

The John Meisel Lecture Series

in Contemporary Political Controversies



Controversies in the Making: Trump, Race, & Time

Debra Thompson, University of Oregon

No. 1 • 2017

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About the John Meisel Lecture Series in Contemporary Political Controversies

In 2017, the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University established a lecture series to honour the legacy of scholarship and public service of Professor Emeritus John Meisel. Always engaged in current public affairs and never afraid to wade into the often choppy waters of political issues, The John Meisel Lecture Series in Contemporary Political Controversies provides a forum for meaningful conversation and deliberation of controversial political issues. Each year, the department invites a junior to mid-career scholar to Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario to deliver a major public lecture that addresses a timely political controversy, followed by a "town hall" style interactive discussion that is open to both the Queen's and Kingston community.

In 2017, Debra Thompson delivered the inaugural lecture on the topic of "Controversies in the Making: Trump, Race, and Time," and offered a compelling analysis of the role that race and the politics of time played in US President Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign strategy.

About John Meisel

A professor at Queen's University since 1949, John Meisel has written extensively on the topics of political parties, elections, Quebec politics, broadcasting, and culture policy, and contributed significantly to public debate. His scholarship is noted as much for its breadth as it is for its elegance and accessibility. Meisel served as the founding editor of both the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* and the *International Political Science Review*, as well as chair of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), and president of the Royal Society of Canada. He became an officer of the Order of Canada in 1989, and was promoted to companion, the highest grade in the Order, in 1999.

Charming, engaging, optimistic, enthusiastic: John remains all of these things. As a member of the Queen's community, John is all of these and more.

He was a wonderful teacher, inspiring generations of students to engage

in political and cultural life. As department head, he recruited stellar new faculty, helping to build the department into one of the strongest in the country. He was an enthusiastic mentor, supporting his younger colleagues and drawing them into national and international networks. Long retired but still highly visible on campus, and in the community, John remains a symbol of the best of the Queen's tradition.

About Debra Thompson

Dr. Debra Thompson is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Oregon, specializing in race and ethnic politics. A political scientist with strong interdisciplinary orientations, Dr. Thompson's teaching and research interests focus on the relationships among race, the state, and public policy in a comparative context. Before joining the Department of Political Science at the University of Oregon, Dr. Thompson taught at Northwestern University and Ohio University, and held a SSHRC postdoctoral fellowship with the Center for American Political Studies at Harvard University in 2010-2011. She is the author of the award-winning book, *The Schematic State: Race, Transnationalism, and the Politics of the Census* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

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Controversies in the Making: Trump, Race, and Time

In the inaugural John Meisel Lecture Series in Political Controversies, Dr. Debra Thompson asks what President Donald Trump's campaign to "Make America Great Again," tells us about how Americans understand their country, their national community, and the past, present, and future of the union. Engaging in a *politics of time*, Trump's electoral efforts were premised on the idea that America is in decline, that something important to or about America had been lost during the Obama presidency, and that Trump was the strongman needed to return the country to greatness. Thompson underscores a simple but important point: Trump and his supporters' isolation of the past as a distinct entity that can be separated from the present is an act of power. Political controversies, she suggests, are about who has the power to declare the past *as past*, and at the heart of the debate over Confederate monuments or controversies that envelop efforts to rename buildings on university campuses is disagreement over the bifurcation of the past and present. Focusing on the role of race in the rise of Trump and the events of the past year in American politics, Dr. Thompson examines the complicated relationship between the chronological and the epistemological, specifically examining the ways that America's racial past continues to haunt its present.

Introduction

It seems fitting to begin with a controversy.

Last July, HBO announced that D.B. Weiss and David Benioff would follow their hit series, *Game of Thrones*, with a new drama entitled *Confederate*. It will be set in an alternate timeline in which the southern states did not lose the Civil War, but rather seceded from the Union and formed “a nation in which slavery remains legal and has evolved into a modern institution.”¹ The series, they claim, would chronicle the events leading up to the “Third American Civil War,” following characters on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Demilitarized Zone, including slave hunters, freedom fighters, journalists, abolitionists, and the executives of a slave-holding conglomerate. In short, the new series will ask, “What would the world look like... if the South had won?”²

