution was/is on the horizon, one of the significant achievements of Sander’s campaign was not revolution but simply changing the language around certain issues, and indeed pushing many Democrats, including Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, further to the left on certain issues.

While this may all seem to fit within a defeatist mode of thinking, it is a realistic rather than optimistic approach, especially when considering the juggernaut of metanarrative and metaculture, not to mention that incremental change is an achievement in itself when regarding history, including the legacy of the Sixties in America. My argument is that opposing ideas can obviously be true (without necessarily being reconciled) at the same time: life is precious; life is meaningless. In this context specifically, there needs to be an ‘outside’ that *remains* unassimilated and fails to penetrate hegemonic standards to the extent that it becomes hegemonic

itself. There also needs to be Others that *do* gradually penetrate hegemonic norms and values, who, in time—not necessarily in an immediate revolutionary sense but an incremental one—may overturn those norms and values. The life of Christ as we know it could have been a potent source of ‘revolutionary’ failure. But many of his supposed intentions were co-opted by ‘mainstream’ ideas thereby becoming a hegemonic power, utilized quite differently than was his intention (according to scripture).

Aesthetics, Art, Resistance

Subcultural movements and marginal populations offer sites of resistance wherein oppositional cultures “are not symmetrical to the authority that they oppose, [while] relations between sexuality,” or race, “and time and space provide immense insight into the flows of power and subversion within postmodernism” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 13). These sites of resistance challenge conventional wisdom, conventional knowledge, and at times “conventional logics of development, maturity, adulthood, and responsibility,” and thus they challenge the logic of dominant culture, including, for instance, national ethos and economic imperatives (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 13). Sometimes these sites of resistance require ideas that are outside of the mainstream that need to *slowly* seep into mainstream consciousness, that need to less obnoxiously, or less repellently (as some may perceive it) infiltrate the mainstream through *aesthetic* means that are (seemingly) not far from convention.

For instance, there is something to be said for television’s *Will and Grace*’s influence on cultural opinion regarding gay lives by utilizing the traditional format of the television sitcom and inserting counterhegemonic and counter-heteronormative narratives (to varying degrees). As well, Ellen DeGeneres’s influence on equal rights, including, but not exclusive to the LGBTQ+ community, should not be overlooked. Her celebrity daytime talk show, which aired for nineteen

years on a major TV network—NBC—carries enormous influence and has changed much of the dialogue and the *consciousness* surrounding some marginalized populations. *The Daily Show* has made tremendous strides in challenging the narratives of mainstream mass media, among other things, while dressing itself up as a ‘typical’ news report.

There is an argument to be made that *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight*, and similar programs are only preaching to the converted, but that does not make the ‘product’ any less important in its existence. Moreover, these programs are important for challenging existing narratives, and revealing actualities that would otherwise be left unsaid or muted. The adult cartoon, *Family Guy*, despite what many argue includes misogynistic narratives and ‘baiting’ humour while employing a somewhat stereotypical white middle-class sitcom family, has been resistant, subversive, and challenging to many dominant modes of thinking, in general, including ideas regarding religion that were previously entirely taboo on a mainstream network. Regarding the latter, it should not be ignored that *Family Guy* airs on the FOX network, home of the right-wing *Fox News*, a pairing that makes for a postmodern, paradoxical yet advantageous and positively corruptive example of the benefits of fluidity, hybridity, as well as the often-unsavoury relationship between aesthetics and commerce.

Aesthetics, including modes of entertainment, can be influential precisely because of the seemingly superficial, *artificial*, and playful ways in which ‘reality’ is challenged. Marcuse suggests that “art opens the established reality to another dimension: that of possible liberation. To be sure, this is illusion [...], but an illusion in which another reality shows forth. And it does so only if art *wills* itself as illusion: as an unreal world other than the established one” (87; original emphasis). The latter is precisely the realm in which *Family Guy*, *South Park*, and many other subversive, yet popular, aesthetic works dwell. Simply put, the arts, aesthetics, have the

ability to change perception. This is not a new idea, but one that should not be forgotten or ignored in favour of a more encompassing narrative.

When Adorno, for example, writes that “[i]n all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan,” he is privileging the commerce aspect over the art, which in many cases is the correct assumption, but certainly not all of the time (*Culture Industry* 85). Aesthetics and commerce enjoy a strange and often paradoxical relationship. The capitalistic aspect of that relationship does not always dictate what art gets produced and what counternarratives to hegemonic dominance the particular art may produce, nor how many people will ‘consume’ the product. Adorno asserts that “[t]he individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap” (*Culture Industry* 85). Yet, when the gap is seemingly insubstantial, and is ignored, it is precisely in this circumstance that the gaps are crucial. The gaps, and often the *subtlety* of the gaps can change perception and influence a change in dominant modes of thought. Can an entity within the culture industry such as a film be revolutionary or revelatory *and* conventional at the same time?

Rancière writes, “Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct ‘fictions’, that is to say material rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and said, between what is done and what can be done” (39). This statement has positive and negative connotations. On the positive side, regarding aesthetics specifically, these ‘rearrangements’ however minor can be very transformative, especially when accumulated over a given period of time. With regard to societal resistance to change, William Stephenson remarks, “By introducing a degree of permissiveness, the system neutralizes a potentially disruptive force and thus tightens

social control” (52). There is truth in this statement in many sociocultural scenarios, but by no means is it a hermetic theory. We could change the wording slightly to counter Stephenson’s observation: ‘By introducing a degree of *digression*’ in the form of permissiveness, ‘outsiders’ neutralize reflexive, knee-jerk reaction thus *loosening* social control.

The argument that Adorno and Horkheimer produce regarding the relentless unity of the culture industry as providing insignificant counter-hegemonic observations is not to be entirely underestimated. Yet, it is not without relevance, for instance, when a mainstream big budget film such as *Fight Club* challenges hegemonic norms regarding commodity fetishism with lines from its protagonist such as, “The things you own, end up owning you.” This is an insight that however seemingly minor to the many people who have not been introduced to the idea, or indeed live by the motto that ‘he who dies with the most toys wins’ could be quite significant. When 1990’s slacker Troy Dyer, surmises in *Reality Bites* that life is a “random lottery of meaningless tragedy and a series of near escapes,” it could meet with consideration by someone who holds to a ‘God’s eye’ narrative and believes that all is within God’s plan. Furthermore, it is not an insignificant commentary on the futility of war, and the embedded militarism in American culture, when Robert Duval’s character famously exclaims in *Apocalypse Now*, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning. You know, one time we had a hill bombed for twelve hours. When it was all over, I walked up. We didn’t find one of ’em, not one stinkin’...body. The smell, you know that gasoline smell, the whole hill. Smelled like victory.” (Or, as the line is commonly remembered, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning. It smells like victory.”)

This is not to say that overt dissent does not disrupt and provoke horrified reactions, nor to say that that is not necessary as well. Yet, the Stonewall Riots—an aggressive and importantly unobvious revolutionary event—are only one piece of a rather large picture in bringing cultural

change, and changing a significant portion of public consciousness of LGBTQ lives. It is to say that punk rock, or the Occupy movement, or a simple symbolic gesture such as burning the flag, or taking a knee during the national anthem, or an idea like ‘make love not war’, need not hold someone to the view that these gestures need to be part of, or associated with, revolutionary activity in terms of overthrowing existing norms and policies in order to achieve a desired outcome. Indeed, if the possibilities for incremental social change are dismissed, what we are left with far too often is apathy, helplessness, lack of action. Or, on the other side, we have reactionary violence and discontent that is met with cries of heresy, immorality, and with the brick wall of resistance to change.

Moreover, for better *and* for worse, as Halberstam points out, echoing, in part, Berman’s earlier cited quote regarding the trouble with capitalism, “Within postmodernism, subcultural activities are as likely to generate new forms of protest as they are to produce new commodities to be absorbed back into a logic of accumulation; and new sites of opposition or ‘geographies of resistance’ become available even as new forms of domination are formed” (*In a Queer Time and Place* 98). Furthermore, addressing the Occupy movement, Chomsky asserts, “To have a revolution—a meaningful one—you need a substantial majority of the population who recognize or believe that further reform is not possible within the institutional framework that exists. And there is nothing like that [in America], not even remotely” (*Occupy* 59).

As I have argued, and as Harvey demonstrates, referring to neoliberal proliferation in the 1980s and the domination of the Reagan administration, people will often put more emphasis on ideology in decision making than in pragmatic concerns: “Not for the first, nor, it is to be feared, for the last time in history has a social group been persuaded to vote against material, economic,

and class interests for cultural, nationalist, and religious reasons” (*A Brief History* 50). Fromm suggests,

In any society the spirit of the whole culture is determined by the spirit of those groups that are most powerful in that society. This is so partly because these groups control the educational system, schools, church, press, theatre, and thereby to imbue the whole population with their own ideas; furthermore, these powerful groups carry so much prestige that the lower classes are more than ready to accept and imitate their values and to identify themselves psychologically. (*Escape from Freedom* 112-113)

For these reasons, precisely, postmodern aesthetics, postmodern thought, subculture, and marginality are important organically.

Yet, though there is truth to Fromm’s claim, matters are not quite as ordained or as homogenous as he seems to suggest. The working class, for example, in a capitalist society, “lives a political existence of its own outside the direct grip of capital [as] it protests and submits, rebels or is integrated into bourgeois society” (Braverman 378). However, it is also true that in its “*permanent* existence,” the working class as the living part of capital, as capital’s occupational structure, “is seized, released, flung into various parts of the social machinery and expelled by others, not in accord with its own *will* or *self-activity*, but in accordance with the movement of capital” (Braverman 378; emphasis added). Therefore, subcultural and marginal lives and activities potentially resist norms and normativities by refusing to try to exist within present norms and *without* the desire to become future norms.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Again, *deviation* critiques hegemony by simply being, or becoming, or unbecoming. Even without overtly overthrowing the ‘machinery’ and the restraints they exist within, sociocultural change can, and does, occur.

Conclusion

Much of the time, patience is an inevitable requirement of sociocultural change, but it should not be considered a defeatist feature. However, certainly patience regarding issues of marginalization, is a rather privileged concept, especially on an individual level. But in terms of cultural change, history has demonstrated that to shift hegemonic norms, there is often, if not always, the lag in changing dominant discourse. This is the difference that Massumi points to when making the distinction between hope and optimism, and the potentially positive effects of affect. He uses the term ‘affect’ (which can have both positive and negative effects, though Massumi accentuates the positive) for hope and margins of manoeuvrability, the capacity for affecting and being affected, as well as, I maintain, a realm of uncertainty that can (and should) be empowering rather than disconcerting.

As Massumi points out in *The Politics of Affect*, freedom arises from within constraints. Freedom is not freedom *from* constraints but a creative conversion of constraint. For example, Massumi uses the analogy of walking as ‘controlled falling’:

There are always constraints. When we walk, we’re dealing with the constraint of gravity. There’s also the constraint of balance, and a need for equilibrium. But, at the same time, to walk you need to throw off the equilibrium, you have to let yourself go into a fall, then you cut it off and regain the balance. You move forward by playing with the constraints, not avoiding them. There’s an openness of movement, even though there’s no escaping constraint. (*Politics of Affect* 10)

If recognition is a precondition of cognition, and thus reification is a failure of recognition, then recognition is a facet of resistance to dominant norms that work to exploit, subjugate, and

oppress. Without recognition (of, for instance, the power of metanarrative and the power of metaculture), there is no sociocultural change.

In every instance, privilege needs to be recognized and there may be little patience to be had by the many who exist without it. Yet, at the risk of being colloquial, the ‘big picture’ is often built (again, for better and for worse) with a better *frame* than more immediate actualities. When we examine history, we can understand the processes, the struggles, the resistance that brings change. But when we are most often simply focused on current institutional, systemic frameworks that subjugate, (and/or/or attempt to) keep order, constrain, and maintain power, the lack of immediate change, the frustration and (oft warranted) impatience with the messiness of changing dominant discourse can be overwhelming and seemingly undefeatable. At what point do we recognize if not somehow reconcile the paradox that life is both meaningful and meaningless (in the grand scheme of things)? Thus, we need to recognize that oftentimes the conditions of existence are entirely paradoxical: Can rock and roll change the world? No. Has it? Yes. But for better and for worse it is arguably not the rebellious cultural force that it once was. It cannot be, for it has entered the grips of the hegemonic norm in many instances, and in many of its incarnations.

We need not lament the loss of cultural forces that surrender—however unwillingly—their potency. That would run the risk of cultural stagnancy, and worse, the risk of dwelling in nostalgia. Many cultural forces and especially countercultural and subcultural forces fade away and/or become a parody of themselves. Indeed, this is one of the problematic aspects of the presence of the backward gaze in American narratives. Even the Sixties can seem idyllic to many people despite the tumultuous actualities of the decade. It was certainly not all peace and love. But the impact these cultural movements make can produce substantial cultural change,

evolution, even if there are many powerful forces at work that will not stop working towards regression, trying to de-evolve. The utopian *aspirations* (not the actualities) of an idea such as Make America Great Again are an example of mass inclination towards de-evolution.

This is precisely why I argue that postmodernism is critical both in theory and in (past) practice. Rancière writes, “The joyful, postmodern artistic license, its exaltation of the carnival of simulacra, all sorts of interbreeding and hybridization, transformed very quickly and came to challenge the freedom or autonomy that the modernist principle conferred – or would have conferred – upon art the mission of accomplishing” (28). Similarly, earlier I incorporated Massumi when arguing that being solution-oriented—or entirely focused on the ‘mission accomplished’ ideal—is often not entirely productive when trying to affect societal and cultural change. Indeed, often facing the problems rather than some sort of encompassing solution is a more progressive and effective way forward.

Rancière argues that postmodernism, specifically therein the avant-garde, challenges “the topographical and military notion of the force that marches in the lead, that has a clear understanding of the movement, embodies its forces, determines the direction of historical evolution, and chooses subjective political orientations” (29). He continues, “If the concept of the avant-garde has any meaning in the aesthetic regime of the arts, it is [...] not on the side of the advanced detachments of artistic innovation but on the side of the invention of sensible forms and material structures for *a life to come*” (Rancière 29; emphasis added). Yet, some of the ambitious claims of revolution within some postmodern movements were misguided precisely in the totality of their revolutionary outlook. Rather, postmodernism points to the imperative to question, to be reckless even, with the present in order that an undeniable understanding of uncertainty prevails insofar as faith, belief, and therein inner certainty—political, moral, ethical,

metaphysical, and otherwise—can produce, among other things, the ‘military notion’ that has a ‘clear understanding of movement’, when indeed it does not.

