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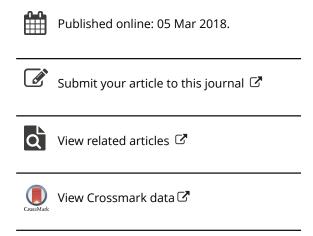
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On Political Perversion

Joshua Gunn

Recent attempts to brand US President Donald J. Trump as a psychotic or fascist have failed because such labels do not capture the double character of his appeal. In this essay, I argue Jacques Lacan's understanding of perversion better captures Trump's peculiar brand of political rhetoric.

Keywords: disavowal, genre, persona, perversion, psychoanalysis

... if we could, in a sense, discover for a complex linguistic formulation a corresponding form of character ... we should then be able to subsume that discourse under a moral order and thus satisfy our obligation to history.

-Edwin Black ("Second" 110)

By the time this essay appears in print, the 45th President of the United States will have said or done something more obnoxious than when it went to press. Although some critics have compared Donald J. Trump's rhetoric to the likes of Andrew Jackson and Barry Goldwater (Inskeep; Rosenwald), at present the most popular sentiment on the screen and page echoes one expressed early by political analyst Mark Halperin shortly after Trump's campaign commenced: we've "never seen anything like it" (Kim, par. 2).

What is not unique to Trump's rhetoric are the recurrent iterations of occultatio (i.e., introducing a topic by disavowal; Lanham 105), such as the paralepsis that Jennifer Mercieca has isolated as Trump's tropological calling tweet ("How Donald"), or the preteritio that Martin J. Medhurst finds coupled with a penchant for a simpering hyperbole (qtd. in Agence France Presse). Having a handlist for identifying Trump's tropological tricks helps us to grapple with the specialty of his statements, but we are still not quite sure how his ironic and often mean-spirited repertoire coheres into a patterned archive. Irony or occultatio notwithstanding, Trump's rhetoric remains elusively shrouded, as our social scientific friends might

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say, in an "N=1" (Hart 874). "I've been studying presidential rhetoric for 40 plus years now," Medhurst concedes, "and I cannot recall an instance in any campaign or in any presidency where people have used language the way Donald Trump is using language" (qtd. in Agence France Presse, par. 2). So, how do rhetoricians grapple with devices that we can name but that are advanced in seemingly unpredictable, novel performances?

The overdetermined recourse—of course!—is "to the man" (see Walton). In the national news media especially, Trump's bizarre speech is typically construed as a sui generis expression of his (presumably pathological) singularity, which is a habit in keeping with the speaker-centered bias of the rhetorical tradition (Zarefsky 8). Owing to a number of shifts in Western thought—the influence of psychology, a displacement of focus from the speaker to the audience, and a posthumanist reconciliation in various guises—contemporary rhetorical theory has come around to a more constitutive view that grasps the elements of a rhetorical encounter in immanent or quasi-immanent terms (see Biesecker 351-64; Charland 133-50; Greene 21-41). For example, in her elegant condensation of a widely traveled posthumanist way station, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell describes rhetorical agency as "promiscuous," "protean," and "communal," which suggests that a given rhetor or "text" is a "point of articulation" rather than a locus of origination ("Agency" 1-19). To this or at least a similar end, rhetoricians have developed a number of middle-range approaches that examine the discursive constraints of an articulation in a number of productive ways (e.g., Davis, Inessential; Stormer). Among the more familiar today are methodological perspectives and concepts that attempt to strike a balance between close reading and an analysis of ideological structuring or discursive articulations, keeping discrete personhood and its rhetorical production in tension with the criticism of genre, ideology, personae, and style, among others.

At the risk of theoretical infidelity, in this essay I develop a complementary perspective for rhetorical and cultural criticism with an elaboration of what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan termed "Freudian structures" (Evans 192–95). The example of Donald Trump's rhetoric is helpful for this purpose because of the autonomy it claims and the *ad hominem* attacks it invites: in what sense does a predictable rhetorical form or pattern speak Trump, and what do we call it? How do we square such a pattern with judgments of character? Observations that implicate Trump the biological animal are unavoidable; however, my primary foci are *the structural position and affiliated discourse that animate his figure*. My thesis is that Trump's rhetoric may be productively described as an iteration of "political perversion," the term for a peculiar, rhetorical configuration of style and genre that has been part of US political discourse for some time but that has

¹For the most sustained and nuanced reading of the relation between Lacanian and rhetorical theory, see Lundberg's *Lacan in Public*. The primary sources consulted in this essay include Lacan, *Écrits*; Lacan, *Seminar III*; and Lacan, *Seminar XI*.

become conspicuous recently because of the 2016 presidential election. In a larger, disciplinary frame, I propose that a reckoning with political perversion invites us to reevaluate the role of ethical judgment in rhetorical criticism.