Shocking nobody other than the white executives of HBO, who had to put down the piles of money they were holding in order to defensively posture that we should all “reserve judgement until there is something to see,”³ the backlash was immediate. The *Atlantic’s* resident McArthur genius, Ta-Nehisi Coates, wrote that we need not give HBO the benefit of the doubt; from *Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind* and beyond, “Hollywood has likely done more than any other American institution to obstruct a truthful apprehension of the Civil War.”⁴ In an op-ed in the *New York Times*, Purdue professor Roxane Gay wondered “why people are expending the energy to imagine that slavery continues to thrive when we are still dealing with the vestiges of slavery in very tangible ways.”⁵ These vestiges, she continues, are “visible in incarceration rates for black people, a wildly segregated country, disparities in pay and mortality rates and the ever-precarious nature of black life in a world where it can often seem as if police officers take those lives with impunity.”⁶ Both Gay and Coates hone in on a central point: we don’t need the thought experiment of an alternate history, because the Civil War isn’t quite history. It still haunts us.

In his excellent book, *Silencing the Past*, Michel-Rolph Trouillot contends that “many historical controversies boil down to who has the power to name

what.”⁷ Controversies are born from differing interpretations of our shared past, which result in something more than disagreement about facts and figures. The kind of controversies that I am the most interested in, those that pertain to the power and permanence of race, are about the ways that we think of the role of the past in the present; our hopes, dreams, and fears of and for the future; and our very ideas about the nature of time.

In political science, as well as other disciplines in the social sciences such as sociology, economics, and especially history, time is the central, underlying basis of all political and social analysis. Political scientists take time seriously in our work. We know that history matters, and that there are distinctly temporal dimensions of real social processes.⁸ But time isn’t just how we measure political phenomena; temporality actually constitutes social relations. *Time itself is a political construct.*

Systems of meaning work to create the concept of time. We know this – there are competing calendars from different cultural traditions, units of standardized time that emerged from the invention of the transcontinental railroad, time zones that coincide with geopolitical borders, and a dominant conception of a work day that reflects the impulses of the industrial revolution and the hard-fought battles of labor rights activists. The systems of meaning that create time give it value. At one point or another, haven’t we all heard or thought, “my time is valuable”? And, as Timothy Snyder has recently argued, the ways that political leaders and citizens orient themselves in time matters.⁹

Let’s explore two examples from two American presidents.

During his victory speech on November 4, 2008, Obama declared: “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our fathers is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.”¹⁰ His speech that night, and many other nights thereafter, would focus on what he believed to be the enduring power of American ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity, and the unyielding hope that Americans could work together to form a more perfect union.

Obama was more aware than most of how difficult that task would be, in

part because he had deep knowledge of American history. During the 50th anniversary of the events of “Bloody Sunday,” in Selma, Alabama, Obama said:

One afternoon fifty years ago, so much of our turbulent history – the stain of slavery and anguish of civil war; the yoke of segregation and tyranny of Jim Crow; the death of four little girls in Birmingham, and the dream of a Baptist preacher – met on this bridge. It was not a clash of armies, but a clash of wills; a contest to determine the meaning of America.”¹¹

During that same speech he discussed the Department of Justice’s report on the Ferguson Police Department, which had been released the previous week. Though Obama rejected the notion that nothing had changed between Selma and Ferguson, he conceded that America’s racial history still casts a long shadow on the present. But, ultimately, “two hundred and thirty-nine years after this nation’s founding, our union is not yet perfect. But we are getting closer.”¹²

Let’s be clear here: Obama wasn’t perfect. His rhetoric about American exceptionalism was purposeful and strategic political fodder. He had critics from the ideological left as well as the right. His image of America often included a demand that black people abide by the rules of respectability politics, and he equivocated the struggles and anxieties of the white working class with working class blacks, when we know that black poverty and white poverty are not at all the same.¹³ But Obama’s vision of America was, in a word, hopeful. We are better, we can do better, we can be better, because out of many we are one.

In the alternate reality of the 2016 election, Donald Trump announced his candidacy by promising to build a border wall and by saying that Mexican immigrants are criminals, rapists, and drug dealers, though some, he assumed, were good people.¹⁴ Replacing Obama’s campaign slogans, “hope,” and “forward,” was Trump’s “Make America Great Again”, premised on the idea that America is in decline, that something important to or about America had been lost during the Obama presidency, that Trump was the strongman needed to return the country to greatness. The “false promise of strongman

rule,” the independent international human rights watchdog Freedom House notes, is a characteristic shared by both populists and autocrats.¹⁵ “Make America Great Again” is nostalgia for a bygone era that was better than the present and better than citizens’ perceptions about their future. Trump’s message is intended to anchor voters to a mythological past. Instead of thinking about the future, voters are focused on what they feel they’ve lost: “Trump isn’t after success; he’s after failure.”¹⁶

To some, the idea of “Make America Great Again” gives us pause. Sometimes I play this game with my students – it’s a thought experiment. If you could live during any time in the history of the world, when would it be? The answer, of course, is right now, because of dentistry. And if you happen to be a person of colour, LGBTQ, a woman, or any combination of those signifiers, the answer is not even right now. *Not yet*. So, “Make America Great Again” leads many of us to wonder exactly when America was so great, for whom it was great, and who or what it was that caused it to lose its greatness.