For instance, what does it mean when belief trumps science? After hearing about four reports produced by his own administration confirming that climate change was real, and attributable to human action, Trump responded by stating that he simply did not believe the reports (De La Garza). This attitude toward the science of climate change is by no means anomalous. There are various reasons why the science is being denied: corporate interests, capitalism and neoliberal deregulation in general, religious belief (wherein many believe that even if climate change is real, it is a sign of the impending apocalypse and is therefore welcome), and anti-intellectualism. Fact-based science has long been disregarded by fundamentalist Christian sentiment because it interferes with the blind spots of dogma, poking holes into the fabric of belief. As mentioned, the world, it has been argued, among other fundamentalist theories, was created by God approximately six thousand years ago with the ‘appearance of age’.

The following chapter examines and demonstrates why scientific fact has often been unable to dismantle religious belief in America. I argue, as well, that the potential philosophical differences between ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ require nuanced investigation. Science and religion both wield great power, but each requires scrutiny in terms of where we find meaning, how meaning-making takes place, and what the limitations are regarding meaning, facts, knowledge, and wisdom. Chapter Ten demonstrates the power, and counterintuitively, the resourcefulness, of anti-intellectualism in America in this regard.

Chapter Ten

Doubtless: Science and Religion, Knowledge and Wisdom in America (and an Examination of Neil Postman's *Technopoly*)

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine how meaning gets made in our minds and lives by both science and religion as well as when the two converge. Throughout the chapter I utilize Neil Postman's (highly respected and influential) *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* in this examination. I demonstrate how despite Postman's argument to the contrary, science does not do away with Christianity in American culture. There are different ideas regarding knowledge (scientific enquiry) and wisdom (humanistic enquiry) which allow religion to continue to have much cultural capital despite being debunked in many circumstances. I demonstrate as well that dogmatism takes on many forms, and scientific dogmatism is not excluded from these types of understandings. Regardless of scientific or religious understandings, which may be entirely conflicting, each has the ability to become dogma, to become 'the Word', and as such the search for meaning and the making of meaning continue indeterminately though nevertheless in search of determination.

Deciphering 'meaning' is an on-going philosophical, theological, social, cultural, and scientific human endeavour. However, when Christianity, and therefore Christian *meaning* has a hegemonic hold on a population, as I argue it does in the United States, regardless in some instances of actual religious faith, science and faith are treacherous domain. For instance, there is a strain of Christian belief, 'Young Earth Creationism', that subscribes to reconciling the consolidation and conflation of the Genesis creation myth with modern scientific understanding. Even as Christian myth loses some of its previous power due to scientific findings, it retains its

power in the eye of the beholder simply because of the overwhelming influence of faith and the willingness and obstinance of fundamentalist belief. This is where the blind spots of dogma, or the ghosts of dogma as well as implicit cultural policy come into play. Scientific understanding may make ‘ghosts’ of dogmatic religious belief, but the faithful still hold strong to the ghosts in the face of their debunking. Science too is not immune to dogmatic faith, especially in the Social Sciences (an oxymoronic term) which often attempt to naturalize certain aspects of human behaviour thereby offering codified facts to that which is not in actuality factual. Eugenics is a prime example in this regard. As well, evolution is both fact and theory. Organisms evolve: fact. The explanations for evolution are theoretical.⁶⁷ Technological determination is another example of providing scientific fact to that which is theoretical, partial, and random.

Because of the void of human existence, our collective unknowing, while religious belief attempts to fill that void with meaning, secular belief, including scientific understanding, is also prone to meaning-making in manners that are not always as whole as they are determined to be. In other words, science is not exempt from dogmatic thinking that often requires faith where facts are determined. There is a certain authority attached to the term ‘science’ just as there is with ‘religion’, and purveyors of media for example, that can often be at fault for perpetuating authoritative facts where facts are either left to be determined or are left outside of the frame in which other facts are offered. Science and religion, while often at odds, are both fields in which dogma, if not the starting point (which is often the case especially in religious contexts), is the idealized endpoint.

⁶⁷ I acknowledge that the term ‘theory’ has a different meaning or connotation in the scientific community as opposed to within the Humanities. But importantly, in terms of science, we must also accept the fact that ‘facts’ do, at times change.

Frank Lambert writes, “During the first half of the nineteenth century, science and religion flourished alongside each other in the United States in a relationship that was harmonious, not contentious” (117). But, as “[s]cience offered novel methodologies and coined a vocabulary for explaining authority” whilst introducing “a new discursive style into American culture,” what was “disturbing for many Christians” was that “Holy Scripture” was called into question as perhaps not being “the immutable, indisputable Word of God that provides a bedrock for faith” thereby introducing uncertainty to all of the “doctrines and teaching [that rested] on it” (Lambert 118). Again, ‘Grant one error to the Word of the Lord and the whole of it is suspect’. Such is the power *and* the precarity of the Word. As “American Protestants divided over how to respond to the new criticism and to the findings of science,” Lambert contends, “[many people] saw the new teachings as deeply disturbing, and they set about to discredit them first through argumentation both within and without the church and then in the political arena” (118). As new meaning(s) entered cultural consciousness thereby challenging formerly axiomatic meaning in people’s lives, the question of how to retain fundamental religious faith in the face of contrary science became paramount.

Making Meaning: Science and Belief

Meaning, insofar as it is utilized to dispel the terror of meaninglessness, is prone to being relegated to an anti-intellectual realm of unquestioning, of acquiescence to tradition or religion, or to authoritative, canonical, culturally reified universals that are in actuality unknowns relied upon to infuse meaninglessness, or unknowing, with knowing.⁶⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that because we are in the world, we are *condemned* to meaning (Critchley). ‘Meaning’,

⁶⁸ As mentioned earlier, Žižek utilizes the phrase ‘the temptation of meaning’ to describe much of humankind’s compulsion to ascribe meaning to what may otherwise be considered a life consisting of “a random lottery of meaningless tragedy and a series of near escapes” (Žižek qtd. in *Examined Life, Reality Bites*).

however, can be quite problematic terrain. Sources of meaning may be, or may resemble, fables, myths, traditions, that which pertains to family values, stories, cultural norms, all of which may seldom reach beyond belief to demonstrate their constructed reality, such as the divinity of Christ, Noah's Ark, marriage between man and woman, or a National Anthem for that matter. These ideological constructs function both as productions of, and producers of meaning, and they inform understandings such as tragedy being a part of God's plan, for example, or a coincidence as being providence. They contribute to the mystification of meaning, to meaningful inner conviction, when uncertainty may be all that can be found to resemble that which is absolute. Natural science is often thought to demystify meaning, acting as myth's counterpoint, offering concreteness, knowable laws and principles, empirical *proof* that provides greater meaning than that which may be regarded as mere belief. Yet, as Simon Critchley asks in his examination of Continental Philosophy, "[D]oes the scientific conception of the world eradicate the need for an answer to the question of the meaning of life? Does the body of knowledge [scientific enquiry] require the appendectomy of wisdom [humanistic enquiry]?" (5).

The easy answer to each of the above queries is that for some people it does and for some it does not. But when the meaning of life is embroiled with scientific knowledge, or when knowledge and wisdom are seen as interchangeable, this may lead to (recognition of, or non-recognition of) the overstated separation of church and state in America, for example, or, to the conflation of fact and fiction, and, however counterintuitive, to the inclusion of ideals and ideas of religion, or religious myth, within scientific study, *despite* scientific fact.

Technopoly

Neil Postman, in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, argues that in America's sociocultural condition of technopoly—which he defines as a totalitarian technocracy

(technocracy being the authority given in society to the role of elite ‘experts’)—the supposed harmony of the theocratic world is utterly obliterated as technological rationality has become the rationality of domination. As such, Postman argues, the moral center of society is removed as technological ‘tools’ “are not integrated into the culture, they attack the culture, [...]they bid to *become* the culture” (28; emphasis added).

Within ‘technopoly’, Postman locates ‘Scientism’, a dogmatic belief that science “can serve as a comprehensive belief system that gives meaning to life, as well as a sense of well-being, morality, and even immortality” (147). Within Scientism, Postman identifies the practice of social science, which he argues coopts the “awesome measure of authority” granted science in technopoly, and in turn works to codify the human condition, applying the methods of the natural sciences to the study of human behaviour (159). He writes, “In most [...] respects, social research has little in common with science, and much in common with other forms of imaginative literature. Yet social ‘scientists’ have consistently sought to identify themselves, and in more than name, with physicists, chemists, biologists, and others who inquire into the lawful regularities of the natural world” (Postman 159). In many ways, Postman’s point is simple, yet important: scientific facts and theories have dismantled many religious ideas, yet science, and social science are still drawn to dogmatic thinking. This is not to argue that there are not scientific ‘facts’ that are irrefutable, only to say the tendency towards dogmatism can be problematic in various instances outside of religious circumstance (for instance, Eugenics, Functionalism, Social Darwinism). Yet, in America, in particular, despite the scientific dismantling of religious ideas, Christian religious ideas remain prominent. Postman’s argument that scientific *knowledge* has betrayed religious *wisdom*, vastly understates the degree to which

religion (Christianity) still holds a place in American life, and overestimates how many (oft religious) people do not trust the ‘authority’ of science.

Postman demonstrates what he perceives as an *absolute* shift from religious authority to secular authority in technopoly, by pointing to a series of scientific discoveries by Galileo, Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, and others, that worked to dispel formerly axiomatic religious truths, such as, for instance, the details of creation as found in the book of Genesis. He asserts that these findings thereby “undermine the whole edifice of belief in sacred stories and ultimately sweep away with it the source to which most humans had looked for moral authority” (Postman 160). He states, “It is not too much to say, I think, that the desacralized world has been searching for an alternative source of moral authority ever since” (Postman 160).

Yet it *is* ‘too much to say’ that America is desacralized, even in technopoly, and certainly too much to say that sacred stories have been swept away or have lost their authority even as they may have been delegitimized. Postman claims that “[u]ndeniably, fewer and fewer people are bound in any serious way to Biblical and other religious traditions as a source of compelling attention and authority” (79). But despite overwhelming evidence to contradict some of the stories in its pages, biblical belief, and (perceived) literal biblical belief, or, fundamentalist belief, has certainly, if illogically, persevered greatly in America. As religious scholar Martin Marty correctly suggests, America “has more than the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution enshrined in a vault in its archival heart; the Bible is also there” (qtd. in Berlinerblau 6).

Postman references the infamous Scopes ‘monkey trial’ of 1925—wherein evolution and creationism were pitted openly against one another in an American court of law—to emphasize the irrelevancy of religion in the face of scientific fact. He states, “The battle settled the issue,

once and for all: in defining truth, the great narrative of inductive science takes precedence over the great narrative of Genesis, and those who do not agree must remain in an intellectual backwater” (Postman 50). However, and in keeping with Hofstadter’s argument(s), ‘intellectual backwater’ is where many Americans and many American ideals exist, as anti-intellectualism still thrives. As Martin Marty suggests, “Poll-takers and politicians alike witness the fact that Americans want to be religious or to think of their nation as ‘under God.’ They see religion as somehow utile for civil and personal character and culture” (qtd. in Luedtke 397). The vast majority of the ‘religious’ in this context are belonging to one form or another of Christianity, and when it comes to the *nation’s* religion, it is Christianity.

Postman claims that certain scientific discoveries have obliterated previously accepted religious Truths thereby fundamentally eliminating traditional “thought-worlds” rendering them “invisible” and thus “irrelevant” (50). But in doing, he (contradictorily) does concede, to an extent, that a dismissal of religion entirely would be to undersell matters, especially in America, as it pertains to social relevancy. He writes,

Technocracy did not entirely destroy the traditions of the social and symbolic worlds. Technocracy subordinated these worlds — yes, even humiliated them — but it did not render them totally ineffectual. In nineteenth-century America, there still existed holy men and the concept of sin. There still existed regional pride, and it was possible to conform to traditional notions of family life. It was possible to respect tradition itself and to find sustenance in ritual and myth. It was possible to believe in social responsibility and the practicality of individual action. It was even possible to believe in common sense and the wisdom of the elderly. It was not easy, but it was possible. (Postman 45-46)

While Postman concedes that dispelling myth does not make myth disappear, he very much understates the idea—much like he does by singling out *nineteenth-century* America and the hold of religious tradition. He writes,

The technocracy that emerged, fully armed, in nineteenth-century America disdained such [traditional, religious, mythical] beliefs, because holy men and sin, grandmothers and families, regional loyalties and two-thousand-year-old traditions, are antagonistic to the technocratic way of life. They are a troublesome residue of a tool-using period, a source of criticism of technocracy. They represent a thought-world that stands apart from technocracy and rebukes it — rebukes its language, its impersonality, its fragmentation, its alienation. And so technocracy disdains such a thought-world but, in America, did not and could not destroy it. (Postman 45-46)

If the Scopes trial demonstrates nothing else, it reveals that even in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence, specific fundamentalisms give no weight to the facts of other ‘theories’, or indeed, to facts. Even as legitimacy is decimated, this does not negate *social relevancy*, cultural prevalence, and cultural norms.

Christianity as Hegemony

In America it is very often easier to side with supposed, accepted common sense, to concede to hegemonic norms which often include and privilege symbolic worlds, to make regional pride a priority, to be devoted to traditional family values, and to privilege wisdom over knowledge. In *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History*, R. Laurence Moore writes, “Important religious groups that had not existed one hundred years before were spread over the American landscape [in the nineteenth century]. This achievement did not come undone easily and would last well into the twentieth century” (144). Moore too

underestimates the longevity of many of these religious groups' relevancy; nevertheless, he continues, "[T]he twentieth century introduced enormous changes in the social and cultural lives of Americans. Many of them might make us wonder how organized religion remained as powerful as it did" (144). Indeed, religion—Christianity specifically—remains as powerful as it is in America because of the prevailing intertextualization of capitalism, nationalism, and Christian belief. Despite the fact that "[a]fter two devastating world wars, science dominated the research agendas of America's leading universities [and thus] [t]heology was no longer the queen of the sciences," Christianity retained its sociocultural capital (R. Moore 145). Christianity still retains its sociocultural capital in America—as does fundamentalist belief in many of its incarnations, because it is better in the minds of many people to be certain rather than uncertain, and the power of the Bible provides that certainty.

Michael Cobb argues that the Bible is "a massive and textually unstable document, which must be translated, implied, refined, interpreted, and applied in very ingenious ways all the time, [...yet] religious language is thought to be a secure form of language" (22-23). While the *ingeniousness* of the applications he refers to is in many cases quite suspect, his point is crucial. Such is the power of the Word of God that its contextual language becomes entitled, providing a source of secure and meaningful identity and purpose, that in actuality, by its very nature, its history, is unstable. Furthermore, fundamentalist belief is demeaning unto itself by its stubborn refusal to consider the existence of certain complexities and ambiguities. This foundation of instability is treacherously volatile considering what content of the Bible is adhered to, by whom, and for what purpose.