To this end I first attempt to navigate the sticky wicket of what Avery F. Gordon terms "complex personhood," an ethical disposition of affording others—especially those who both excite and repulse us—a robust and enigmatic life at the same time as we recognize patterns of discourse that move through and even constitute their subjectivity (4-5). I suggest that Lacan's understanding of "the subject" helps us to reckon with such complexity with respect to psychical structures that comprise habituated, cultural strategies for relating to others. Then I describe how one such strategy, perversion, can be refigured as a both a rhetorical style and genre of discourse that features a recurrent disavowal, which audiences register variously as contradiction, irony, or occultatio. I conclude that Trump's rhetoric implicates a structural perversity that we respond to because we have heard it before, because we are conditioned to enjoy it, and because we will hear it again.

Ad Homina Homina Homina

Mother should I build the wall?/Mother should I run for president?

—Pink Floyd, The Wall (Waters, Gilmour, Mason, Wright)

June 15, 2015: In a tower that bears his name, just a worn coin's throw from the New York Stock Exchange, Donald Trump descended a gaudy, golden escalator with his spouse Melania to a flag-rimmed podium in a food court atrium (Moos). Sensationally concluding that "the American Dream is dead," in a rambling, 45-minute address Trump announced his candidacy for the US presidency and introduced a platform more meticulously outlined on a 1979 Pink Floyd double-album than any subsequent press release or policy paper to date ("Immigration Reform"). "I would build a great wall, and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me," Trump barked, "[a]nd I will have Mexico pay for that wall" (Trump, par. 159). Such an unlikely structure would have been dismissed out of hand were it not for the raison d'être of Trump's erectile injunction: Mexico's immigrants are "bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists," and while he assumes "some ... are good people," Trump averred, "border guards" say that Mexico is "sending us not the right [sic] people" (Trump, par. 9). The interminable circulation of Trump's "truthful hyperboles" then and now has given them the kind of stylistic consistency that simply begs for a character assessment.²

Attempting to apprehend the role of political feelings in our moment, a number of mental-health experts violated professional propriety to diagnose Trump as a

²The term "truthful hyperbole" was coined by Trump's ghostwriter for *The Art of the Deal*, Tony Schwartz, which the writer later denounced as a "contradiction in terms. It's a way of saying, 'It's a lie, but who cares?" (Mayer, par. 35).

handbook example of "narcissistic personality disorder," characterized by grandiosity, an exaggerated sense of self-importance, and a lack of empathy (Alford; McAdams). Although the narcissism of Trump's rhetoric is difficult to deny, the printed and screen-based diagnoses of his character and psyche were so frequent in 2016 that the president of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) issued a press release, presumably admonishing psychiatrists—but really, all political commentators-to refrain from publically "psychoanalyzing" Trump (Blake). "The unique atmosphere of this year's election cycle may lead some to want to psychoanalyze the candidates," wrote Maria A. Oquendo, "but to do so would not only be unethical, it would be irresponsible" (par. 1). To proffer pronouncements about Trump's mental health violates the so-called Goldwater Rule adopted by the APA in 1973, an ethical guideline developed to protect those who truly suffer from the stigma of mental illness.3 The rule, which holds that psychiatrists cannot offer psychological opinions about someone whom they have not personally analyzed, was developed after a short-lived magazine published a survey of 2,417 psychiatrists in 1964, over half of whom declared Barry Goldwater psychologically unfit to assume the presidency (Oquendo, par. 2). Ultimately, of course, the problem the rule is designed to manage is the suggestion of subjective political or moral opprobrium in the guise of objective, "scientific" truth.