The point is this: I don’t think we can tell the story of the rise of Trump, or what has happened since the election, without taking race seriously. Not just the relationship between race and voting behaviour – others have far more expertise in this area than I¹⁷ – but the ways in which race has always shaped narratives about American identity. That is how Americans understand their country, their national community, and the past, present, and future of the union.

Ultimately, I am trying to make a simple, but important argument: Trumpism’s isolation of the past as a distinct entity that can be separated from the present is an act of power. The types of political controversies we’ve seen lately, from the debates over Confederate monuments, to heated arguments about renaming buildings on university campuses, to neo-Nazis marching with their ridiculous tiki torches in Charlottesville, shouting “You will not replace us!” – these are all about who has the power both to define the past and to declare the past *as past*. And in America, this power is inextricably tied with race.

Racial Time

There are at least three different ways that thinking through the prism and power of race helps us to reconsider the relationship between the chronological and the epistemological. That is, there are at least three dimensions of “racial time”¹⁸: (1) the temporal dimensions of racial dynamics; (2) the ways that racial dynamics are constituted by certain temporal understandings; and (3) political time, or the constructed separation of the past and present.

First, the temporal dimensions of racial dynamics pertain to the ways that time allocation is a key element of the power relations that create and sustain the concept of race. Time management was an integral part of slavery and freedom is, in part, having control over one’s own time. We could also talk about the ways that racism manifests as unequal temporal access to goods and services – think of, for example, the time spent traveling to get groceries if there isn’t a store in your neighbourhood. Or when the pace of change is too frightening for some and too slow for others. Recall that Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1964 book was called *Why We Can’t Wait*.¹⁹ We could also talk about disproportionate incarceration rates as “doing time” or, more critically, about lost time – literally, the ways that black life expectancy is limited. A recent article in the *New York Times* revealed that “more than 700 studies on the link between racial discrimination and health have been published since 2000, and it is estimated that more than 100,000 black people die prematurely every year.”²⁰ Time cut short.

The second dimension of racial time is the ways that racial dynamics are constituted by peculiar temporal understandings. An anecdote: in the summer of 2009 my siblings and I bought my parents a Roomba – one of those robot vacuums that zooms around while you’re not home. While my parents were pretending to appreciate it (they did *not*), my brother leaned over and said, “You know, we just bought our parents a robot and there’s a black president. I’m pretty sure that means we’re living in a science fiction movie.”²¹ Just as the presence of a black president used to signal a fictionalized world about to face an unprecedented (sometimes super-) natural disaster,²²

temporal conceptualizations are critical to our understandings of race.

Think about what we mean when we say we live in the post-civil rights era, or what we meant when we thought Obama's election marked the beginning of the post-racial era.²³ The *post-* in post-racial is crucial. While colour-blind ideologies consider any expression of race as racism, post-racialism implies that race and racism are artifacts of a world history that we are now beyond. It signals a break with the past; that insistence that Things Have Changed because of transcendent, unidirectional racial progress – away from the racist past and toward a more egalitarian future.²⁴

I am most interested in the third dimension of racial time, which Jack Turner calls "political time." It is, in essence, the bifurcation of the past and present. Turner wonders whether the past is as past as we would like to believe. Instead, what if the relationship between the past and the present is an open, political question? What if the past doesn't recede in direct proportion to the earth's orbiting of the sun? What if the relation of the past and the present is instead a matter of interpretive judgement?²⁵ Recognizing that political time might be out of synch with chronological time, Turner argues, "compels us to come to grips with the conservative forces – in this case, forces conserving white supremacy – at play."²⁶ Competing interpretations of political time can constitute different temporal imaginaries, each with its own framing of the role of the past in the present.

