ON TRUTH AND LIES IN A PRAGMATIC, PERFORMATIVE SENSE (WITH MY RESPECTS TO
NIETZSCHE), AKA: REALITY NEEDS A BETTER PR DEPARTMENT.[1]

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Like many elections, the 2016 election tumbled forward in time as a dramatic tale.
For many participants and spectators, however, the play did not end with the sort of
resolution Victor Turner posits in his classic account of social dramas, but instead in
tragedy, portending years of turmoil to come. This social drama pitted different
characters against one other: anti-establishment Washington outsiders against corrupt
Washington insiders. It pitted core Enlightenment categories against one other, with
truth, facts, and reason constantly counterposed in the liberal media to fakes, lies, and
the irrational.

Indeed, in the months leading up to the election, many liberal journalists were thrown
into an existential tizzy over the way lies so nakedly circulated in the public sphere
with no obstruction whatsoever. Many indicted the Internet and its visual culture for
flinging us into a post-fact state of affairs. Journalists blamed memes for their ability
to unleash and channel the irrational emotions that fueled racism among a new
Internet-bred alt-right generation.[2] And the Internet itself was called out for creating
the echo chambers which prevented analysts and also voters from confronting
different ideas, especially from encountering facts—and even truths—that did not
align with their existing worldviews.[3]

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[1]   As I was discussing some of these issues on social media, journalist Karl Bode responded with a
succinct phrasing of the problem, when he quipped: "Reality needs a better PR department."

[2]   For an indictment of memes, especially, for how they tug and appeal at the level of not reason but
"emotions," see "The Age of Vitriol: Edward Luce on US Politics and Social Media" by Edward
Luce in the *Financial Times* (published November 4, 2016,
http://linkis.com/www.ft.com/content/XQkx9).

[3]   "How the Internet Is Loosening Our Grip on the Truth," published in the *New York Times* by Farad
Manjoo, (November 3, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/03/technology/how-the-internet-is-
loosening-our-grip-on-the-truth.html?_r=0) is paradigmatic of some of the core liberal anxieties
underwriting the powerlessness of facts in the face of a biased population and the Internet's filter
bubble. In the piece, that no solution, even partial can be proposed to fix this problem, is a potent
confirmation of just how wedded so much of journalism is to the idea that their arsenal is
composed of so-called presenting facts and truth. For a thoughtful critique of the decisive role the
Internet played in the election, see "Social Media Did Not Give Us Donald Trump and it is Not
Weakening Democracy" on *Medium* by Daniel Kreiss (published November 7, 2016,
https://medium.com/@dkreiss/social-media-did-not-give-us-donald-trump-and-it-is-not-

Still, despite these problems, and partly due to faith in the data driven and statistical polling of the kind that Nate Silver made credible (and of a sort which mostly forecasted an HRC win), many believed it was impossible for Trump to become our next president.

When the unimaginable solidified into a state of reality, it left many stunned. Much of journalistic critique pivoted 180 degrees. It wasn't only technology or right-wing nutjobs to blame; instead the critique also took the form of a *mea culpa*.[4] Liberal journalists began to blame themselves for overlooking vast sets of facts. And as these facts were suddenly brought to light—albeit too late—a new awareness emerged. Many recognized Trump's power lay in his popularity, especially with non-urban voters, and thus his populism. Journalists wrote more seriously about how he could sway voters during an era defined by a crisis of political legitimacy. He persuaded enough of those who harbored discontent with the political process, had widespread feelings or experiences of economic and social insecurity, and hold a desire for a new political vision. He accomplished some of these goals, in part, as many other populist leaders have done before: by scapegoating immigrants and guaranteeing job security.

But these analyses still fell short, unable to address the dramatic social processes of performance and spectacle, that are central, not peripheral, to understand how and why a candidate who was openly racist and misogynist with little political experience could clinch the election. As one right-wing pundit put it, observing an alt-right even he found extreme, "Young people perhaps aren't primarily attracted to the alt-right because they're instinctively drawn to its ideology: they're drawn to it because it seems fresh, daring and funny, while the doctrines of their parents and grandparents seem unexciting, overly-controlling and overly-serious."[5]

For the rest of my talk, I will use Trump as an object lesson to demonstrate how the pull of drama—the lure of spectacle—helped to partly determine the outcome of the election and how truth and lies were never stable or obvious categories, but were malleable entities that needed to be drawn out and clarified by the light of practice

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weakening-democracy-20814a054c31#.stfjv3b4v).

4   See, especially, "A 'Dewey Defeats Truman' Lesson for the Digital Age" by Jim Rutenberg in the *New York Times* (published November 9, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/09/business/media/media-trump-clinton.html) and "The Media Didn't Want to Believe Trump Could Win" by Margaret Sullivan in the *Washington Post* (published November 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the-media-didnt-want-to-believe-trump-could-win-so-they-looked-the-other-way/2016/11/09/d2ea1436-a623-11e6-8042-f4d111c862d1_story.html).