Rhetoricians have wrestled with related issues of professional propriety regarding the character assessments of speakers, initially in regard to the role of the speech or composition teacher in the classroom (Crowley, Composition 215-27; Gehrke 14-87), and later "speech criticism" in the postwar period. In the handbook that guided the emergent field of rhetorical studies in the mid-twentieth century, Lester Thonssen and A. Craig Baird afford the critic license to assess the "probity" of a speaker's character if she or he advances an "ethical proof" (ethos) dependent on credibility, moral esteem, and goodwill (384-85; also Antczak 15-22). Although Edwin Black's Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method helped to unmoor a longstanding focus on the rhetor in favor of audience psychology, emotion or "exhortative" rhetoric, and larger social and ideological contexts (esp. 138-47), since World War II the dis-ease about the discussion of the character of a rhetor was and remains registered in the repeated displacement of specific, speaking bodies with an ethical proof, traditionally the notion of a rhetor's character as constituted in the delivery or text of a speech, echoing in some sense an avoidance of the "intentional fallacy" inherited from literary criticism (Wimsatt and Beardsley 468-88; also see Clark; Welleck and Warren 41-43). In recent memory, tensions over the critical distance effected by a focus on proofs instead of persons came to a head over the rhetoric of a particularly "tricky" figure who, not coincidentally, is frequently compared to Trump: Richard Nixon (Barbaro and Burns).

³What suffering person would want to seek treatment, the reasoning goes, if she is worried about her privacy? See Soreff and Bazemore (22–26).

In an influential exchange between Forbes Hill and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in 1972, Nixon was praised as a shrewd technician and denounced as a liar, respectively, but both scholars were careful to underscore their assessment of the speaker's "perspective" instead of Nixon's person (Campbell, "Conventional"; Campbell, "An Exercise"; Hill, "Conventional"; Hill, "Reply"). From a presumed scene of Aristotelian objectivity, Hill praised Nixon's 1969 "Vietnamization" address as a calculated masterpiece and criticized Campbell's explicitly moral critique of the same. In her rejoinder Campbell argued that Hill's praise of Nixon's instrumentality was "covert advocacy" and that the critical act is unavoidably a political one demanding some degree of reflexivity. In so doing, Campbell tacitly underscored the ancient, moral dimension of ethos and asserted the role of the critic to make "ethical assessments" of a speaker's integrity based on standards internal to a discourse vis-à-vis established facts of record (also see Campbell, The Great). The exchange between Hill and Campbell can be said to have inaugurated the so-called "ideological turn" in rhetorical studies (Cloud and Gunn); however, in so turning the dispute also helped to authorize, recommend, and reinforce a critical somersault first executed by Edwin Black two years prior: rhetorical personae.

In the tumultuous, televised context of the first Nixon term, the end of free love innocence in California, civil rights struggles, and the unprecedented, "embedded" coverage of the carnage in Vietnam, Black argued that "our politics seems at times a public nightmare privately dreamed," necessitating "some adjustments" to "the ancient doctrine of ethical proof" ("Second" 111). Black underscored a commonly accepted, critical distinction "between the man and his image" and the consequent evasion of moral judgments by rhetorical scholars; "the whole subject has the forbiddingly suspicious quality of a half-hidden scandal," he opined ("Second" 111, 109). Black found footing for ethical appraisal in terms of the figural agents implied by a discourse, which kept "before us the possibility, and in some cases the probability, that the author implied by the discourse is an artificial creation" and not "necessarily a person" ("Second" 111). Although Black would later find a more robust role for an analysis of the first persona—and not surprisingly, with Nixon—he advocated for the critical discernment of the "second persona" or the implied audience of a text as an index of ideology ("Second" 111-13).

The analysis of other kinds of personae in rhetorical criticism would follow in succeeding decades (the third persona, the fourth persona, the null persona, etc.), producing a number of insightful, landmark studies that illustrate, as Kenneth Burke once put it, how words use us and how ideology "makes a body hop around in certain ways" (6). In this respect persona criticism and its kissing cousins in style, genre, and ideology criticism implicitly rest on a version of the Goldwater Rule that is still observed in rhetorical studies today: a showperson's show does not necessarily align with "that man [or woman] behind the curtain." Let us dub this familiar habit of analytical restraint the Wizard of Oz Rule.

Moral Judgment Reconsidered: On Psychical Structures

What lie behind the sense of guilt of neurotics are always *psychical* realities and never *factual* ones.

—Sigmund Freud (Standard XIII 159, emphasis in the original)

The widely circulated notion that there are "two Trumps" (Petri), or that Trump is akin to the Wizard of Oz lurking behind a fog machine, as Hillary Clinton observed (Merica),⁴ suggests that the Wizard of Oz Rule is popular beyond the domain of scholarly critique. The Rule rests on two assumptions: (1) there is an authentic or "true" self or group orchestrating, conscious or unconsciously, the persona(e) in performance; and (2) the assessment of personae entails some kind of implicit or explicit moral judgment, usually in the register of responsibility or accountability.