Living in the Past I: Make America Great Again

In the temporal imaginary that surrounds the call to "Make America Great Again," nostalgia is a form of dog whistle politics. Ian Haney Lopez defines dog whistle politics as coded racial language that is inaudible and easily denied on one level, but stimulates strong reactions on another level. It consists of (1) speaking in racial code to a target audience; (2) using codes that contain a hidden message that would violate the moral consensus against explicit racism if it were stated overtly; and (3) creating codes that are typically calls for seemingly race-neutral items like small government, states' rights, personal responsibility, law and order, references to individual rights, national security, and white victimization.²⁷

Now, in contrast to dog whistle politics, everyone could hear Trump, who, just in case we've forgotten: failed to disavow the endorsement of KKK leader David Duke in February 2016; insinuated that Ghazala Khan, the Gold Star mother whose husband spoke during the Democratic National Convention, was forbidden from speaking because of her Islamic faith; claimed a judge was biased against the case involving Trump University "because he's a Mexican"; and treats entire racial groups as monolithic entities, claiming, for example, that African Americans and Hispanics are "living in hell." Prior to this we should not forget Trump's role in fanning the hysteria around the Central Park 5, his public and vehement opposition to the Ground Zero mosque, that he was the driving force behind the birther movement that claimed President Barack Obama was not an American citizen, and that his career as a real estate mogul was built on discriminating against black people.

And that was only prior to the election. Since becoming President, the Trump administration has transformed the landscape of American criminal justice. According to the Marshall Project, the first year of the Trump administration catalyzed nine major changes, all designed to eradicate Obama's legacy: (1) Trump changed the tone of political discourse, often in racially charged terms; (2) the administration has kept the "mass" in "mass incarceration," by reinstating mandatory minimum sentencing in federal prosecutions; (3) Trump has made immigration synonymous with crime, playing on racist stereotypes, creating a

surge in deportation orders, putting DACA recipients at risk, and threatening to withdraw funding from sanctuary cities; (4) the Department of Justice has reinvigorated the War on Drugs, maintaining that possession of marijuana is a federal crime, no matter how many states have legalized it for recreational use; (5) Trump has unleashed the police, backtracking on consent decrees that used to require police departments that have violated civil rights to reform their unconstitutional practices; (6) Trump has been a boon to for-profit prisons, doubling the stock prices of the country's largest private prison operators in spite of a scathing Inspector General's report on the inhumane conditions within those prisons; (7) Trump has indicated that he wants to revive the death penalty, and the Department of Justice has indicated that it will seek the death penalty in two federal cases, even though the last time a federal prisoner was put to death was back in 2003; (8) he concedes to the demands of the NRA, in spite of the continuation of mass shootings throughout the country; and (9) he is remaking the United States court system by stocking the lower courts with disproportionately conservative white male nominees, filling the federal appellate courts with twelve new judges, and making plans to fill more than 100 federal judgeships by 2020.²⁸ More recently, the retirement of Justice Anthony Kennedy, who was traditionally a swing vote within the United States Supreme Court, has stoked legitimate fears that his replacement will be more staunchly conservative. This ideological rebalancing of the Supreme Court could jeopardize progressive politics in a number of policy areas – LGBTQ rights, affirmative action, voting rights, and immigration – for a generation or more.

However, the basic truth of the matter is that a lot of people liked what they heard in the call to “Make America Great Again,” and agreed with the image of America that Trump presented.

For example, before the election, producers for NPR's *Code Switch* podcast interviewed Trump supporters in western Montana, who explained why they supported Trump. They were open about their views of the recent past and their fear for the future:

Think about how everything is racist now...before Obama got elected, you really didn't hear much about race, racism or any of that stuff. He's brought this all to us...I think he's

done this country more harm in that respect than anybody could.

[Muslim immigrants are] expecting us to conform to their culture, rather than they to Americanism. And they look at – we need to build their mosque, but on the other hand we can't even say prayers in our own schools anymore. And yet we can build mosques across the country.

I think we'll have a very big recession [if Clinton wins]. We'll have a flood of immigrants coming across the border, flooding our health care system, flooding our education system, flooding our prisons. You'll see a real downturn in the standard of living you now know as American.