If one believes the story of Noah and his ark, for instance, as literal truth, this will likely shape their worldview and their perception of truth with a potentially dark vision of limited

scope that encourages intolerance, destruction, and death, often in accordance with whatever ‘sinful’ dalliances they consider to be the vilest. Moreover, due to intertextual impulses, the ‘two by two’ narrative may confirm notions of heteronormativity. When taken as a scientifically sound narrative, a factual scientifically sound historical event, it may quite easily suspend rationality and support incredulity regarding other scientific facts. As John Boswell suggests, “[Revealed religions] specifically reject rationality as an ultimate criterion of judgement or tolerance as a major goal in human relations” (7). He continues, “Careful analysis can almost always differentiate between conscientious application of religious ethics and the use of religious precepts as justification for personal animosity or prejudice” (Boswell 7). Legitimate ‘careful analysis’ is not an element of fundamentalism.

The willingness to surrender to absolutist ideas is the folly of fundamentalist belief, and yet it provides its comfort in this folly. As far as religious fundamentalism is concerned, when knowledge (again, meaning scientific enquiry) is pitted against wisdom (humanistic enquiry), wisdom wins out the vast majority of the time. Though it stands to be said that many fundamentalists will not only conflate knowledge and wisdom, but also insist that it is all subservient to the Holy Word of God that the scriptures provide. Certainly, the perseverance of Christianity, and the commonness of fundamentalist biblical belief in the face of overwhelming contradictory evidence, can be attributed to the stubborn, non-self-reflective nature of fundamentalist belief. As Nietzsche states, the Christian-Moral interpretation of the world is driven by a “*will to untruth*” (qtd. in Critchley 83; emphasis added).

Yet, religion’s social and cultural significance is sustained not because it provides knowledge and facts but because of humanistic inquiry. Moore states, “If religion were merely science, then people in the modern world [would have] no need for it. Science [can] explain, but

it [cannot] give *meaning* to life” (145; emphasis added). However, Moore argues that this is the case because people are able to make religious belief “rational and credible” (145). My argument, rather, sides with Nietzsche, insofar as there is a deliberate will to deny a place for rationality, instead insisting upon credibility when engaging with many religious scriptures, and specifically with the Bible.

Often what religious inquiry does is reduce complexity—the mysteries of the universe and the metaphysical realm—to something decidedly not complex, that which is simply answered: God. At the same time, religious inquiry will take that which is quite simple, yet terrifying, such as unknowing, and mystify it with the seemingly complex: heaven, hell, apocalypse, grace, forgiveness, unforgiving, prayer, and a life of striving to be a righteous person and all that that entails. The latter is unnecessary in many Christian interpretations because of grace and forgiveness through Christ, however, righteousness paradoxically becomes important when dealing with differing opinions on abortion, homosexuality, gender, Otherness, and all matter of ideological, moral, and ethical conflicts. In many belief systems and moral codes, no matter the amount of faith in Christ, if one disobeys certain elements of biblical interpretation and human wisdom regarding certain matters, there is no antidote for God’s wrath.

There exists an idea in Buddhism that scripture or religious teachings should be thought of as a finger pointing to the moon (the moon being a metaphor for God or Truth, and the like); but one must not mistake the finger for the moon. Christianity, rather, teaches that the Bible is the Word of God, and thus the finger pointing at the moon *is* the moon, despite being written by the hands of human beings.

Postman and the Ghosts of Dogma

Postman argues, “When religion loses much or all of its binding power—if it is reduced to mere rhetorical ash—then confusion inevitably follows about what to attend to and how to assign it significance” (80). But this is precisely why dogmatic fundamentalist logic is such a juggernaut. Its power *is* its logic—or lack thereof—and the usefulness or affective-ness of the approach. Its absolute authority is lost when just one piece is pulled from the puzzle. Meanwhile, many of the pieces have been jammed together in the first place (and are continually), and the picture that is revealed is often muddled, simplistic, crooked, and illogical, as is the morality which it fosters, and the ethical quandaries that follow. This is precisely because of the way fundamentalism frames an encompassing, wholly intact, moral reality.

Postman locates morality in technopoly within a strict technological determinist framework. As he chronicles the transition from tool-using culture (wherein embedded in every tool is an ideological bias), to technocracy (wherein technical rationality is the rationality of domination), to the totalitarian technocracy of technopoly (wherein “society [is] only loosely controlled by social custom and religious tradition and driven [instead] by the impulse to invent”), he concludes that the search for an alternative source of moral authority—rather than religion or tradition—has led to the *deification* of technology (Postman 18, 41; emphasis added). Incorrectly, to credit social custom or religious tradition with ‘loose control’ is his most generous designation.

Postman describes the technopolic secularized shift as investing such faith in the ‘goodness’ and the authority of science and technology that it in turn provokes an utter surrender to science and technology which elevates ‘information’ to “a metaphysical status” (61). Thus, morality becomes associated with the privileging of knowledge in technopoly, even as it assumes

the role of wisdom. He asks, “Why do [...] social researchers tell their stories? Essentially for didactic and moralistic purposes. These men and women tell their stories for the same reason the Buddha, Confucius, Hillel, and Jesus told their stories” (Postman 157). However, the difference, according to Postman, is that “[c]ulture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology” (71). The social sciences, according to Postman, privilege their ‘discoveries’ by coopting the “awesome measure of authority” attributed to science in technopoly (147). What this demonstrates is that it is not only religious ideas that may be dogmatic; secular ideas are also prone to dogmatism especially when intertextualized with religious sentiment, rhetoric, and tradition.

“[I]t may be,” Butler writes, “that secularism can only be defined by its implication in the very religious traditions from which it seeks to distinguish itself, [but] I would suggest that secularism has a variety of forms. [...] In fact, a critical perspective does not line up perfectly with the distinction between religious and secular thinking” (*Frames of War* 122). She adds, “[I]t won’t do to embrace secularism as if it were a monolith, since the diversity of secularisms often receive their definition from the nature of the break they make with specific religious inheritances” (Butler, *Frames of War* 122). Yet, as I have suggested, the ‘nature of the break with religious inheritances’ is often not exactly a very clean or clearly defined break within Americanism. Finally, Butler states (supporting my claim of Postman’s overcalculation of the triumph of science over religion), “If religion functions as a key matrix for the articulation of values, and if most people in this global position look to religion to guide their thinking [...], we would make a political error in claiming that religion ought to be overcome in each and every instance” (122). As such, in part because of the blurred lines between secularism and religion, particularly secularism and Christianity in Americanism, intertextualization aides the process of

legitimation of certain dogmatic ideals and too the legitimization of the process of dogmatization itself.

Scientific Dogmatism and Social Science in Technopoly

Science is a realm of questioning—testing theories and furthering its ‘laws’. Science should have little room for dogmatism; indeed, in many instances dogmatism is antithetical to science. Science builds upon itself and is therefore processional, ongoing. Rhys H. Williams states, “Natural laws are discoverable and predictable [once discovered], a knowledge potentially without limit” (177). Religious language, on the other hand, often requires dogma in order to provide and support the supposed authority to its ideological endpoints. As R.H. Williams suggests, “Religious language—that language with a transcendent authority that in some way embodies ‘God’— [...] contains the potential for its own limitations” (177). Religious language is limited by its own required aspect of faith in the transcendent authoritative power that is “beyond impersonal law-like principles” (R.H. Williams 177). Therefore, religious language “stops short of the ultimate manifestation of its own implications” (R.H. Williams 177). Indeed, faith presupposes unknowing and yet the paradoxical glitch in many interpretations of Christianity is that ‘earning’ salvation requires *knowing* that one is saved by knowing the truth of Christ’s resurrection and the grace of God. To surrender that one does not *know* that Christ died to forgive their sins and rose from the grave to afford them salvation is a concession of a lack of faith.⁶⁹ In this case, faith presupposes knowing.

⁶⁹ One of the most well-known verses of the Christian Bible, often read at weddings whether religious or otherwise, is 1 Corinthians 13:13: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (NIV). However, this is contradictory to other parts of Christian doctrine that insist that faith in Christ as the Son of God and faith in his resurrection post-crucifixion is the only way into heaven. That would indicate that if one is concerned with eternal damnation, the greatest of these is *faith*.

Postman frames the practice of social scientists as manufacturers of consent to technopoly, and therein a new framework for morality, neither based in religion nor tradition. He describes the social sciences as holding to the belief that “the study of human behaviour, when conducted according to the rigorous principles established by the physical and biological sciences will produce objective facts, testable theories, and profound understandings of the human condition. Perhaps even universal laws” (145). The accepted authority of science under the technopoly regime, then, allows new truths to perform as though absolute.

In order to convey his disdain of the truth-making of social science studies, Postman singles out the self-importance, lack of legitimacy, and lack of necessity, of studies conducted by Daniel Goleman, whose findings were published in the *New York Times*, a presumably reputable and reliable source of information. Two of the research results that Postman points to are Goleman’s findings that Asian-American students do better in school because they frequently have “intact families that value advanced academic degrees,” and the ‘discovery’ that “children who are inept at social relations tend to be unpopular with other children” (154). Postman sarcastically questions whether Goleman is in fact attempting to ridicule “the trivialities of social-science” following these studies which reveal what could be considered obvious hypotheses regarding human behaviour, yet findings that are nonetheless in no way absolute (145). Postman’s question is a rhetorical one: Goleman has faith in his work. Postman, on the other hand, deems Goleman’s findings not only trivial but dismisses them for assigning social phenomena the status of scientific discovery that is meant to be understood as imperial truth, empirically founded.

Postman is adamant, and correctly so, that empirically founded conclusions of social happenings should not on that basis alone be granted the authority of science, nor even the status

of science. Social sciences align their findings and conclusions with ‘precise knowledge’, as is Goleman’s claim, rather than ‘truthful knowledge’, which rightfully remains at least somewhat subjective. In his dismissal of the presumed legitimate authority of social science, Postman condemns the secular-fundamentalist idea that “technical means—mostly ‘invisible technologies’ supervised by experts—can be designed to control human behaviour and set it on the proper course” (147). Social science, he contends, should be understood as a method of observation and storytelling rather than working under the presumption of sociocultural Truth provided by the authority given science in technopoly. The “legitimate authority” of science, then, is “Technopoly’s grand illusion” (Postman 162). Postman states,

Scientism is dogmatic insofar as the belief therein is that the methods of the natural sciences can be applied to the study of human behavior, [...] that social science generates specific principles which can be used to organize society on a rational and humane basis, [...and] that faith in science can serve as a comprehensive belief system that gives meaning to life, as well as a sense of well-being, morality, and even immortality. (147)

Postman is also correct to suggest that Scientism, as he identifies it, treats subjectivity as a dilemma to be solved by the pursuit of ‘precise’ knowledge, and he is correct in pointing out the misguided and illusory hope of Scientism wherein the “procedures of natural science might be applied without modification to the social world, to the [...] end of increased predictability and control” (159-160). Not only are these absolutist ideas of Scientism misguided, but they again point to the relentless draw to the certainty of meaning that persuades human actors to seek absolutes where none may be found.

Technocracy and Truth in America

As Postman challenges the ‘legitimate authority’ claims of social science, his argument loses some of its merit in the insistence that there has indeed been an *encompassing* technopolic shift in America. The authority he ascribes to technocracy, science, and social science, over the measure of authority that the religion of Christianity retains in America, and therein its social capital, is erroneous. In America, despite the emphasis on progress and innovation, there is a widespread distrust of science, and disregard for secular authority that is outside of a Hand of God narrative. One example is George W. Bush considering embryonic stem cell research to be “at the leading edge of a series of moral hazards” (qtd. in Lind and Tamas 50). Further, when Bill Clinton addressed the Human Genome Project in 2000, he injected religious connotations likely in order to appease and/or appeal to those who find this work immoral or questionable on religious grounds: “Today, we are learning the language in which God created life. We are gaining ever more awe for the complexity, the beauty, the wonder of God’s most divine and sacred gift” (“President Clinton, British Prime Minister...”). Climate Change is another primary example of the distrust of science. So too are the polemical debates over lockdowns, vaccines, and masks during the COVID pandemic.

If as Postman suggests, America’s shift from a technocratic society—in which opposing technological and traditional worldviews tenuously coexisted—to a technopolic society, signals the invisibility, irrelevancy, and therefore the utter redefinition of traditional and religious values (an assertion I have challenged here), this shift nevertheless does not bridge the gap between knowledge and wisdom but makes it all the more acutely felt. As Critchley suggests, “If all epistemic worries are to be resolved empirically by scientific enquiry, then we might feel that even if [...] all those worries were resolved, then this would somehow still be irrelevant to the

question of wisdom, to the question of knowing in what exactly a good human life might consist” (6). Or, as Roger Scruton states, “The human world is a world full of significances, and no human significance can be fully grasped by science” (27). While I suggest that Scruton is overstating matters to an extent, suffice to say that the temptation of meaning persists as even the (perceived) empirical absolutes of Scientism fail to fill the foundational void of unknowing in human existence.

*Mystification and the Void*⁷⁰

Critchley writes, “[T]he universe is vast, cold, inhuman, and mechanical, [it] expresses no human purpose, it is simply governed by physical laws that we can do our best to ascertain, but which are indifferent to human striving” (8). The temptation of meaning mystifies our experiences, and indeed, our existence, with metanarratives and dominant discourses that are concocted and constructed to fill the void of human experience, and thereafter, frequently become common sense. Thus, rendering traditional thought-worlds *invisible*, as Postman’s assertion incorrectly suggests, nevertheless does not make them synonymous with irrelevancy as he, in part, claims. The supposed stability presumed of ideology that is reified through cultural practices, social performance, and the like, works to affirm and reaffirm ideological Truth. A sociocultural standard that is reified must be criticized.

Bauman draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of ‘cosmic fear’ to describe the unknowing of the void: “it is not in the human power to grasp, comprehend, or mentally assimilate that

⁷⁰ As indicated earlier, the ‘void’ of existence can be described, in social constructivist and poststructuralist terms, as humankind’s fundamental condition of unknowing, of perpetual lack, of the foundational nothingness which produces anxiety and desire in the absence of a grand narrative of universal truth, or indeed in the face of the lack of objective reality, or the lack of both. Thus, the anxiety of the void is quelled with language, narrative, and discourse—which work to create and decipher meaning regarding our supposed objective realities, but they are nevertheless unstable and deficient constructs.

awesome might which manifests itself in the sheer grandiosity of the universe. That universe escapes all understanding. And so ‘cosmic fear’ is [...] the horror of the unknown: the terror of *uncertainty*” (*Wasted Lives* 72; original emphasis). Similarly, Scruton suggests, “The supernatural realm becomes a reality for us whenever we confront the mystery of death and hover above the abyss. We know then that the riddle of existence cannot be understood in words; that the doctrines of religion, to the extent that they are merely doctrines, must fall short of an answer” (8). He adds, “In confronting death we find ourselves facing the vertiginous, the bottomless, the unknowable” (Scruton 8). While I do not disagree with this contention, I argue that we need not turn to supernatural understandings of metaphysics, nor do we need to confront death in order to hover above the abyss. We are *ever* hovering above the abyss, as it is (abyss, void, unknowing, call it what you will) the foundation of human existence.