The first assumption has been rigorously critiqued as a humanist conceit that has lost some explanatory power: the ideological turn and the introduction of poststructural perspectives (especially deconstruction, performativity, and Diane Davis's meticulously elaborated concept of "rhetoricity") have collectively undermined the idea that there is something essentially substantive behind the rhetorical curtain (Davis, *Inessential* 1–17). While there are certainly discrete histories, experiences, and particular exigencies, and while there are specific "bodies that matter" and feel and think, we are not so sure there is more to our drapes in any meaningful way other than how they hang (Butler, *Bodies*). Nevertheless, however we regard the status of agency, understanding, naming, and explaining how discourse hangs together remains the guiding protocol of rhetorical scholarship.

The moral connotations of the Wizard of Oz Rule are much harder to negotiate, especially after Campbell's intervention. Various approaches to rhetorical personae and formal patterns like genre have been developed to manage this impasse; but still, the problem with such meta-moves is that they *feel* dissatisfying. They displace the persons attached to and produced by the rhetoric we critique to some peripheral place (e.g., "what I am saying about Nixon is limited to his language and actions, and yet ... "). The discernment of implied personae in a given discourse, for example, imparts a disembodied disposition: in a savvy analysis of personae constellated around the person Joe Biden, for example, the authors show how "circulating personae may neuter roles important to political rhetoric and public culture" (Waisanen and Becker 256). Related approaches to rhetorical style, genre,

⁴The comparison of Trump's campaign to Oz's fictional, phantasmagorical feats was common during the 2016 election cycle and began early. For example, until each party nominated a candidate, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* regularly featured a segment titled "The Road to the White House" with characters from Baum's Oz mythos, always featuring Trump as Oz.

⁵"[T]he terminal character of [moral] judgment works to close critical discussion," observed Black, because it is "categorical" and shapes "decisively one's relationship to the object judged" ("Second" 109; also see Crowley, "Reflections" 464).

and ideology seem even more abstracted from the mouths, ears, and brains they animate. The case of Donald Trump is particularly apropos because so many of us are passionately drawn to dismissive ad hominem claims: the frequently bandied assertion that he is "unfit" for the presidency intones a judgment of responsibility that rests, however naively, on an assumed divide between an erratic persona and some immor(t)al essence. In light of the project of the posts, the pickle of personae and persons presents in many guises, sometimes as a tension between contingent and terminal judgments, but often as a choice between ethics and politics.

What if, however, we commit more deeply to our posthuman convictions and begin our critical analyses of public figures and their rhetoric with the assumption that the divide between persons and personae is an inevitable but nevertheless illusory contrivance? What would it mean for critics to say that rhetoric is an index of roles and "complex linguistic formulations" constitutive of speaking subjects? Admittedly, such a position is hardly homey. This conflation of personae and persons displaces the moral judgment of criticism from essentialist-tinged "stands" against demagogues and fascists to dynamic and contingent contexts and consequences, thereby subjecting ethical observations to ceaseless revision and reevaluation. I think this intersection of an unsatisfactory and unresolved contingency, this place of dead roads (Burroughs), is where rhetoricians have arrived—at least in theory: the subject as such is and remains dead, or at least is on display as an open question or casket (Cadava, Connor, and Nancy; C. Williams 191-92). Although the admission is frustrating, this means that we have already resigned the Wizard of Oz Rule toward this or that limited strategic purpose (such as the work of activists and the public intellectual) in favor of more complicated and tentative reckonings with subjectivity, which is all the more reason why a rhetor like Donald Trump both infuriates and amuses.

While it is also unsatisfying, and purposefully so, I think a psychoanalytic perspective provides at least a modicum of relief in a space of pause, or at least gets us a little closer to handling the homo in a way that stalls a familiar, habituated rush. In the context of our present political predicament, rhetoricians can benefit from psychoanalysis because it has wrestled with the ontological status of the subject in the treatment of psychological disturbances, straddling the singularity of an individual's experience with meaningful patterns that inhere in culture; this is why psychotherapists can take up pseudonymous "cases" in general discussion, because the focus is on patterns and not individual persons. From a Lacanian perspective, the symbolic netting that predisposes (as opposed to predetermines) a person toward particular kinds of relations with others is a Freudian structural position, or a "psychical structure" in short.