It's been a dark eight years. And I mean a dark eight years... I've watched my country go from a place where I felt safe to a very unsafe world. I don't feel safe anymore, here.²⁹

As the *Code Switch* reporters note, these comments reveal that these Trump supporters are, frankly, petrified. They are scared of terrorism, scared they're being left behind, scared of demographic change, scared that their American way of life is being dismantled because, in their view, immigrants refuse to assimilate. Even as they live in a town that's 96 percent white, they're still consumed by fear of a changing population – what will happen to my children and grandchildren's opportunities?³⁰ It is in this context defined by white fear and anxiety that Trump's magical nativism and promise of a world order and *racial order* restored was highly appealing, much more so than Clinton's promise to competently manage Obama's legacy.³¹

There have been some important recent interventions to the exploration of white working-class identity – a key Trump constituency. In *Strangers in Their Own Land*,³² University California at Berkeley sociologist Arlie Hochschild spent five years interviewing members of this group in rural Louisiana. Her research suggests that Trump happened to come along when three forces were already in place for this group: (1) their economic lives were unstable; (2) their cultural views ridiculed and seen as outdated; (3) demographic changes made them feel as though they were becoming a minority. Together, these forces created incredible anxiety, and a feeling that these people were now strangers in their own land.

From her ethnographic data Hochschild crafts what she calls a “Deep Story” – the story that feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It’s a narrative that feels true. The Deep Story goes something like this.

In the first scene, you are standing in a long line that winds up a hill. Just over the hill lies the American Dream. You’re tired, your feet hurt, and the line is not moving, but you’re not a complainer. There are people behind you in this line, and many of them are people of colour; you don’t wish them any ill-will, but you’re quite riveted on the idea of getting a reward for all the hard work you’ve done.

In the second scene, you notice that others are cutting in line ahead of you. Who are these line-cutters? They are black people, who, through affirmative action programs have access to places in universities and jobs that were formerly reserved for whites; they are also women, immigrants and refugees, and overpaid public sector workers. All these people are cutting in line in front of you, but it’s people like you, not them, who have worked hard to make this country great.

In the third scene, you become suspicious because the people cutting in line must have had help. Then you notice the supervisor of the line, the one responsible for ensuring the line is fair and orderly, is actually helping the line-cutters! He’s telling you that these cheats deserve special treatment, that they’ve had a harder time than you have. What you’ve seen on Fox News tells you this can’t be true. It’s not fair. And who is the supervisor? President Barack Obama. Of course – he and his wife are line cutters themselves. And government – in all its manifestations – is just an instrument of the line cutters.³³

With this “Deep Story” as the backdrop to white, conservative working-class identity, Trump’s campaign rhetoric resonated. And while there are many elements of the story, race is an essential part. But the people featured in this book do not consider themselves racist. They feel that liberal elites on the coasts and in the cities call them racist, homophobic and xenophobic, and they hate it.³⁴ Now, their understanding of racism, on the whole, is simplistic. For example, a *Huffington Post* poll from 2016 found that Trump voters think that white people are more likely to face discrimination than

any other racial or ethnic group.³⁵ Racism, however, is not simply a function of individual attitudes. It is the social, legal, economic, and political distinctions that mark and maintain unequal entry and access points to privacy, property, protection, prosperity, and personhood. It is embedded in structures, institutions, and ideas, especially those about hard work, deservedness, representation, redistribution, and even the proper role of government.

Of course, the point is not whether the definition of racism or other parts of the Deep Story are accurate,³⁶ the point is that it *feels true* to many Americans and that these kinds of narratives are powerful. And note that this Deep Story isn’t just about the American Dream – it’s also about *time*. We are all waiting in line, and embedded in the American Dream is a causal logic about hardships and rewards; putting time in to get time out. It’s not a coincidence that the rural communities that voted for Trump are often described as displaced in time. J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, for example, describes Appalachia as a world unto itself, “forgotten,” clinging to ideas that are no longer in fashion, like religion, or depending on industries that belong to the past, like coal mining.³⁷

Living in the Past II: Ghost Stories

But there are other Deep Stories to be told. We know that race played a role in the 2016 election. The research of those political scientists who, unlike me, actually study American elections indicate that it was fear of diversity, and not economic anxiety, that made people more likely to vote for Trump.³⁸ This is the central argument of Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto's 2013 book on the rise of the Tea Party, *Change They Can't Believe in*,³⁹ as well as a recent book by John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck, on the 2016 election.⁴⁰ A focus on race politics not just in the era of Trump, but any era of American history, reveals that past and the present are politically confounded. What race makes clear is how very much we are haunted by the past. And just as time is a key element of the Deep Story that Trump supporters have created for themselves, time is fundamental to other imaginaries as well; this is what black political theorists call counter-histories.⁴¹ These, too, are Deep Stories – but rarely are they accompanied by the calls for empathy and understanding of the plight of the white working class that chorused after the election. You see, our stories are ghost stories.⁴²