The unknowable ‘bottomlessness’ that Scruton attributes to death is arguably more acutely experienced when confronting life, in that we are here, now, but we do not know why (existentially). Thus, the unknowable bottomlessness invades our present perpetually. As Critchley points out, by way of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, we may wonder “why are there beings at all and why not rather nothing?” (qtd. in Critchley 98). When we confront death, we are confronting the *substantial fear* of the future. What, if anything, happens *after* this life? Alternatively, in confronting the meaning of life, we address the question in the anxiety of the present: why is this life happening now and what does it all mean? The latter question is not directly produced by substantial fear, but rather the unknowing of existence, though fear may certainly be subsequently produced by the question. In other words, the void precedes fear while fear precedes death. We are confronted with uncertainty, which is not singularly comprised of fear but is instead is more akin to anxiety. In this regard, Critchley turns to Heidegger’s

understanding of anxiety: “[anxiety] subsists and insists prior to all fear, like some uncanny background noise in one’s existence. Anxiety is not, then, anxiety about this or that, it is anxiety about the whole of one’s being” (98). Therefore, uncertainty need not correlate with fear.

There is another element of Scruton’s assessment here that requires scrutiny. He argues that the doctrines of religion fall short because they are reduced to *words*, and as such—though he does not put it in these terms specifically—they are reduced to the realm of language. Regarding language, Critchley states, “contemporary philosophy is agreed that language is the realm in which thinking takes place, but is at complete loggerheads as to how best to understand and describe that realm” (104). Therefore, again, Scruton is not necessarily incorrect to make his deduction regarding words/language, however, in doing he does not commit to connect irrelevancy to religion, but only suggests that its doctrines fall short of providing the tools for absolute understanding. If this is the case, however, then religion may still be perceived as absolute, or entirely correct, even as it may be understood to be lacking, insofar as the lack pertains to (not) understanding the fundamental mysteriousness of God. Therefore, for all that we do not understand, we may simply put our faith in God. Because *God* knows, and if we have faith in ‘His’ knowing, the fear or anxiety, the void of our unknowing, is quelled.

Within the latter form of ‘knowledge’ resides the comfort of fundamentalism—solace precisely in *the lack* of understanding, but which in turn is not recognized as lack of understanding but instead is understood *as* understanding: we may understand that God has the answers to that which we do not know or understand. If one believes in a divine mind, then there needs to be the acceptance, on some level, that in our state of unknowing “humans cannot with certainty know the breadth and depth of the divine mind ‘that passeth all understanding.’ And thus, religious truth is ultimately a logic of obedience” (Smidt 178). But to what obedience are

we succumbing to if not the perceived authority of scripture, or to the voice(s) in one's head, or the faith in one's 'heart', the conviction of the soul?

The Word...

An even more problematic element of Scruton's argument, specifically (though not exclusively) within the context of this dissertation, is when he states that the riddle of existence cannot be understood in *words*, as this is precisely Christianity's claim: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1.1). Granted, some are more prone to attach literal meaning to this than others, but it nevertheless works to refute Scruton's claim as far as Christianity is concerned, insofar as Christianity claims that understanding is both found and founded in the Word(s) of God. The Word is absolute. This understanding links metaphysical truth to declarative truth, and "most religious truths [...] are relentlessly tethered to a declarative modality of truth" (Brown, *American Nightmare* 707). As Brown argues,

'God said 'let there be light' and there was light' was surely among the earliest and most dramatic instances of the power of performative speech, the original recognition that a saying can be a doing and a making, that an utterance can bring truth into being and thus literally re-make reality. The declaration of what is true, right, and good without any necessary reference to facticity has become a well-known neoconservative modality of political truth. [...] The rhetorical power of a declarative rather than reasoned or argued truth is buttressed by the neocon defense of truth and moral certainty against what is targeted as the epistemological and moral relativism of the opposition; since neoconservatism makes moral-political fetishes of truth, consistency, and moral certitude

in this way, the declarative truths have more purchase than they otherwise might.

(*American Nightmare* 707)

This modality of truth articulates “‘truth from the gut,’ which corresponds with the personal moment of conversion in evangelicalism. In this instance, truth derives from inner conviction or certainty that no amount of facticity or argument can counter” (Brown, *American Nightmare* 707). The latter is the very definition of religious fundamentalism; it is affective moral certainty relying on the inner conviction of the soul, or, the essence of the thing.

The Christian fundamentalist may deduce that for all that they do not know, as mentioned a moment ago, they understand, or believe, that their *benevolent* God—the genocides of Noah’s Ark and the end time Apocalypse, and the death sentence and torture given to his ‘Son’ not withstanding—*knows*. Thus, they are secure in their unknowing because they know that someone or something else knows for them. Many Christians will also declare that all that there is to know (except for their immediate future I suppose) can be known by the scriptures—the Word of God.

Similarly, dogmatic understandings regarding science simply allow that we may not know *yet*, but knowing is waiting to be discovered. Or, in Scientism, as Postman indicates, we may not know, or understand, but *someone else* knows and understands for us—the experts, the social scientists of whom we presuppose their findings are scientifically accurate, and therefore they are placed in the desired technopolic realm of ‘precise knowledge’ which also gains, in this context, the quality of wisdom. Žižek, by way of Lacan, refers to this thought paradigm as “the subject supposed to know” (*How to Read Lacan* 27). Žižek offers the example of psychoanalysis wherein, “I can only arrive at the unconscious meaning of my symptoms if I presuppose that the analyst already knows their meaning” (*How to Read Lacan* 28). In terms of religion, Žižek writes, “I first believe in God and then, on the ground of my belief, become susceptible to the

proofs of the truth of my faith” (*How to Read Lacan* 28). Of course, the *proofs* of the truths of faith, the signifiers of right(eous)ness, are highly subjective and selective.

‘The subject supposed to know’ bridges the gap between knowledge and wisdom by accepting that for all that we do not know, someone or something else knows it for us—God, science, future discovery, scripture, tradition, Americanism. Furthermore, social science, inasmuch as it is linked with the authority of science in Postman’s idea of technopoly, is also, like religion, susceptible to the declarative modality of truth, especially as it pertains to the fundamentalist faith in the purity of natural science, and to the ‘subject supposed to know’.

Where are We and How are We Here? How are We and Where (and Why) are We Here?

There are limitations on both religious discourse and scientific discourse. R.H. Williams argues that “[s]cience, with its principle of potentially limitless knowledge, makes all things possible to human society and institutions; religion, in principle, puts brakes on those ambitions of power and control” (178). This argument is problematic on each side of the coin—which is precisely why ethics must be situational and pragmatic. When religion keeps science in check, or ‘puts the brakes on’ scientific ambition, we can see many unethical results and questionable limitations on, for example, research that could work to wipeout afflictions that are currently quite devastating for many people—i.e., embryonic stem cell research. R.H. Williams also argues that “religion forms a vital part of civil society and, at least partly through the generation of social capital, helps provide for a richer and more democratic sphere” (171). This is incorrect, especially insofar as it is Christianity that holds sociocultural capital in America. When the founding fathers are viewed to be Christian people who upheld Christian principles, and when every single President of the United States has (had to have been) publicly identified as Christian, this does not make for a richer democracy.

Furthermore, R.H. Williams argues that “[m]uch religious language, particularly within Christian traditions, is universalizing and, at least in principle, opposed to the exclusionary sentiments found in nationalism, nativism, or other forms of social distinction” (173). This statement is either highly idealist, blind to sociocultural actualities, or is only somewhat correct in the ‘at least in principle’ portion of the statement. Christian discourse has historically been one of the most divisive uses of doctrine in history. It has been used to subjugate populations based on race, gender, religion, class, and many other ideals and ideas. It is strange then, when R.H. Williams does later concede—even as he downplays its significance—that “religious language is not always a call for inclusion” (173). “[A] deep theme in American religious and political culture,” he admits, “is the divide between the elect and the unregenerate, the saved and the damned, the morally pure and the unworthy” (R.H. Williams 173). Whenever the authority of dogma—whether scientific, religious, or otherwise—underlies (or overcomes) ideology, and especially when unchecked, it is always problematic and potentially utterly divisive and destructive.

Postman, Authority, and Media

In terms of the social authority of science and the effort of the social sciences to codify or dogmatize aspects of human behaviour, Postman produces a small social science experiment of his own, conducted on his colleagues. He quotes outlandish ‘facts’ and attributes them to university studies or to news sources such as the *New York Times*. His findings are that most people believe the ‘facts’ he presents, or else simply do not wholly disbelieve him, because he credits his peculiar suggestions to science and to credible sources. Therefore, this little experiment works to demonstrate the power of declarative truth when linked to a seemingly authoritative field such as social science. But his experiment also works to demonstrate the

authority of *the source* of the information, be it a respected university, the Bible in other cases, or a media news report. In regard to the latter, faith in the media demonstrates the reassuring function of certain technologies.

For many people, despite the recent fad of decrying ‘Fake News’ in our current historical moment, there is a certain level of respect given the news we receive from social media (consider QAnon which Trump has become enamored with since realizing just how infatuated they are with him), print media, and the ‘experts’ via various media sources (though these sources may differ drastically depending on ideological bent). In many instances such as these we may supposedly be rest assured that we now know the truth because ‘the subject is supposed to know’. Postman writes, “[Social scientists] have not been squeamish about imputing to their ‘discoveries’ and the rigor of their procedures the power to direct us in how we ought rightly to behave. That is why social ‘scientists’ are so often to be found on our television screens” (161). He continues, “The milieu in which Technopoly flourishes is one in which the tie between information and human purpose has been severed, i.e., information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose” (Postman 70). Here, the importance becomes how media *frames* their information and how susceptible we are to the allowances of ‘being framed’.

Moreover, Christianity need not be at odds with media. Quite the opposite; media is utilized for proselytizing purposes and for letting us know how we ‘ought rightly’ to behave, much like Postman’s assertion regarding social scientists who appear on television. The framing mechanism holds power itself. Consider Marshall McLuhan’s (in)famous ‘the medium is the message’, meaning that politics are embedded within the medium itself. Accordingly, Christianity, rigid in so many ways, in this regard, and in regard to framing their messages, has

always been quite adaptable. As George Lakoff suggests, American political conservatives have a history

of carefully working out their values, comprehending their myths, and designing a language to fit those values and myths so that they can evoke them with powerful slogans, repeated over and over again, that reinforce those family-morality-policy links, until the connections have come to seem natural to many people in the United States, including many in the media. (19)⁷¹

Though he does not explicitly state it as such, Lakoff is describing not only the process of reification, but of intertextualization at work. As well, then, recognition of the bias of the media is of the utmost importance. Yet recognizing bias is quite different than simply repeating ‘Fake News’ as a rhetorical device. The ‘Fake News’ mantra is the equivalent of putting one’s fingers in their ears and shouting ‘I can’t hear you’. Nevertheless, the media imposes its authority as ‘the subject (that is) supposed to know’, and as Žižek indicates, this is a function of faith—religious faith, faith in experts, faith in economic ideas, in military, in morals, and so on and so on.

Conclusion: Facts, Fiction, Knowledge, Wisdom, Meaning

As demonstrated in this chapter, specifically regarding facts and fiction, science and religion, mythology and tradition, investigating how meaning gets made and how different cultures and individuals create their meaning or have their meaning created (or decided) for them, is paramount when studying culture. Postman’s argument regarding technopoly and its “emphasis on progress without limits, rights without responsibilities, and technology without cost” corresponds with the dogmatized faith of neoliberal/neoconservative doctrine that

⁷¹ It is important to recognize that not all conservatives are Christians, nor vice versa, yet many Christians belong to this categorization, and the interests of both parties, however (minimally) disparate, frequently correspond.

solidified to become the juggernaut that it is in our current historical moment in America (179). What *progress* and *innovation* in neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and in Postman's *Technopoly* and its emphasis on progress without limits *do not* correspond to, among other things, is the lack of progress regarding climate change, green energy, and social ethical progress in general.

For Postman, the consequence of technopoly's progress-first philosophy is that it in turn transfers society's focus from morality to practicality—while practicality is meant to offer didacticism—as the decline of reliance on the biblical narrative “was accompanied by the rise of the great narrative of Progress” (60). However, the notion of ‘progress’ in America is intertwined with the biblical narrative that informs the Protestant Work Ethic; and the Protestant Work Ethic is subsequently intertwined with the traditional American values of the American Dream, which holds a prominent dogmatic presence in the nation's ethos. We can identify discursive intertextualities of religion, materialism, traditional values, and the nationalistic ethos of what constitutes supposed proper ethical Americanism and therein a proper moral American. Furthermore, technological progress is often treated as an inherent ‘good’, synonymous with betterment. Such an ideal is destabilized by the supposed progressive ‘good’ that led to, for instance, the atom bomb. Neoliberalism, meanwhile, an acceleration of American technopoly and capitalism is certainly not the inherent good that it is framed as by its proponents.

Postman overstates the utter distinctions of religion and science, tradition and technology, when he claims that technopoly “casts aside all traditional narratives and symbols that suggest stability and orderliness” (178). Indeed, were that the case, there would be some cause for celebration insofar as it would allow for the Nietzschean understanding of the death of God, thereby allowing ethics to be grounded not in the authoritative ‘knowledge’ of science, nor the authoritative ‘wisdom’ of religion, nor their ideological convergences, but rather in the

unknowing that humankind inhabits together. Instead, traditional values are precisely the problem in technopoly, as stability and orderliness are, for many, forged in God's name.

To be clear, I am not arguing that technopoly is not a paradigm shift of sorts, or that new technologies do not, as Postman states, "alter the structure of our interests, [...] the character of our symbols [...], or the nature of community" (20). That would be an absurd assertion on my part as it is more than obvious that different technological advancements shape our way of life both socially and individually. And I certainly do not argue that this sociocultural paradigm of technopoly is not problematic as it places "efficiency, interest, and economic advance [promising] heaven on earth through the conveniences of technological progress," for this too is a tragedy of neoliberalism and America's faith in 'progress' (Postman 179). I have argued, however, that technopoly does not sweep the past away, even as it works to (or attempts to) confirm the dominance of science in the face of tradition.

Thus, where technopoly and Scientism are especially problematic is when discourses of 'wisdom' and 'knowledge' lack distinction and instead interlock to form power relations that uphold and reinforce each other, thereby infusing discourse with more authority because of the supposed sum of its parts. When dealing with fundamentalism, not reason, nor rationality, nor science, nor technology, nor God, nor Devil, can eliminate the relevancy of the belief system even as it inevitably negates the truth of its dogma, as counterintuitive as that may seem. Scientism and Christianity in the Americanist sociocultural paradigm of technopolic neoliberalism, demonstrate that humankind falls prey with purposeful fervour to the temptation of meaning, and the willingness to surrender to authoritative ideas, especially insofar as the subject is supposed to know.

Meaning is often framed for us. What does it mean to be a girl, a boy, a Canadian, an American? These terms are loaded with meaning that shapes us even when self-examination is cultivated, as we often still fall in line (or have to contend difficultly) with hegemonic prescriptions and assumptions. Moreover, why do certain terms mean so much to some people and much less to others? What it means to be an American draws more attention and fervent sentiment than what it means to be a Canadian. This is not true in all circumstances, yet for some people the need to be *defined* by certain ideas is of the utmost importance, while others embrace, or at least are complacent to, being undefinable according to conventional understandings.