5   Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos, "An Establishment Conservative's Guide to the Alt-Right," *Breitbart*, March 29, 2016, http://www.breitbart.com/tech/2016/03/29/an-establishment-conservatives-guide-to-the-alt-right/

and performance.[6] While Trump won the election narrowly and due to a multitude of reasons, including manipulative voter suppression tactics, I will focus on Trump's ability to harness the western cultural ideal of authenticity, and how his monopolization of this virtue enabled his campaign to cast HRC as a masked, Janus-faced, and thoroughly inauthentic candidate.

My performative analysis may not strike as all that unique to this audience. After all: anthropologists, along with their close kin in performance studies, have often been on the front lines of establishing and taking seriously categories of social fantasy, drama, and the powers of the "irrational" denigrated elsewhere in western academic traditions. But the stakes of the issue might be posed instead as a question: why should "democratic" politics be thought of as "above" the forces and powers of fantasy, enchantment, passionate sentiments, and drama when these characteristics are so fundamental to the workings of social life? The answer is they shouldn't. And by insisting that the integrity of democratic institutions means civilizing and rationalizing them against these mystical forces, their reactionary powers might only be heightened.

For anti-Trump citizens and liberal journalists, Trump was a fake, and for obvious reason: he demonstrated consistently a willingness to lie, even a zeal for it. In unmasking his statements as lies and thus allowing the facts to take their place, many journalists assumed—or at least hoped—that the common sense of the electorate would take over, and they would see Trump for what they believed the facts plainly revealed him to be: a pathological nutjob. The problem, as Clifford Geertz has argued, is that what constitutes "commonsense"—in contradistinction to the term itself—is rarely as commonsensical as it should seem.[7]

Many journalists failed to see how Trump could trump the facts with the more robust power of performance. For a sufficient portion of the population, Trump was able to construct himself as a more authentic candidate by selling a desirable fantasy about the possibility of a different political way. As Trump railed and ranted against the establishment, his panache and charisma demonstrated a type of authenticity that enough citizens could believe in. Sure, he may have lied pathologically, but he showed such disregard for the significance of his own duplicity that the very tenure of the lie seemed to point to a higher truth. In other words, during his speeches and the debates, he conveyed his anti-status quo message as much through behavior as

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6 In no way am I suggesting that such performative tactics are the sole, much less, decisive factor in determining the election outcome. In fact, Trump's win was no landslide and there were multiple reasons—from voter suppression tactics, to key missteps in the HRC campaign, and many more—that underwrote his win. Nevertheless, a dramatic, performative reading is one that mainstream and liberal journalists are ill-equipped to offer and was one conduit of many to help explain the so-called Black Swan event.

7 See Clifford Geertz, "Common Sense as a Cultural System," *The Antioch Review* Vol. 33, No. 1 (Spring, 1975): 5–26.

through any utterance: he was outrageously cocky and defied all rules and norms of civility. He gave a middle finger to political correctness. While such behavior horrified many, others were thrilled by his willingness to be such a crude, bad, and rude boy. Many of his supporters made video compilations collating his "best" bad boy moments, which of course were popular.[8] His unapologetic stance suggested that there was nothing to apologize for. He branded himself as an outsider in accordance with contemporary media and entertainment tropes—not all that surprising given he was an ex-reality TV star.

The crucial word here is *authentic*. Even if human dramaturgy and performance can be considered to be something of human universals, the success of performances are indebted to particular cultural ideals and historical contexts. In performance space, one can be authentically inauthentic: one can be lauded for bringing a realness to an unreality, by committing to it without reservation, and maintaining the suspension of disbelief. By branding himself as the more authentic candidate, a vision that at least enough voters found alluring, the payout out was significant for Trump. After all, the ideal of authenticity is one of the most important core sentiments and moral ideals of the western self, as Charles Taylor and countless others have argued.[9]

This ideal of the authentic self, what Lionel Trilling long ago has defined as "being true to oneself" also meant that under the right circumstances, Trump could cast Hilary as the inauthentic, duplicitous, and masked politician. The notion of the mask in western societies beholds no singular meaning, but as Steve Coleman has pointed out, "the mask (literal and metaphorical) is often devalued and is generally regarded as … disguise."[10] The mask can easily be mobilized as an icon of deceit with profound social effects—both good and ill.

And Trump marshaled ideals of authenticity and the dominant western perception of the mask as a fake facade to his advantage. From the beginning, Trump went to work casting Clinton as a fake crook. And this cause was aided by the fortuitous timing of an FBI investigation into her secretive, masked, private email network, and a series of data breaches amplified by WikiLeaks that further positioned her in the shadows.