The acknowledgement, of what Du Bois called the “present-past” and what Toni Morrison calls “rememories” means that we must take shadows, memories, traumas, ghosts, and specters seriously.⁴³ That which is uninvited, but not unconscious.⁴⁴ A seething, haunting, maddening presence. This is challenging for political scientists, because it means that we must delve into the world of what we can't quite see and probably can't measure. In his book on black politics and popular culture, Richard Iton points to the tension between the disciplined, quantifiable, bounded realm of formal politics and popular culture's “willingness to embrace disturbance, to engage the apparently mad and maddening, to sustain often slippery frameworks of intention that act subliminally, if not explicitly, on distinct and overlapping cognitive registers, and to acknowledge meaning in those spaces where speechlessness is the common currency.”⁴⁵ In popular culture omission is method and silences carry meaning – just think of how important a beat or two of silence can be in jazz. So, too, that which cannot be ordered, bound, or

easily discerned can still be significant; as Toni Morrison once said, “invisible things are not necessarily not there.”⁴⁶

To take a recent example from pop culture: in November 2017, when Jordan Peele’s movie “Get Out,” was nominated for a Golden Globe Award in the category of “best comedy or musical,” he responded with just five words, “‘Get Out’ is a documentary.”⁴⁷ It is a fictional account of the terror that marks the African American experience in the United States. In the opening scene of the film a young black man is lost in the suburbs at night. When a car slowly approaches him, he immediately recognizes the danger he’s in. The entire movie, from this opening scene – a clear reference to the tragic murder of Trayvon Martin – to the subsequent plot about an African American man meeting his white girlfriend’s parents for the first time, is an acknowledgement that simply existing in white spaces is enough to get a black person killed. The real nightmare, the unabashed and unavoidable horror that the film demands the audience grapple with, is the ubiquity of white spaces. They are *everywhere*.

Ghosts and shadows were central images in the immense body of work of W.E.B. Du Bois, who is increasingly being recognized as a founder of modern sociology.⁴⁸ The shadow of slavery hung heavily over the present, not only because the past was so violent and terrible, but also because shadows darken and obscure.⁴⁹ In Du Bois’ work, the shadow represents a history of evasion, of stories that could not be told and that remain untold still. For example, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois beautifully articulates the two emblematic specters of the post-Civil War landscape:

Amid it all, two figures ever stand to typify that day to coming ages, - the one, a gray-haired gentlemen, whose fathers had quit themselves like men, whose sons lay in nameless graves; who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolition threatened untold ill to all; who stood at last, in the evening of life, a blighted, ruined form, with hate in his eyes; - and the other, a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries, had aforetime quailed at that white master’s command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and

closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife, - aye, too, at his behest had laid herself low to his lust, and borne a tawny man-child to the world, only to see her dark boy’s limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after ‘cursed Niggers.’ These were the saddest sights of that woeful day; and no man clasped the hands of these two passing figures of the present-past; but, hating, they went to their long home, and, hating, their children’s children live to-day.⁵⁰

As Lawrie Balfour notes, the brilliance of this scene is how it sketches something important about the relations of power and powerlessness in this shared history.⁵¹ It’s not a simplistic narrative of victims and villains. He captures, beautifully, “the power of historical injuries that are compounded over generations, and of their capacity to foreclose democratic futures.”⁵²

Even now, the specter of slavery is not dead and gone. In Jamaican culture a “duppy” is a term for a ghost that escapes between death and burial. It is malevolent spirit that engages in mischief toward the living. Taking any form it chooses, the duppy signifies the quotidian possibility of danger and harassment, extrapolating the lingering and residual remains of the irrepressible.⁵³ The duppy tells a different Deep Story, one in which the rise of Trump fits a pendulum-like pattern of racial progress and backlash that began with the death of slavery, but *escaped before the institution was buried*. That is, in every moment when African Americans and their allies have challenged the structures and institutions of white supremacy they have been met with a disproportionate backlash in which white Americans have employed the power of the state, in addition to the extra-legal terrorism of groups like the KKK, to protect and defend systems of racial inequality.⁵⁴