Stereotypes and generalities are undeniably problematic, but obviously some people relish, embellish, and/or embrace the way they are framed according to the ideas that may become attached to them (their nationality, religion, their race, their culture), as it informs their identity in profound and *meaningful* ways. For others, how they are framed from *without* is a burden that may have devastating consequences (racism, gender inequality, class structures, culture, nationality). As such, *framing* is of the utmost importance in the examinations in the following chapter.

Chapter Eleven

Frames of Normativities, Tolerance, and the Objectification of Other: Essentialism and Marginalization

Introduction

‘Framing’ is a mechanism of control, a mechanism which purposefully works to restrain representations of reality. It is a communicative tool with which to disseminate meaning. Framing can be quite unconscious but is often entirely coercively intentional taking place in a variety of manners—through visual media, discourse, permitted content, censorship, rhetoric, political posturing, and so on. The manner in which an individual may be framed from without due to cultural norms, hegemonic understandings, stereotypes, and the like, provides privilege for some and disadvantage for others. This observation can be seen in many various circumstances such as race, class, and gender, but also in some lesser considered circumstances such as health and sickness. In the 1980s as HIV/AIDS was ravaging a portion of the population, President Reagan refused to broach the subject and many other conservatives had little empathy and rather vitriolic responses to ‘lifestyle decisions’ that caused people to get sick. The misinformation—the way in which HIV/AIDS was *framed* in dominant discourse—was detrimental not only to individuals’ physical health but psychologically in terms of utilizing individual moral stances ahead of the ethical treatment of others. The morality of the *soul* of one who succumbed to AIDS was considered to be corrupt and therefore their physical body was being punished. Those afflicted by the epidemic were considered by many to be entirely at fault for their condition.

Similarly, in terms of race, essence, and identity, one’s skin colour, in the eyes of many, produces fault. There is something considered by many people to be innately wrong with one’s

character as determined by skin tone. As the last chapter demonstrates in terms of dogmatic scientific understandings, eugenics (though entirely debunked), and race (though no longer recognized as a biological distinction but a social distinction), still perforate alongside the blind spots and the ghosts of dogma. This exposes the inherent lag in changing dominant discourse, especially when essentialist understanding cannot be dissolved. As such, in our current historical moment, there is much talk of tolerance, but tolerance, especially as a cultural obligation, is problematic terrain as it is instigated by disdain and intolerance; it presumes disdain and thus the fictions of Others preside over tolerance discourse. Tolerance is influenced by the pretext of disfavour and is patronising in that regard.

Framing both constricts realities and influences interpretations of realities. Butler writes, “Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality” (*Frames of War* xiii). She argues that what is ‘normative’—not to be mistaken with ‘normal’ or common sense per se, but something more socially and culturally policed, often implicitly—frames how we best “arrange political life so that recognition and representation can take place.” (Butler, *Frames of War* 138). Recognition and representation, then, produce the ‘products’ of norms and normativities that also subsequently produce norms and normativities.

Accordingly, Butler asserts that we need to ask “what is the norm according to which the subject is produced who then becomes the presumptive ‘ground’ of the normative debate?” (*Frames of War* 138). Moreover, as norms are enacted through visual (televised media for example) and narrative (discursive, rhetorical) frameworks, “a living figure outside the norms of life not only becomes the problem to be managed by normativity, but seems to be that which normativity is bound to reproduce” (Butler, *Frames of War* 8). What happens, then, when

Christianity and Americanism intertextualized is the managing normativity that works to reproduce itself, as well as reproducing that which is outside of its norms? What happens when normativity is threatened by that which is perceived as deviant and that which challenges the bedrock of normativity?

Framing Grievability

The liminal subject that the norm may or may not tolerate, or the ‘nonlife’ of the grievable/ungrievable dichotomy, falls outside of the frames of normativity furnished by the norm, but only as “a relentless double whose ontology cannot be secured” (Butler, *Frames of War* 8). As such, we must consider the ontology of the subject whose recognition and representation are at issue, and thus “any inquiry into that ontology requires that we consider another level at which the normative operates, namely, through norms that produce the idea of the human,” or in the context of this discussion, not just the human but the proper human, thereby including the American, the un-American, or the anti-American “who is [or may be] worthy of recognition and representation at all” (Butler, *Frames of War* 138).

I deem the latter consideration to be an issue of grievable morality, for inevitably grievable/ungrievable is an essentialist dichotomy, or, as mentioned, becomes one when enacted, wherein both sides may be precarious in one way or another but the grievable’s destructiveness becomes unthinkable while the destructiveness of the ungrievable, especially when ungrievability is considered threatening to the grievable, is righteous. Consider Trump’s first address to the UN council, an institution whose foundation is underpinned by the idea and the ideal of global peace, wherein he asserts America’s righteousness and states that if he deemed it necessary the United States would annihilate the 25 million citizens of North Korea. Indeed, the ease and arrogance with which the Others’ destruction is intertwined with Trump’s America First

ideological policy foundation demonstrates the direct symbiotic correlation of utopia and apocalypse. We can see this correlation in Falk's determination that the war against "*apocalyptic terrorism*" involving the "extremist political vision held by Osama bin Laden" had many in the White House seeming "to regard the attacks [by the U.S.] as an occasion to implement their own vision of a new world, one that proposes to rid the world of 'evil' and advances its own apocalyptic vision" (qtd. in Keller 125; original emphasis). Our utopia, their apocalypse. Our grievability, their ungrievability.

Ideals of pluralism, multiculturalism, and tolerance also compromise morality for the grievable life, for the tolerance implied in pluralism or multiculturalism is often a problematic construction that, again, implicitly presupposes disdain, disfavour, uncomfortableness. In Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, one of his characters states, "What AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred" (90). Tolerance, whether societal, cultural, or individual, whether practiced or not, is a moral stance, a moral posturing. Moreover, tolerance is often affected by essentialism insofar as what is tolerated is often associated with something *less natural*—a lesser citizen, or a lesser human being, as is evident in the (Christian) language of 'tolerate the sinner not the sin'.

Framing Ungrievable Homosexuality and HIV/AIDS

Much religious rhetoric regarding HIV/AIDS, especially in its earlier days wherein it was entirely linked to homosexuality—specifically gay men—was/is apocalyptic. For example, evangelist and adulterer Jimmy Swaggart states that homosexuality is "the most filthy, rotten, degenerate, degrading, hellish lifestyles that's ever been incorporated into the human family. Its birth is hell...it is a direct affront to the human race...It is also the worst insult to God ever

conceived of by hell” (qtd. in Palmer 29-30). Theologian John Rushdoony proclaims, “The homosexual is at war with God, and, in his every practice is denying God’s natural order and the law. It is an *end of an age* phenomenon” (qtd. in Long 7; emphasis added). Moody Adams refers to HIV/AIDS as “an apocalyptic Armageddon in our arteries” that is a harbinger of the Second Coming (qtd. in Palmer 22). Again, much of the apocalyptic rhetoric regarding HIV/AIDS was more common decades ago, but history is not over, it exists in present realities and actualities, while that which is supposedly in the past should not be forgotten. As well, history carries itself forward through the lag in changing discourse.

John Boswell argues against the simplistic viewpoint that homosexuality violates nature by stating that such a belief represents “nothing more than a derogatory epithet of unusual emotional impact due to a confluence of historically sanctioned prejudices and ill-informed ideas about ‘nature’” (15). He compares this to other “imprecise negations” like a rallying cry for hostility such as “un-American” (Boswell 15). ‘Un-American’ and ‘unnatural’ are reductive, oft-essentialist cries for unity (despite, or indeed because of their divisive language) based in anxiety and fear, and certainly in many cases based on *desire*. Such desire for supposed unity finds an eager audience with those like Jerry Falwell and those who follow the ‘Reverend’s’ teachings, who long for affirmation and stabilization of what is ‘right’, ‘normal’, ‘natural’, and ‘proper’, so that they may cloak themselves with the security blanket of cosmic order while pointing their finger at those they feel are out of order.

While many Christians point to the authority of the Word to consolidate arguments such as ‘naturalness’, this only reinforces the transparency of their bias and their immoderately irrational logic. Similar to the point made by Sister Helen mentioned earlier regarding capital punishment, but well worth reemphasizing, Boswell writes,

The very same books which are thought to condemn homosexual acts condemn hypocrisy in the most strident terms, and on greater authority: and yet Western society did not create any social taboos against hypocrisy, did not claim that hypocrites were ‘unnatural,’ did not segregate them into an oppressed minority, did not enact laws punishing their sin with castration or death (7).⁷²

For instance, Galatians 5:19-21 lists discord, jealousy, hatred, rage, selfish ambition, envy, sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery as punishable by death and the fires of hell (NIV). Yet, many Christians disproportionately target their definition(s) of the ‘unnaturalness’ that is supposed sexual immorality as the ultimate sin which is indeed ushering in the coming apocalypse. The supposedly unnatural and sinful nature of homosexuality is then only reaffirmed by the signifier of the presence of HIV/AIDS, the ‘God ordained plague’ that will *cleanse*—much like the Great Flood—and eradicate a species of abominable sexual deviants from the world.

Apocalyptic thought, belief, and rhetoric unify many Christians in a twisted manner by intertwining anxiety, chaos, and the destruction of the majority of the human species with the security and salvation of a few. Heaven and Hell become intimately codependent, oddly reflecting, in the context of homosexuality (or sexual *deviancy* in general), the connection of the enjoyment of sex with the ‘consequence’ of HIV/AIDS. Susan Palmer writes, “The central image often used to evoke the terror of HIV/AIDS is that of divine punishment for the sexual behaviour that is against the will of God and hence is profane” (21). Additionally, Thomas Long proposes, “Apocalyptic discourse is particularly effective in promoting *group solidarity* by engaging the individual and collective sense of threat and crisis” (9; emphasis added). In other words,

⁷² Indeed, I argue that hypocrisy is a requirement of the American political establishment.

HIV/AIDS brings homophobic Christian individuals together by utilizing ideas of grievability and ungrievability in pointing towards the threat of the coming apocalypse and therein confirming God's intolerance of queer lives by framing perceived immoral behaviour as being linked to divine punishment.

Jean Baudrillard states, "morality only endures insofar as there is a possible distinction between the victim and the executioner" (*Utopia Deferred* 250). This is precisely what framing mechanisms manage: the distinctions, including that between victims and executioners (both literally and less so), and the language, narratives, discourse, morality, and ethics regarding victims and executioners. In some cases, such as HIV/AIDS, or being un-American or anti-American for that matter, the victim is not considered a victim but they are their own self-inflicted executioner, for their immoral undoing is their own deserved undoing, their chosen fate. The executioner in any case may be God, or military, disease, or economic despair, but in each case the justice that is being carried out is that which the 'victims' called upon themselves, therefore making the victims complicit in/as being their own executioner as well. This is precisely why rhetoric such as 'friendly fire' frames casualties of war as defensible while death for immorality, or deviance, (for such 'crimes' such as being a person of colour) can also be framed as self-inflicted, self-induced, and therefore also justified. (Let us not forget the outcome of the Kyle Rittenhouse trial.)

The Selectiveness of Frames

Framing mechanisms work to keep hidden the interconnected workings—discursive and otherwise—that maintain the frames, such as what constructs the frame and what is outside of the frame. In order to maintain the grievable/ungrievable binary, it *must* keep the workings of and details of the framing mechanisms hidden from mass conscious recognition because what is

outside of the frame is always potentially *subversive*—the potential tools for resistance or rejection, of, for example, normativities. The mechanism of the frame contains, as it attempts to keep out, its own potentially subversively resistant elements, insofar as, for example, if essentialism or essentializing rhetoric is a framing mechanism that allows for oppression, yet a deeply flawed mechanism at that, then it carries with it its own subversive elements. Again, as Butler suggests, the frame is “always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and de-legitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version” (*Frames of War* xiii). This rubbish heap *inevitably* contains the debris of potential resources of resistance.

The frame does not (and cannot) contain an entirely cohesive picture, and how could it? Framing limits context; it undermines context while at the same time determining context. Accordingly, then, Butler argues, “it would be a mistake to understand the operation of norms as deterministic. Normative schemes are interrupted by one another, they emerge and fade depending on broader operations of power” (*Frames of War* 4). Again, as Foucault argues, “power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (*History of Sexuality* 92). There is a strategy of power at work in the frame when it, for example, signifies the normative, which works strategically as the signifier of what constitutes ontology, and this is why recognition of the subject as being both produced by the norm, and becoming the normative ground of the normative, is important in recognizing how meanings are being framed.

Butler writes, “[T]he frames through which we apprehend or, indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured (losable or injurable) are politically saturated [...] operations of power [that] do not unilaterally decide the conditions of appearance but their aim is

nevertheless to delimit the sphere of appearance itself” (*Frames of War* 1). As Foucault argues, networks of ‘micro-powers’—rather than simply ‘power’—are not univocal; “they define innumerable points of confrontation, focuses of instability, each of which has its own risks of conflict, of struggles, and of an at least temporary inversion of the power relations” (*Discipline and Punish* 27).

Foucault states, “Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society” (*History of Sexuality* 93). As power is not a single entity but vast networks of interconnectedness, when power is enacted oppressively, when it punishes, it creates, according to Foucault, the singular entity of the *soul* on those being punished. As such, an objectified ungrievable nonlife, in its subjugation, garners a soul, which is usually regarded as a product of metaphysical essentialism pertaining to ontology. The frames that work to condition apprehension or the failure to apprehend a life, produce an ontological problem since the ‘being’ of life “is itself constituted through selective means,” and as a result, “we cannot refer to this ‘being’ outside of the operations of power” (Butler, *Frames of War* 1).

The Soul: Subjugation and the Production of Essence

Foucault argues that power exercised on the body is not a power that is possessed; it is not property, but rather a strategy: “it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class but, the overall effect of its strategic positions” (*Discipline and Punish* 26-27). Furthermore, this exercised power invests in those it is exercised upon without merely reproducing—at the level of bodies, gestures, and behaviour—the “general form of law or government” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 27). Therefore, although there is continuity as those subjugated are articulated through a whole series of complex mechanisms, “there is neither

analogy nor homology, but a specificity of mechanism and modality” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 27). This is, in large part, how—through the discursive and emotional power of the American Dream, popular understandings regarding work ethic, and the intense privatization of responsibility—American culture is, as Eldridge Cleaver describes it in *Soul on Ice*, a culture that despite persistent cries of unity

subscribes to the piratical ethic of ‘every man for himself’—the social Darwinism of ‘survival of the fittest’ being far from dead, manifesting itself in our ratrace [sic] political system of competing parties, in our dog-eat-dog economic system of profit and loss, and in our adversary system of justice wherein truth is secondary to the skill and connections of the advocate. (85)

As such, Cleaver states, “the logical culmination of this ethic, on a person-to-person level, is that the weak are seen as the natural and just prey of the strong” (85).