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8 See "Ultimate Donald Trump Thug Life Compilation | Funny videos 2016" (published March 12, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nv3ztlYPa1A) and "Most Badass Donald Trump Moments—Can't Stump The Trump Compilation #1" (published October 10, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKG7CZfC0JQ) on *YouTube*.

9 While its roots lie in Romanticism, it is an ideal whose serious staying power is due, in part, to its constant reinvention and renegotiation over the last 150 years in a variety of locations, from the new left political movements (see Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) to the pop culture (Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, London: Routledge, 2004). Even if it is hard to pin down, we know it when we see it—and many saw it in Trump.

10 Simon Coleman, "On Mauss, masks, and gifts: Christianities, (in-) dividualities, modernities," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5.1 (2015): 295–315. Accessed at http://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau5.1.014/1848

These became central "props," to borrow a dramaturgical phrase from Erving Goffman, to allow HRC's supposedly corrupt character to be unveiled. Indeed, many liberal journalists misread the specific importance and effect of WikiLeaks's release of HRC emails. Even as many waved off the emails as inconsequential because of their lack of new, revelatory information—to the extent that many joked that the only noteworthy email contained Podesta's recipe for a really creamy risotto—the fact of attention to what was once hidden, the fact of dramatically shining light in a dark place—even if there was nothing in it—cemented for many the conception that the HRC campaign represented dirty politics as usual. And cemented, in the doing, the idea that Trump was the maverick, authentic—even transparent—alternative.

To conclude, a core lesson in anthropology and performance studies is that people get caught up in spectacular affective movements through the power of performance or manipulating symbols (like flags) or by harnessing ideals like authenticity. But we have been a lot less successful in porting these lessons about these human social conditions to other scholarly domains, and even less so to the public at large. The reasons for such failure are complex and multifarious and I don't have time to address them in this talk.

But honoring the moment—a period being experienced for very good reason as a crisis—I would like to end with one final point. Fake is only fake if you've bought into a notion of the real. And the question of what is real is even more urgent and vexed today. But theory and scholarship won't get us out of this predicament. What we need is a pragmatic practice that recognizes the centrality of fantasy, emotions, fiction, performance, and myth for politics and political messaging. Here I am simply telegraphing the ideas found in a short, punchy, and very perceptive book by media and performance studies scholar Stephen Duncombe, a book called *Dream: Reimagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*. This vital tract explains how Trump could land power and how the same tools could be wielded to stop demagogues like him from taking office again. For progressives to stand a chance, Duncombe argues they need to craft an ethical and honesty-based but nonetheless enchanting populist program. It has to rely on the staging of emotionally driven messages and even spectacle, so as to, in his own terms, for "manufacturing dissent."

Even if I can stand up here and criticize liberal Enlightenment epistemologies that treat the line between truth and lies as obvious, I, like journalists and all scholars are bound by these frameworks. We cannot, at least in our capacities as these professionals, spin fantasy. This enterprise of packaging and marketing an honest but compelling vision cannot, in other words, be left to the journalists or even scholars but to the citizens and political crusaders who must also engage in old-fashioned and laborious organization.[11] Anthropologist Didier Fassin has recently and thoughtfully pried apart core differences between fiction and ethnographic writing in light of truth

11 See Astra Taylor, "Against Activism," *The Baffler*, No. 30 (2016). Accessed at
   http://thebaffler.com/salvos/against-activism

telling—lessons as applicable to the field of journalism. While he fully recognizes fiction, whether literature or TV/film, can reveal as deep of truths about social existence as what can be produced by scholars (and certainly far more profoundly and compellingly), anthropologists are bound to stick to what they know and can know, even if these so-called facts and truths are and should be framed as partial, uncertain, and likely to change. The very same logic applies to the scholarly enterprise writ large and the field of journalism as well.

But journalists and those invested in political change are in desperate need of new, more radically open and flexible mindset that can accommodate and recognize the working of the following core idea offered by Stephen Duncombe: "With apologies to Galileo (who merely makes the mistake common to many modern Western thinkers), reality and fantasy don't inhabit separate spheres, they coexist. Reality needs fantasy to render it desirable, just as fantasy needs reality to make it believable." In so doing, it might empower journalists to move beyond a narrow and myopic vision of the meaning of truth and lies. In turn, it might allow them to diagnose and frame the problem and potentials of political movements with more nuance and imagination. Just as many mainstream and liberal journalists could not even fathom Trump as President, largely because his overt racism/misogyny and constant fibbing, so too did many of these same liberal journalist's discount Bernie Sanders almost entirely for his "unrealistic" program. I wonder how of them now wish they had given Sanders as much of a visible platform as they did with Trump.