This temporal imaginary begins with the establishment of Black Codes after the end of the Civil War. These codes prohibited the newly freed slaves from the right to vote, serve on juries, own or carry weapons or rent or lease land. Laws were also passed that prevented blacks from migrating to northern or western states. African Americans that were orphaned after the end of slavery, or those found to be in violation of the laws that restricted movement and labor, were arrested and imprisoned. The advent of the convict leasing system then used Black prison labor

to rebuild the South. A few decades later, African Americans fled the South *en masse* to seek better economic opportunities, but more urgently to escape white lynch mobs, who tortured and murdered an estimated 5,000 people between 1882 and 1968. White southerners did everything possible to derail the Great Migration. Because underpaid black labour was still at the heart of the Southern economy, white southern elites banned black newspapers, stopped trains, and used vagrancy laws to arrest people trying to leave the state.⁵⁵

In the 1930s, the New Deal – the series of federal reforms enacted in the 1930s to ease the hardships of the Great Depression – was purposefully designed to exclude African Americans from the social safety net. At the time, most blacks in the labor force were employed in agriculture or as domestic workers. As Ira Katznelson shows, members of Congress from the South demanded that those occupations be excluded from minimum wage laws, social security, unemployment insurance and workmen’s compensation.⁵⁶ Similarly, the GI Bill, largely responsible for the emergence of the white middle class, excluded black veterans. They were denied housing and business loans, were not granted admission to whites-only colleges and universities, and were excluded from job training programs. Of the 67,000 mortgages insured by the GI Bill to support home purchases by veterans, fewer than 100 were for Black homeowners.⁵⁷

In the post-war era, white Americans resisted all attempts at school integration after *Brown v. Board*, first by shutting down schools rather than integrating them,⁵⁸ and later by channeling public funds into private and charter schools. Schools have been quietly resegregating in recent years. The number of high-poverty schools that serve black and brown populations has doubled since 2001 and in some parts of the country schools are more segregated now than they were fifty years ago.⁵⁹ In the 1960s, white Americans continued to demand, protect, and bolster discriminatory housing and lending policies.⁶⁰ Even today, African Americans are 105 percent more likely than whites to have high cost mortgages for home purchases, even when socio-economic status, credit score, and other high-risk factors are controlled.⁶¹

Much has been said about how the invention of Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” in the 1960s was a strategy to channel white anger over civil rights into support

for the Republican Party. The “law and order” rhetoric of Reagan’s administration was later institutionalized in the War on Drugs, a disastrous policy that expanded a system of mass incarceration that disproportionately targeted and imprisoned African Americans.⁶²

Equally important is the system of mass criminalization that has enabled the explosion of prison populations.⁶³ For example, the Department of Justice’s report on the police department in Ferguson, Missouri revealed that the city’s practices were driven by revenue generation. Officers would disproportionately issue tickets to black residents, and then when residents failed to pay arrest warrants were used almost exclusively for the purpose of compelling payment by threatening incarceration.⁶⁴ For example, a black resident of Ferguson parked her car illegally in 2007 and was issued two citations and a \$151 ticket. She was then charged with seven failure to appear offenses for missing fine deadlines; with each failure to appear, the court issued another arrest warrant and additional fines. When she tried to make payments in \$50 increments, the court returned them, refusing to accept anything other than payment in full. In December 2014 she had paid \$550 for her original \$151 citation, and still owed an additional \$541.⁶⁵ In a city with a population of 21,000, approximately 16,000 of the residents had arrest warrants in their name.⁶⁶

In the 1990s, Bill Clinton’s welfare reform strategy capitalized on the stereotype of the Black Welfare Queen. The *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act* helped consolidate a new mode of poverty governance that, as Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram argue, is simultaneously neoliberal – grounded in market principles – and paternalist, that is, focused on telling the poor what is best for them.⁶⁷ In communities defined by their racial and class positions of subjugation, “police, courts, and welfare agencies work alongside one another as interconnected authorities and instruments of governance.”⁶⁸

The pattern continued into the new millennium with the erosion of affirmative action policies in higher education, which are under constant attack in the courts and media.⁶⁹ In the 2013 decision *Fisher v. University of*

Texas at Austin, the Supreme Court reaffirmed the strict scrutiny of any use of racial classifications in public policy: any consideration of race must serve a compelling government interest; the educational benefits of a diverse student body in institutions of higher education meets this standard of “compelling interest,” but efforts to use affirmative action to redress past instances of racial discrimination does not; and workable, race-neutral alternatives that produce the same outcomes are always preferable to race-conscious policies. The Trump administration has signaled that it will join conservative forces in the fight against affirmative action. The Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice has set up a special project to scrutinize race-conscious admissions practices.⁷⁰