The culmination of this ethic is the rather unethical determination of grievable and ungrievable lives, and of grievable and ungrievable *souls*. Normative framing mechanisms work to keep the complexity of the interconnected inner workings of power outside of the frame(s) thereby normalizing the polarizing dynamic, again, despite the frequent rhetorical appraisals of the oneness—the monolithic nature—of the American people and the lamentation when it is determined that ‘we are more divided than ever’.

In order to make his argument regarding the soul of the punished, Foucault borrows from Ernst Kantorowitz’s analysis of ‘The King’s Body’, which is a ‘double body’ according to the juridical theology of the Middle Ages, since it “involves not only the transitory element that is born and dies, but another that remains unchanged by time and is maintained as the physical yet intangible support of the kingdom” (*Discipline and Punish* 28). Foucault writes,

At the opposite pole [to that of a king] one might imagine placing the condemned man; he, too, has his legal status; he gives rise to his own ceremonial and he calls forth a whole theoretical discourse, not in order to ground the ‘surplus power’ possessed by the person of the sovereign, but in order to code the ‘lack of power’ with which those subjected to punishment are marked. In the darkest region of the political field the condemned man represents the symmetrical, inverted power of the king, [...] the ‘least body of the condemned man’. (*Discipline and Punish* 29)⁷³

As the surplus power possessed by the king gives rise to the duplication of his body, the surplus power exercised upon the condemned man gives rise to another type of duplication, a ‘non-corporal’ duplication, or a ‘soul’. It is a soul rather than a ‘double body’ because the body of the criminal has disappeared from view since the (supposed) abolition of physical torture, and the spectacle of physical torture, as publicity has shifted to the trial and conviction of the motives, instincts, and passions of the criminal (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*).

In terms of oppression, racism, racialization, class demarcations, and marginality, I argue that Foucault’s analysis applies, as the motives, instincts, and passions of the punished are presumed to be known by the oppressor, and are often presumed to be, or enacted upon, as essentialized characteristics marking the soul of the oppressed. Rather than regarding this soul as “the reactivated remnants of an ideology,” it is the “present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 29). Therefore, according to Foucault, it would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect, within the context of subjugation, but instead that

⁷³ It may be helpful here as an aside or as supplementary commentary to paraphrase Lacan who suggests that it is not only a madman who thinks that he is king that is a madman, but a king who actually believes he is a king who is mad as well.

it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished – and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects. [...] This is the historical reality of this soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint. (*Discipline and Punish* 29)

Foucault here, affirms the existentialist assertion that, as Sartre states, “existence precedes essence, or, if you prefer, [...] subjectivity must be the starting point” (*The Nation* 378). Foucault continues,

[L]et there be no misunderstanding; it is not that a real man, the object of knowledge, philosophical reflection or technical intervention, has been substituted for the soul, the illusions of the theologians. The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A ‘soul’ inhabits him and brings him into existence which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. (*Discipline and Punish* 29)

This existence would not interrupt or disrupt one’s ungrievability; rather it is the *result* of ungrievability. In other words, ‘existence’ afforded to the punished body in the attainment of a soul is not the guarantee of not being a nonlife. As Foucault states, “the soul is the prison of the body” (*Discipline and Punish* 29). The ungrivable nonlife’s ontology is an objectified existence, as the object of oppression, therein attaining the object of a soul that is also an *objectifying* soul. As Fanon attests, the attainment of a soul in the process of objectification and subjugation renders him a nonlife (*Black Skin, White Masks*). Indeed, the paradigm of the soul as the prison of the body is precisely what renders Fanon relegated to feeling nonexistent.

Subject, Object: Essentialist Word Play from the Framed Subjugated

Franz Fanon both entertains notions of essentialism and dispels them in *Black Skin, White Masks*. In rather modernist terms, he states that as one who is racially marginalized, as one who is colonized, he feels that he is an “object in the midst of other objects,” he is fragmented, “dislocated,” “nonbeing,” having had his originality ripped from him (Fanon 109, 112). Moreover, he describes his experience of being “fixed” by the subjugating Other, as having his essence, or his soul, thrust upon him: “I am given no chance. I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my own appearance” (Fanon 116).

Fanon is careful to point out that the *essence* of blackness or the “black man’s metaphysics,” cannot be teased apart from the “customs and the sources on which they were based” which have been “wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him” (110). He is explicit here in linking historicity to the notions of essence and culture, thereby acknowledging that existence precedes essence. He states that the essence of ‘blackness’ is fixed under white eyes (“in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye”), and that to be black is to be locked inside an “infernal circle” found in the shadows of pretext, for, as he argues, to be black is not only an issue of blackness, but that blackness is always in relation to whiteness (Fanon 116).

The black man, Fanon argues, has “no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man,” but is instead an objectified reality wherein a secured black ontology is rendered impossible when one experiences *being* through others (90). The plight to regain the ontological essence from those who have prescribed essence upon him and within him, is an exercise in futility as Fanon feels nonexistent, unable to make meaning for himself because meaning is already waiting, pre-existing. But trapped in this nonexistence he decides to indulge,

momentarily, in the idea of fully embracing ‘wholly blackness’, the essence of black consciousness, despite earlier stating that “Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely *one* Negro, there are *Negroes*” (Fanon 136; original emphasis).

Fanon’s logic works because the text is a performance. He has demonstrated that his essence as he experiences it is external rather than internal, from without rather than within, yet still inscribed on both his body and his soul. But to make explicit his objectified position he asks whether turning to a black essentialness, to essentialism, is indeed a way out of his ideological prison(s). Yet there too he will find no solution: “At the very moment when I was trying to grasp my own being, Sartre, who remained the Other, [...] reminded me that my blackness was only a minor term” (Fanon 138). This remark works ironically. If his blackness is only a minor term, then everything that he has stated has been overstated. Yet, it *is* a minor term because blackness should not determine how he is thought of by the Other nor why he is Other. Once again, he feels nonexistent. “Every ontology,” he states, “is made unattainable in a colonized and civilised society” (Fanon 110). Therefore, “[t]o state reality is a wearing task. But, when one has taken it into one’s head to try to express existence, one runs the risk of finding only the nonexistent” (Fanon 137).

Essence, Identity, and the Soul

The soul that Fanon discusses in *Black Skin, White Masks*, is the soul of Foucault’s theoretical paradigm; it is produced permanently around, on, and within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised upon the objectified, the subordinated, by the punisher upon the punished. Fanon’s soul is an encompassing, supposedly encapsulating element of his objectified existence, and as such, he is a nonlife, without ontology, ungrievable. The soul does not liberate or make human, but rather it imprisons. The soul *essentializes* Fanon not as an

inward truth or an organizing core, but a perceived truth that is fundamentally tied to his body. His essence, the perceived truth of his soul, is written upon his skin and decoded by the oppressor, marking his body with essentializing significance, thereby weighing him down both spiritually and physically.

Fanon describes the manner in which blackness carries with it the weight of having his soul literally on his face thereby making him hyper-conscious of his body. He argues that bodily gestures and movements are made “not out of habits but out of implicit knowledge” and as such what is created is a “slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world” (Fanon 111; original emphasis). As he describes it, this schematic should not *impose* on the self but instead should act as a “definitive structuring of the self and of the world” (Fanon 111). However, when one is made conscious of the body to a heightened degree, the result of having one’s body be indicative of identity and of one’s soul, “consciousness of the body,” Fanon asserts, “is a solely negating activity” (112).

Regarding identity, essence, and the conscious and unconscious performativities of the body, Butler argues that identity “is fabricated as an interior essence,” the effect and function of “a decidedly public and social discourse [that is] the public regulation of fantasy [as] articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing [...] core” (*Gender Trouble* 173).⁷⁴ The gestures and enactments that are frequently construed to purport to express essence or identity are rather fabrications manufactured and sustained through “corporeal signs and other discursive means,” referred to by Butler (and initially defined by John Austin) as

⁷⁴ “The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 170).

“performativities” (*Gender Trouble* 173). Within performativity, we see it confirmed that all communication is symbolic.

If identity is fabricated as interior essence, Butler argues, then “interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse, the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body” (*Gender Trouble* 173). She notes, “If the ‘cause’ of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the ‘self’ of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practises which produce that ostensibly coherent [identity] are effectively displaced from view [...] onto a psychological ‘core,’” thereby fabricating notions of “true identity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 174). We do not fully choose our identities, but are subjected by social discourses, by framing mechanisms, that slot us from birth into the reiteration of (reified) hegemonic social norms. We can reject social norms and discourses, but they nonetheless shape us one way or another, influence acceptance or rejection, and are the product to one degree or another, or the repulsion of, hegemonic norms.

Social power and implicit cultural power are cloaked as the natural language of the world. Yet, Fanon demonstrates that the *recognition* of social performances, and of performativities (though not addressing them as such), does not necessarily liberate the individual. Rather, in the context of wearing one’s soul on one’s body, performativities and social performance are all the more stringently policed by the self, by culture, and by others. For Fanon, performativities, acts of the body, impose an overly-conscious, anxiety-burdened, solely-negating, maddening (non)existence. He writes,

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is [...] a third person consciousness. The body is surrounded by a certain uncertainty. I know that if I want to smoke, I shall have to

reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table.

The matches, however, are in the drawer on the left, and I shall have to lean back slightly.

(Fanon 110, 111)

The effect of wearing his soul, his essence, on his body, in a sociocultural paradigm of white hegemony is so stifling, so socially and culturally policed, that he is much too well aware of the wiggling of his finger. Moreover, one can imagine the cumbersomeness that this self-conscious awareness suggests. As an object in the midst other objects, his body is the material signifier of his soul. He operates within the model of reality fabricated as interior essence played out on the surface politics of the body. He understands the power-knowledge relationship at work that produces for him a soul but which renders him nonexistent.

Foucault argues that power-knowledge relations are to be analyzed “not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known, and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations” (*Discipline and Punish* 30). This is understanding freedom from within constraints. One may assume that this works to Fanon’s advantage; he has the upper hand, so to speak, in this regard, in his recognition and his awareness of the fallacy of the operation of certain social norms and normativities. But to concede to this notion would be to romanticize his sociocultural position. Fanon recognises the apparatuses at work and demonstrates their flaws, but he is still objectified. As Foucault writes, “One would be concerned with the ‘body politic’, as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge” (*Discipline and Punish* 28).

Black Skin, White Masks: BLM in the NFL

Subjugating bodies as objects is of primary concern regarding the (initially) black players (but now both racialized players and those who are not) in America's professional national sporting leagues who have chosen to protest the state of systemic racism and police brutality in the United States by taking a knee during the National Anthem and who have experienced—consciously or otherwise—the soul as the prison of the body. At a political rally in Alabama, Trump proclaimed that those—specifically the black players in the NFL whom he dubbed 'sons of bitches'—who (supposedly) disrespect the flag and the anthem in such manners should be fired. The Sunday following the President's comments, many more players, coaches, and owners demonstrated their (symbolic) solidarity with one another by taking a knee, interlocking arms, and some refusing to come out of the locker room for the anthem. Many of the fans in the stands booed to demonstrate their disgust with this intermingling of politics, civil rights protest, and sport. When Alejandro Villanueva was the lone Pittsburgh Steeler to stand for the anthem, his jersey was, by the next day, the highest selling jersey on the NFL's website (Garcia).

While the protests were initiated as a demonstration entirely regarding systemic racism according to the players who participated, the protests following Trump's comments could be perceived as simply anti-Trump, anti-Trump's comments, or as acts of solidarity among members of the NFL. As the protests have already been (mis)construed by the vast majority of those on the right as anti-military and anti-American because the participants have chosen to make their statement during the National Anthem, the growing number of those demonstrating their solidarity have provided more fodder for the political right's condemnation. Many on the right, including *Fox News* talking head 'Judge Janine' have stated that the players in the NFL specifically (and in this regard it is no stretch to acknowledge that those being singled out are the

black players), should simply be grateful for making the money that they make and being allowed to reside in such a wonderful country (Pirro). Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, meanwhile, argued that those taking part in the protests should “do free speech on their own time” (Robillard).

Trump—and many others who take issue with these demonstrations—claims that the issue of protesting during the anthem is not an issue of race. Yet, those protesting insist that that is precisely what it is about. Who is he to say otherwise? It is akin to telling anti-war marchers that they are not actually protesting a war. It is similar to the treatment of the BLM movement (which these athletes’ protests helped initiate) as a terrorist group. If Trump is simply refusing to acknowledge that his disparaging remarks that have nothing to do with race, he is simultaneously refusing to acknowledge the protestors’ constitutional right to silent and peaceful protest, thereby relegating them to less-than American citizens, anti-Americans. Trump and many others are assigning meaning of their *own* onto the actions of those who are protesting. It is not too much to say that in doing they are marking the protestors’ souls as traitorous for desecrating a sacred symbol and a symbolic act.

The players in the NFL and the NBA are predominantly black, and those protesting have clearly and repeatedly asserted that their actions are taking place in order to comment on systemic racism in the United States. Trump’s comments demonstrate that this is not only an issue of race for the players, but for him as well, especially as he specifically congratulates NASCAR for their lack of protest, though it is doubtful that the participants in a sport with only one black driver amongst them would have as much reason to be upset about the same sociocultural issues to the same degree, and would likely have never experienced similar oppressiveness to the same degree (Andrews).

Mnuchin argues that there should simply be a rule in the NFL that the players must stand for the anthem out of respect for America and its ideals. In doing, he demonstrates his ignorance to the fact that standing for the anthem in that context would not be an act of *freedom* and would instead render patriotism rather hollow, dictated in fact, in that form. Many of the voices on the right continue to argue that this is not an issue of race but of respect for the flag, the anthem, the military, and America, while their contestation and consternation not only demonstrate aspects of fundamentalist Americanism (once again being selectively applied), but also demonstrate that for many Americans, militarism is fundamentally, indissolubly intertextualized with Americanism, to patriotism, to the symbol of the flag and to the anthem.

Indeed, their viewpoint—whether they have deciphered this for themselves or not—is one wherein the symbolic realm (the flag, the anthem) surpasses in importance the actualities of citizens' rights, or at least black citizens' rights. It is an argument—whether forcefully stated or otherwise—which contends that if the players are making a statement regarding the state of black lives and racism in America in order to improve the actualities of current sociocultural conditions in America, then their ideals fall short of their intentions simply because their issue is secondary to how others may feel about the country in which they reside. In other words, the delicate sensibilities of the supposedly dedicated patriot, or the nationalist, come first and all other considerations are secondary at best.

Purposefully refusing to stand for the anthem is an ultimate sin in the eyes of many, while the actuality of systemic racism, no matter how pervasive, evidence be damned, simply does not supersede the importance of a song and a flag. (Never mind those who unrepentantly use the washroom or buy beer and nachos while the anthem is being performed.) Indeed, Trump himself, in stating that the players' actions are a fireable offence, has gone beyond the limits of the

constitution is his rhetoric. The constitution reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Former Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders did something quite similar to Trump when she claimed that ESPN reporter Jamele Hill should lose her job for posting her opinion that Trump is a white supremacist on her private twitter feed (Nakamura). Ironically, Huckabee Sanders also referred to the players’ protests and the sanctity of the anthem as simply being a ‘black and white’ issue. While on the one hand there is unintentional truth in such a statement, she also demonstrates the shortcut to thinking that binaries provide. Again, nuance is not an aspect of fundamentalist thought.

The athletes, caught amongst the screams of subordination, are simply ‘objects’ interfering with supposed American certainties, thereby troubling, destabilizing, that which is supposed to be written in stone, eternal, fundamental, Truth. This speaks to what will be *tolerated* in a supposedly pluralistic society. It speaks to what are framed as grievable and un-grievable lives in the United States, and demonstrates that for many people in America, specifically the marginalized, the soul is indeed the prison of the body. The body imprisons the soul and the soul imprisons the body, and so it goes: the cycle of pretext.

Discourse, Illusion, and Crisis of Identity

Human bodies as objects of knowledge allow race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion, to often be prescribed at birth. These conceptualizations are frequently regarded as naturally occurring subdivisions within the ‘human race’. To treat these divisions as axiomatic is to subjugate the individual, objectify the subject, and thereby assign essence from without. But,

again, we are objects of power-knowledge relations. For example, ‘It’s a girl’ or ‘It’s a boy’ is usually expected to culminate at some point in each case with ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’. The latter is quite likely to take place in a religious context predominately with people of one’s own colour. We are folded into discourse. One is not a girl per se, but is instead in a constant process of ‘girling’—citing, quoting, mimicking femininity in performativity. The same can be said of maleness, race, and nationality. There are hegemonic right and wrong ways to *be* these concepts, to inhabit the self correctly. Nietzsche asserts that the truth was a lie that forgot it was a lie (*The Gay Science*). As such, the illusion of originality is produced *after* the fact.

The illusion of American Exceptionalism, for example, that has in Reagan’s words made the United States “the envy of mankind,” is produced and reproduced and reified by an overwhelming eagerness to put “a halo on American history and policies,” rather than engaging in the otherwise supposedly cynical examination of the “obviously, brutally, violent” actualities of what it means to assume that the ‘soul’ of the nation dictates that there is purity, innocence, even a “divine right to dominate that does not implicate Americans in anything that might deserve blame” (Reagan qtd. in Crothers and Lind 22, Pahl 2).

Indeed, on November 1, 2017, the American Psychological Association reported that according to their survey, 59% of Americans considered their current historical moment to be the lowest point in American history (APA Stress in America™ Survey). If this was the lowest point in American history according to so many Americans, then what was the Great Depression, World War II, Vietnam, the civil rights battles and counterculture clashes of the 1950s and 1960s (and beyond), the very real paranoia of Mutual Assured Destruction that the Cold War provided, and the era of slavery? American history belies American identity.

American identity is such that at the time this survey was taken, perhaps more than any other time in their history, Americans view it as a low point because the ego has been deflated—albeit by no means entirely. Embarrassment seems to be hovering over much of the citizenry. For many people, I suggest, including those represented in the survey mentioned above, they view this moment not as a low point in daily American life, but as a low point for American identity. Identity, in general, disavows its own fiction. It does so especially in essentialism and in fundamentalist thought.

Power and Historical Amnesia

Such is the pervasiveness of historical amnesia in American culture, despite being a culture that also perpetually reiterates ‘never forget’ whilst erecting many a monument for military memories and the glorification therein, that the rather contradictory reverence and arrogance of the present, the bubble of the presentism of the current historical moment, is also often considered exaggeratedly calamitous. The past is righteous, the current catastrophic, and the future melodramatically precarious. This is a theme in political rhetoric. Democrat Ted Kennedy addresses George H. W. Bush’s education policy in 1992, stating,

Today, historians are carrying out [...] analyses on [the decline of] the Soviet Union. But in future years, they may also be exploring the cause of America’s decline. How is it, they may ask, that a nation so blessed in its freedoms, so rich in natural resources, so proud of its institutions, suddenly fell into decline? [...] One of the principal causes may well be the failure to devote sufficient attention and resources to the education and training of our citizens. (qtd. in Crothers and Lind 139)

Similarly, Paul Ryan writes, “The state of affairs [under the Obama administration] is the erosion of the American Idea, a way of life made possible by our commitment to the principles of

freedom and equality rooted in our respect for every person's natural rights" (x). Additionally, responding to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's calls for Executive Restructuring in 1937, Democrat Senator Josiah Bailey states,

I take it that every intelligent man on earth knows that democracy is at stake in the world today. [...] The question in America is whether we can maintain the democratic structure, the democratic spirit, and the democratic method. [E]verywhere else [but in England] it has gone up in a reversion to the barbaric tyrannies which we had hoped were buried in history 2,000 years ago. (qtd. in Moser 103)

Comments such as these from Kennedy, Ryan, and Bailey may seem like rather benign statements, even correct perhaps, but when political rhetoric is littered with such polemical often-hyperbolic statements, what we are left with is a constant state of unease—not simply uncertainty, which is always present, but a pervasive crisis of instability that leaves citizens reaching for new certainties. This is demonstrated in the historical moment wherein Trumpism, and refugee crises have allowed for blatant unwavering marginalization, racism, xenophobia, and far-right values to move to the sociocultural and political center. Instability, whether real or fabricated, produces fear, and fear allows for greater control for those in power. “Controlling the general population,” as Chomsky points out, “has always been a dominant concern of power and privilege” (*Hegemony* 5).

This is not to say that very real issues of instability regarding human survival do not exist. Keller asks,

Will all the issues that matter unconditionally to the future of a sustainable planet, such as global warming, the ozone hole, the economy, racial justice, education—already on the back burner—be ignored until it is truly too late? [...] So we [remain] certain of ‘our’

goodness. Fundamentalism has reacted not only against the arrogance of modernity but against its growth toward pluralism, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. Yet who does not grasp at straws of certainty when so much is at risk? (123)

Fundamentalism reacts to the ‘arrogance of modernity’ in America in nearly every historical moment with the backwards gaze, whilst simultaneously, essentialist Americanism is guilty of the arrogance of modernity with its focus on the (oft considered dystopian) power of the present, and thus the fear of pluralism, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. These characteristics are the foundations of the beginnings of religious fundamentalism and its grasp at the ‘straws of certainty’.

Yet, this is precisely the problem—grasping, often quite desperately, for certainty. It is not that truth does not exist, but that far too often ‘reality’ is mistaken for actualities and therein actualities may take on an apocalyptic tone. When Ted Kennedy, for instance, speaks of the failing educational system in America, he is not entirely wrong, but the tendency towards exaggerated political statements, and the pervasiveness of them, is highly problematic. It allows for the existing paradox of America’s tendency to be self-congratulatory regarding its importance and its greatness, while being culturally guarded by the backward gaze towards the supposedly idyllic in the face of a supposedly catastrophic present and potentially dystopian future. Because of the prevalence of often rather meaningless hyperbolic rhetoric (or rhetoric that releases its potency by indulging in the hyperbolic), when there are actually seriously dire circumstances such as the state of climate change, for those who do not wish to accept, these actualities are easier to disregard.

History and the Present

The arrogance existing in the bubble of the presentist Right Now and the mythologized history of America provide the locus of utopian/apocalyptic rhetoric; they provide the short-sightedness of the present *and* the backward gaze towards fictionalized glory that helped Trump, among others, get elected in the first place. The ‘Right Now’ and the mythological past also both provide ‘legitimized’ narrowmindedness— including the binary dichotomy of greatness and chaos and the piety of American values coupled with the idea that they are not being upheld in proper fashion, that they are constantly at threat, unstable, undermined in a manner that produces, for instance, the supposed societal moral decay such as the War on Christmas or the ‘left-wing plot’ to destroy American traditions such as Thanksgiving with rising turkey prices.

Lara Trump made the latter claim in 2021 while speaking with *Fox News*: “They have told us from the beginning that they want to fundamentally transform America,” she states, “Well, how do you that? You have to change America from the inside out, you have to take away our traditions. At really, the core of this, they want to divide Americans up. They don't want us to have any common ground. They don't want us to have any shared traditions like Thanksgiving” (qtd. in Baker). Of course, the higher price of turkey in 2021 is due to the realities and actualities of capitalism rather than ideological conspiratorial rallying. But never mind that now. Ideologically speaking—which is precisely what Lara Trump is partaking in—Freedom is pitted against freedom, Liberty against liberty, and Certainty against certainty, all of which contribute to the (my) capitalism against (your) capitalism that is a fundamental American truism.

The narrowmindedness of presentism and the ‘arrogance of modernity’ *and* the backwards gaze, also play a significant part in climate change and the lackadaisical, sloppy, and

terrifying way it has been thought about and primarily handled in the United States, particularly by the political, capitalist, and religious right. The narrowmindedness of presentism and the perpetual need for America to be (perceived as) a monolithic united unit allows for the pervasive rhetoric in the Trump era (an era that exists beyond his time in office) that America has never been so divided—cue Dan Rather on Facebook: “I have never seen my country so divided, so fearful” (qtd. in Wade). Yet, as Adorno writes, “The melting-pot was introduced by unbridled capitalism. The thought of being cast into it conjures up martyrdom, not democracy” (*Minima Moralia* 66).

When Senator Bailey questions the state of democracy in the aforementioned quote, he also states that he has no worry regarding the hegemonic hold of capitalism: “The question in America is not whether we can maintain the capitalist system” (qtd. in Moser 103). As Marcuse argues, “[T]he totalitarian trend of monopoly capitalism militates against [socialist] strategy, and the debunking of its sham-democracy is part of political countereducation [sic]” (54). The self-congratulatory stance on democracy in America as being a fundamental American truism, whilst being tossed about in political rhetoric as such, disguises the actuality that in America “it is necessary to safeguard a system of elite decision-making and public ratification—‘polyarchy,’ in the terminology of political science—not democracy” (Chomsky, *Hegemony* 5). This is a difficult truth to face in a nation wherein, for many people, voting is their ultimate act of democratic freedom. Without that act, that indivisible right, their identity as an American deteriorates. Identity disavows its own fiction.

For Fanon, his disavowal is not a plausible or workable option. He is overdetermined from without. W.E.B. DuBois refers to living with this overdetermination as double consciousness, double ontology. “It is a peculiar sensation,” he writes, “this double-

consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (DuBois qtd. in Park 309). Such is the actuality for many marginal lives in America—a nation that proclaims that all are free and equal yet privatizes healthcare and prisons, criminalizes certain kinds of drug use while benefitting economically from others, and a nation that commercializes and commodifies identity often in rather extreme manners. Being American is not simply an act per se, nor simply an identity, but an identity embodied by acts. It is quite similar to Foucault’s assertion that there was a specific cultural historical moment when homosexuality transposed from being an *act* to being an *identity marked by acts* (*The History of Sexuality*).

Likewise, criminality is often not understood as criminal *acts* but as identities—criminals, felons, evildoers, monsters—wherein, in many cases, one forfeits part of their American identity as they lose their voting rights. Moreover, what are the consequences when a democratic act such as voting is subject to scrutinized identity in the form of gerrymandering or restrictive voting laws? It is a rather self-righteous notion to think that the voting rights act of 1965 removed all barriers to black lives in American democracy, but it is a lie. Policy change may have taken place but policy does not simply produce sociocultural change, nor does policy simply make culture. There are implicit policies (and/or organic laws) to contend with, compounded by the lag in changing discourse, demonstrated palpably with the vitriol reserved for the folks who kneel during the national anthem. Policy does not simply shortcut the inherent lag in shifting (dominant) discourse, nor does it do away with history no matter how loudly, fervently, and perpetually those who are *not* marginalized, those who enjoy the privilege of hegemonic norms such as whiteness, Christianity, and nativism, argue otherwise.

Nativism, Questionable Tolerance, and the Fiction of Other

Our America is Walter Benn Michaels' analysis of a cultural logic that emerged in 1920's America wherein cultural pluralism emphasized racial *difference* rather than racial superiority and inferiority, a movement referred to as 'nativist modernism'. In his text, life and nonlife, double ontology, identity and the pursuit of unattainable identity and therein unattainable ontology are all imperative concepts—whether named as such or otherwise. The nativist logic determines that the notion of cultural identity in America, and individual identity as such, is not a description of a peoples' actual practices and values, their normative activities, but rather an object of an essentialist ambition to become what one already is—American—an ambition that can be entirely elusive. Michaels writes, “[I]n nativist modernism, identity becomes an ambition as well as a description. [...] What we want [...] may be a function of what we are, but in order for us to want it, we cannot simply be it” (3). He continues, “Indeed, it is only this transformation of identity into the object of desire as well as its source that will make the dramas of nativism—the defence of identity, its loss, its repudiation, its rediscovery—possible” (Michaels 3).

It is important to recognise Michaels' contention that the “most important result” of the effort of the American modernist texts of the 1920s commitment to the nativist project of racialization was the “perfection not of racial identity but of what would come to be called cultural identity” (13). He argues that race was a crucial marker of modern identity in America, and yet it was recognised to be limited as a bearer of identity, and as such, culture became a primary way of preserving the primacy of identity in order to reconceptualize and preserve essential contours of racial identity. This shift in the discursive framing mechanism, therefore, is a strategy, a weapon of the sociocultural power-knowledge relationship. Brown writes,

These conflations and slides [of racial and cultural definitions] are not simply the effect of historical and political ignorance or of a sloppy multiculturalist discourse in which all marked identities are rendered analytically equivalent. They are, rather, symptoms of the culturalization of politics, the assumption that ‘every culture has a tangible essence that defines it and then explains politics as a consequence of that essence’. (*Regulating Aversion* 20)

Pluralism, Michaels asserts, “transforms the substitution of culture for race into the preservation of race” in part because “although the move from racial identity to cultural identity appears to replace essentialist criteria of identity (who we are) with performative criteria (what we do), the commitment to pluralism requires in fact that the question of who we are continues to be understood as prior to questions about what we do” (14-15).

Though it is written before the time period Michaels is referring to, DuBois aptly points out the dualistic cultural and racial forces at work: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (qtd. in Michaels 7). Moreover, as Fanon demonstrates, it matters little that race is not a *reliable* bearer of identity, that there is not ‘one Negro’ as quoted above, but ‘*Negroes*’, for the realness is in the social understanding, and his soul—the ‘self’ that is presumed of him—is presumed also to inform his performative self, whilst his skin and his performativities presumably inform others of who he is. Nativist modernism, or nativism in general, invokes an ideological form of colonialism wherein the subject is to *mimic* the ideals of the dominant power-knowledge understanding in order to obtain at least an element of belonging—quite ironic in a nation of rugged individuals.