The vitriolic hatred of President Barack Obama is fundamentally an outgrowth of white backlash. Michael Tesler’s research demonstrates that in spite of the Obama administration’s substantial efforts to remain politically neutral on the topic of race, Americans’ political beliefs are now more polarized by racial considerations than ever before.⁷¹ Similarly, Adam Serwer recently pointed out the irony of Trump supporters’ numerous assassinations of Obama’s character:

Conservatives attacked Obama’s lack of faith; Trump is a thrice-married libertine who has never asked God for forgiveness. They accused Obama of being under malign foreign influence; Trump eagerly accepted the aid of a foreign adversary during the election. They accused Obama of genuflecting before Russian President Vladimir Putin; Trump has refused to even criticize Putin publicly... Conservatives said Obama was lazy; Trump “gets bored and likes to watch TV.” They said Obama’s golfing was excessive; as of August Trump had spent nearly a fifth of his presidency golfing. They attributed Obama’s intellectual prowess to his teleprompter; Trump seems unable to describe the basics of any of his own policies... Republicans said Obama was racially divisive; Trump has called Nazis “very fine people.” Conservatives portrayed Obama as a vapid celebrity; Trump is a vapid celebrity.⁷²

There is virtually no personality defect that Republicans accused Obama of possessing, Serwer concludes, that Trump doesn’t actually possess. But beyond the rhetorical hatred of Obama, the most recent manifestation of this racial backlash is the ways that the Trump administration has sought to systematically dismantle every progressive policy of the previous administration. This includes the continuing attack on voter rights through the proliferation of voter identification laws since the Supreme Court struck down key provisions of the *Voting Rights Act* in 2013. Instead of targeting the ways these laws result in the suppression of African American and Hispanic votes, the Trump administration created a Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity in May 2017 to examine cases of voter fraud, though, a member of the Commission notes, “the implicit rationale for its creation appears to be to substantiate President Trump’s unfounded claims that up to 5 million people voted illegally in 2016.”⁷³

The deep irony of the Deep Story is that while this feeling as though one is a stranger in her own land is new to conservative whites, it’s been something of a status quo for African Americans for most of American history. The American Dream has always been a racially coded construct; it has been made possible for whites precisely because it’s been impossible for blacks. It’s only when we ignore these generational hauntings that racial inequality is explained by a failure in black personal responsibility. This also means that Trump is not exactly the aberration we assume he is; in many ways, Trump is the logical extension and culmination of this pattern of racial progress and white backlash, and the way the Republican party has operated at least since Barry Goldwater. Because ultimately, hauntings are about those endings that are not over.

Conclusions: Shadows that Fall

Let me leave you with some concluding thoughts.

Of course we're outraged by Charlottesville. That's exactly the kind of racism we are primed to be outraged about: violent, explicit, vulgar, intentional. It is the racism of an era long past; easy to name, identify, and repudiate. And, importantly, it is outrageous *because* it is the racism of the past. It's harder and trickier to be outraged at the insidious racism of the everyday. This is the real point of my emphasis on haunting – it's a demand that we listen for whispers in the dark; that we see shadows that rise and fall; that we pay heed to that nagging voice in the back of our minds – the one that sometimes makes you think you're mad, the one that says, "there's something else in the room with us."⁷⁴ It is the racism and white supremacy that is embedded not just in the Trump presidency, but in every aspect of American social life. It is embedded in the location of highways and the funding of schools, the determination of voting districts, in which forms of labor are underpaid, in rental and housing markets, in the surveillance of certain neighbourhoods and the militarization of the police. It's the racism that shows up in unexpected places, like teaching evaluations. It is, in a word, systemic.

Does this mean that we shouldn't have empathy for the white working class? Of course not; after all, communication is, ultimately, about creating *shared time*.⁷⁵ However, it is also important to recognize that in some ways, focusing on the reasons why working-class whites elected Trump fits a similar insidious pattern in American politics: blaming poor people for ill-advised choices, while letting wealthier whites off the proverbial hook.

The historical narratives of political time are important because they function to establish moral authority. Whether we agree on which details of the past are most important to the present is beside the point, because these temporal imaginations exist simultaneously. As James Baldwin noted, "What happened to the Negro...is not simply a matter of my memory and my history, but of American history and memory. [For] the history the Negro endured...was endured...by all the white people who oppressed him. I was here, and that did something to me. *But you were here on top of me, and that did something to you.*"⁷⁶ This history haunts us all.

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