Theodore Roosevelt was instrumental in developing the paradigm for American nativism. Though branded as “a college-bred sissy” in his early political career, Roosevelt’s version of a ‘real’ American was masculine, of strong character, committed to contributing to society, and committed to national ethos (Hofstadter 193). Therefore, if one lived up to the tenets of Roosevelt’s version of Americanism, then regardless of race or ethnicity they should be accepted into the fold. The attributes that are expected of a proper American according to Roosevelt may not sound so terrible, masculinity aside, nor are the efforts towards racial inclusion. However, his version of Americanism, as it is for many people still, was stringent. Roosevelt, according to Hofstadter, aligned himself with the ideals the Reverend Billy Sunday:

This type of mentality is a [...] synthesis of fundamentalist religion and fundamentalist Americanism, very often with a heavy overlay of severe fundamentalist morality. The one-hundred percenter, who will tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism, considers his kind of committedness as evidence of toughness and masculinity. (118-119)

Conclusion

Stringent unambiguous types of understandings of Americanism are not uncommon, nor, of course, is the intertextualization with Christianity. When nativist understandings are at stake, wherein the way someone simply appears outwardly may immediately provide them with a disadvantage in the ‘melting pot’, we see how the anxiety of appearances in America may not only give cause in many instances for people to do their best to be aligned with proper American ideals, but why there are perpetual, pervasive arguments regarding what it means to be an American and widespread insistence that certain American ideals are or are not proper(ly) American ideals.

Chapter Twelve

Conclusion

Jim Jefferies, an Australian-born comedian who has been an ‘official’ American citizen for several years, and who hosted a Jon Stewart / Trevor Noah / *Daily Show*-type television program, did a segment during a July 2018 episode on precisely why America is *not* great in many respects and why this is not only something that is okay to admit, but is important to acknowledge. He demonstrates the importance of these observations by pointing out that America’s reputation around the world is very different than how most Americans view their own country, stating that “what we lack in diplomacy, we make up for in confidence” (Jefferies). (Again, losing and calling it winning is a quintessential American trait.) Jefferies is not the only public figure who is using their platform in order to express these types of sentiments. Jon Stewart, Samantha Bee, Bill Maher, Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers, Trevor Noah, Childish Gambino, Sarah Silverman, Colin Kaepernick, even *Saturday Night Live* via their “Weekend Update” segment, which has had various hosts over the years including currently Colin Jost and Michael Che, are among entertainers and pop culture figures who are currently being quite open and critical of the actualities of life in America.⁷⁵

These pop culture figures and others are treating actualities as being more important than myth, more important than the symbolic realm. This has not historically been a popular thing to do in America. Nor is it necessarily currently popular despite the fact that Trump’s antics and his rhetoric have provided ample opportunity for patriotic dissent. Indeed, while criticizing Trump is

⁷⁵ Yet, they often fall across a standard-issue map of political affiliations. Indeed, Silverman and Maher are alternatively ‘cancelled’ and celebrated by progressives, depending largely on their most recent public statements.

common place in many respects, criticizing America is still considered a very un-American activity.

For instance, Democratic New York Governor Andrew Cuomo demonstrated just how blasphemous it is to doubt America's greatness when he faced tremendous backlash for commenting in a 2018 speech that America 'was never that great'. He quickly did an about face for obvious PR reasons by backpedaling and stating the very opposite, just days later, asserting that the country has *always* been great. Unsurprisingly, the language in his apology includes essentialist-leaning rhetoric and precisely that which appeals to metanarrative and metacultural ideals: "The expression I used the other day was inartful, so I want to be very clear," Cuomo said, "Of course America is great and of course America has always been great. *No one questions that*" (qtd. in Campbell; emphasis added). The latter portion ('No one questions that'), is of course that which not only cannot be substantiated but is invariably incorrect. Such an expression reaffirms the fundamentalist notion of that which should not and indeed *cannot* be questioned.

Nevertheless, the word is getting out there (though still receiving many extremely populist oppositional opinions) *in* America that America is perhaps not so great in many respects including in its supposed undeniable 'best-ness', and its ultimate right to be so by whatever means necessary. Regarding being 'best', it must be remembered that although Trump said virtually the same thing in his MAGA campaign, the message being sent was quite different than that of Jefferies et al. Much of this difference can be attributed to left and right political ideals, yet many on the left still maintain that America is the *rightful* leader of the free world due to its greatness. Indeed, Biden's promise is to return America to its rightful place as the leader of the free world. Trump's criticism of America and his supposed plan for making it great again is/was

based in myth regarding the past and the present, and in a much simpler way, based in lies and lack of understanding—understanding in both the capacity to demonstrate genuine humanity and lacking the ability to comprehend.

Examination of the criticisms from the pop culture figures I have mentioned (and others), on the other hand, demonstrates that facts, truths, are a priority for many people. Much of what is being presented to the public in these regards is becoming more widespread and therefore available to the masses in ways that were generally not historically welcome. Many people may finally question for themselves (or have a greater opportunity than they may have had in the past) whether America is possibly not the greatest nation on earth, and they may then examine various reasons why. There is no revolution in sight, and certainly a few people acknowledging that America is not so great after all, is met with backlash and fundamentalist American resistance. But I argue that it is as Žižek predicted and that which I concurred with earlier in this dissertation: Trump, due to his clumsy political performance, would do more to wake up some Americans to their actualities including their state of democracy than Hilary Clinton would have. However, the price to be paid for being ‘woke’ in many instances can be quite emotionally painful. What lessens the pain is still ‘AMERICA Fuck Yeah!’

In an era when ‘being woke’ is part of the popular lexicon, and ‘hashtag me too’ has become a movement, how exactly did we have a President Trump and why is his influence still so incredibly widespread when his penchant to being untruthful is obsessive? In some manners, the answer is obvious (and clearly demonstrated in many of the previous pages); ‘woke’ itself has become a dirty word—responsible for regression, well, in actuality responsible for cultural progress, but an unwelcomed progress at that, and therefore perceived as regression that is not of the rosy nostalgic variety.

This dissertation has not been about Trump but his presence is also unavoidable as he has proven, better than so many before him, that being untruthful (utilizing and promoting illusion) works in America. What may have come as an unwelcome surprise to many people was that there was a hunger for a racist president in 2016, a bullying campaigner, and a 'politician' who knows very little of what he should know in order to be in such a position. Trump gave a lot of people what they wanted to hear especially regarding the appeal of myth, exceptionalism, and essentialism. The essentialism part worked especially well when describing Others for the citizens who voted him in and who follow him still.

Many people who still follow Trumpism do not care to question how and why he became the president, because he is *their* president (even when out of office), and they *want* to believe what they hear from him. There are many reasons why America's former President is who he is, and they include the draw of exclusivity, the comfort and supposed righteousness of supposed American values, and of longing for Truth in the ideals of metaculture and metanarrative. Despite many people arguing in their own words that Trump has disrupted the metanarrative, in part by disrespecting the position of president, he has not expelled the compulsion for metaunderstandings in American culture. Indeed, for his followers, he has only encouraged and exacerbated the impulse for metanarrative, the longing for metaculture, and the draw of binary understandings.

History may be effaced in many circumstances but obviously (though not so obvious to many) that does not mean that what happened did not happen or is not happening. Nevertheless, the word may be spreading into spaces it has previously not dwelt, but the word is not the Word. The *Word* has faith behind it. Logic and facts are little competition to faith and no competition to

fundamentalism. We can all know, if we choose, at least some extent of America's actualities that counter the myths.

For example, it has become common in the Trump era to state that America is more divisive than ever. But as this dissertation demonstrates, divisiveness is a facet of democracy as well as an inevitability of sheep and goats (Republican and Democrat, Christian and non-Christian, American and un-American) ideology, infected by capitalism and religion and devoid of certain kinds of regulation due, specifically in regard to capitalism, to neoliberalism run amok in the name of an American Dream. If dealing within a sociocultural paradigm of incessant Us and Them, Republican and Democrat, American and Other ideas, heavily influenced historically and still currently by Christian ideologies, traditions, and practices, then the demonizing of the Other is practically inevitable, and in some circumstances *entirely* inevitable.

Hillary Clinton states, “[D]ecades of demeaning government, demonizing Democrats, and debasing norms, is what gave us Donald Trump” (*The Atlantic*). She is not incorrect, although ‘norms’ is problematic terrain in the best of circumstances and especially within the messy *mélange* of capitalism, democracy, and religion. Moreover, the demonizing and debasing therein is not a *decades old* issue, but one that can be traced back much farther than that. Clinton continues, “Whether it was abusing the filibuster and stealing a Supreme Court seat, gerrymandering congressional districts to disenfranchise African Americans, or muzzling government climate scientists, Republicans were undermining American democracy long before Trump made it to the Oval Office” (*The Atlantic*).

There are many aspects of Americanism that undermine democracy, not the least of which is democracy's incompatibility with capitalism. As I have argued, this incompatibility is made much more stringent when national ethos is fundamentally linked with the American

Dream, and neoliberalism is fundamentally linked to deregulation which, among other things, derails ethical social justice—already eroded by the ethos of the Dream, individualism, and, again, the separation of sheep and goats. Thus, Jim Jefferies is not incorrect: *confidence* is a welcome balm for the lack of diplomacy.

I paraphrased this cliché in the introduction and it makes another appearance here: things change, but they also stay the same, as there is an inherent, often inevitable, lag in changing dominant discourse. Hilary Clinton states that “[a]fter Watergate, Congress passed a whole slew of reforms in response to Richard Nixon’s abuses of power. After Trump, we’re going to need a similar process” (*The Atlantic*). Why then, do folks speak about the Trump administration as if this is something that they could never have foreseen happening in America? America has a long history of celebrity worship, of choosing image over substance, symbolism over actuality, privileging character over intellect (though character is subjective and ambiguous—traits that are not always properly recognized), and a history of not simply being divisive but choosing divisiveness over unity, as well as not appropriately distinguishing between divisiveness and disagreement. These choices are the logical realities of capitalist commodity culture—its dominance and the unrelenting fetishization therein, wherein “in every area of modern life, consumers don’t want surprise: they want it safe” (Barclay 292).

For instance, in terms of celebrity worship within commodity culture, Chris Rojek argues in “Celebrity and Religion” that “celebrity culture produces an aestheticized reading of life that obscures material reality and, in particular questions of inequality and ethical justice” (412). Rojek’s work was published in 2006, yet when he further suggests that “[s]ociety requires distraction so as to deflect consciousness from both the fact of structured inequality and the meaninglessness of existence,” he is describing the culture that produces a President Trump

(412). Within the ubiquity of American capitalism, celebrities, Rojek asserts, “contribute to the cult of distraction that valorizes the superficial, the gaudy, the domination of commodity culture”

(412). This is Trump’s America. Trump is nothing if not a distraction—a distraction from his own devastating policies, and a welcome distraction for those who wanted many of their quite unethical and unjust ideals and concerns to be met with validation and valorization from their leader. Adorno writes,

To identify culture solely with lies is more fateful than ever, now that the former is really becoming totally absorbed by the latter, and eagerly invites such identification in order to compromise every opposing thought. If material reality is called the world of exchange value, and culture whatever refuses to accept the domination of that world, then it is true that such refusal is illusory as long as the existent exists. (*Minima Moralia* 44)

While some might be tempted to connect this quote to ‘fake news’, instead, the groundwork for a populist America is ripe for the simplicity of MAGA, and the lies therein have been gestating in various manners since the Puritans’ exodus from England.

In recent years the populism that has allowed for the simplicity of Trump and MAGA has evolved alongside with celebrity culture, ‘reality’ tv, the ‘cult of distraction’, with metanarrative and metacultural understandings, anti-intellectualism, the prominence of Christianity, and the cult of personality. Certainly, the argument could be made, especially in our current social-media saturated culture (wherein the word can become the Word incredibly quickly), that America has never had a President as outspoken, as (often purposefully) erroneous, and frankly as unintelligent as Trump. But the deeply populist sociocultural paradigm that exists in America presents many indications that Trump and his ever-changing administration were not entirely the anomaly that many people seem to think it is.

American culture is what it is because of the stories it tells itself, about itself, and often the stories that are told about other people who are considered decidedly not like themselves. Many of these stories are grounded in myth derived from “staged authenticity rather than genuine forms of recognition” (Rojek 412). In a nation that has historically been so drawn to myth that all across the political spectrum we find essentializing rhetoric and ideals regarding the Shining City on the Hill, the Beacon of Light to the world, it should be unsurprising that Trump is both an embarrassment to some and a welcome contributor to America’s storytelling to others.

Conclusion to the Conclusion

This dissertation, while dealing with many aspects of Americanism, argues that the hegemonic history of Christianity in America and the centrality of capitalism in national ethos, have contributed to an impulse in the national psyche towards illusion. I have argued that due to this impulse and the privileging of illusion over actuality, much violence takes place both within and without the nation’s borders. I have demonstrated the harmful but seldom examined paradoxes produced and sustained by treating American values as sacrosanct in American life and in individual American lives despite the varying definitions of those values, the ways they are interpreted, and the manners in which they are executed.

American values are not only a go-to rhetorical device, but they are part of the illusion. For instance, when Attorney General Jeff Sessions calls the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh in October of 2018 “reprehensible and utterly repugnant to the *values* of this nation,” how can we not view this as disingenuous when examining his and most Republican politicians’ positions on gun laws in America? (“Attorney General Sessions”; emphasis added). This is the power of invoking the almighty Values: the Truth is spoken. It is a very broad, variously defined, and in many ways undefinable Truth; and yet this is precisely why it works. Nuance is disregarded, and

any further discussion or further argument lies well beyond rhetoric, *hiding* behind rhetoric. Any worthy examination of certain situations or calls to action in the wake of countless tragedies is in fact missing the point: illusion first; pragmatism is somewhere down the line or downright dismissed. This is not how each individual American thinks or feels, but how the country has often functioned historically and it is a result of the power afforded national ethos in general. Illusion first, pragmatism later, is how capitalism as an American value causes many different types of violence—both physical and otherwise—while ‘America First’ ideology has caused and continues to cause violence the world over.

Hofstadter notes that there is an “American preference for character over intellect in politics and life, and [an] all but universal tendency to assume that the two somehow stand in opposition to each other” (208). This preference explains many American activities from supposedly righteous wars, to McCarthyism, Reaganomics, Trump, lack of provisions for the poor, systemic racism, and in all of the above and more, the lack of ethical social justice. It is not simply anti-intellectualism that has been so problematic in American history, but the corresponding lack of curiosity to look behind the curtain of illusion for fear that what may be lurking on the other side is destabilizing to fundamentalist Americanism, to essentialism, and is complex, good *and* evil, and anxiety-inducing. Moreover, what does exist behind illusion is often sure to produce uncertainty—something I have argued should positively impact society if what is lurking is embraced as difficult and accepted not as The Truth but true, not as Reality but actualities, thereby allowing the culture to exist in uncertainty and precariousness together rather than apart. That existence more closely resembles a wholeness that is not illusory, and a state that could be considered united.

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