Unlike the dominant, behavioral approach to psychology based on symptoms (Verhaeghe 19-36), Lacan elegantly grounds his nosology in symbolic structures that may or may not express them. The structures are three in number: neurosis, psychosis, and perversion. Everyone is capable of expressing neurotic, psychotic, and perverse traits; however, each of us is an accrual of a set of dispositive reactions (or defenses) toward primary others that compulsively recur and that indicate the predominance of one of the three. I want to suggest that neurosis, psychosis, and perversion are akin to rhetorical styles and genres—and that we could critique discourse as such—because they are structural, because they name compulsive patterns, and because they denote recurrent strategies and defenses that are culturally derived. One might also suppose that psychical structures are akin to rhetorical personae as well, except for a crucial difference that I wager better navigates the pickle of moral judgment: the conception of a psychical structure has no use for an essentialism tied to some deeper self or hidden master pulling levers behind a curtain, thereby better locating the scene of judgment where Black (and Hillary Clinton) suspected it to be: it's the drapes! The drapes! Alternately said: you are your rhetoric.

Perversion Terminable and Interminable

[T]he extraordinarily wide dissemination of the perversions forces us to suppose that the disposition to perversions is itself no great rarity but must form a part of what passes as the normal constitution.

—Sigmund Freud (Standard VII 171)

So far I have been arguing that ethical judgment in criticism is perturbed by the abandonment of subjective essentialism on one foot and a general commitment to acknowledging complex personhood on the other (Gordon 5). To this end I suggested that a focus on discursive structures or articulations such as genre, ideology, and persona comprise a useful response for the rhetorician, but that these leave us somewhat dissatisfied when confronting controversial figures and their words. Part of that dissatisfaction concerns the often forced, critical distance that disarticulates a persona from a person and the strong feelings that we sense are really provoked by both—if only because, in the final instance, these are really one and the same. Insofar as there is an uneasy consensus that the subject is discursively produced, I am going to argue that Lacan's conception of a psychical structure vexes the rhetorical analyses of genre, style, and persona in helpful ways. Below I argue that the concept of psychical structures affords the rhetorician a classificatory scheme and a greater degree of specificity for understanding rhetorical patterns associated with rhetors. I stop short of endorsing psychical structures as the basis for some immutable judgment or character, however, and a closer examination of the perplexing structure of perversion helps to explain why.

⁶During the fall presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton made frequent reference to her father's profession as a drape maker and salesman, widely regarded as an attempt to seem relatable to middle-class voters. In her parody of the candidate on *Saturday Night Live*, Kate McKinnon declaimed Trump's policies would hurt people like her late father, "who made, I guess, drapes, or printed drapes or sold drapes, something with drapes—he was relatable and I am also relatable" (Itzkoff, par. 4).

One of the primary reasons Freud and his followers went to great lengths to elaborate cultural fantasies and related structures was to heed the good warning that both the Goldwater and Wizard of Oz Rules underscore: as Black put it, moral judgments are "terminal" in character and work to "close critical discussion rather than open or encourage it" ("Second" 109). The labor of psycho-, critical, or any kind of analysis would be finished before it began. Whether we call it hope, the noumenal, chance, or the persistent, complaining mote of an odious determinism, we take it as axiomatic that things could be otherwise; as thinking things, how can we not? Moreover, and precisely because any given subject is a performative repertoire of various cultural codes and scripts, absent sustained engagement it is difficult to determine the difference between a psychical structure (a sedimented archive, broadly conceived) and various traits or behaviors of which anyone is capable.

Perversion denotes an especially queer exemplar because we are all perverted: for decades film scholars have elucidated, for example, how the identificatory pleasure of staring at screens is classically perverse because it ignores "dominant notions of 'right' and 'good'" in plot and practice (Staiger 2). Insofar as the assumed baseline of human interaction is the interpersonal encounter, absconding into the world of the woofer and screen is a perverse substitution for bodies in the flesh.

More to the point, perversion popularly denotes a swerving from cultural and purportedly biological norms in general, especially the widely assumed relation between sexuality and reproduction (Freud, Standard VII 135). In addition to the (then) scandalous observation that infants and children are sexual beings, Freud famously argued folks are fundamentally "polymorphously perverse" (Freud, Standard VII 191), meaning there is no "pregiven natural order" to the sexual drive and that its object of inspiration (either a person or a person's part) is ultimately interchangeable sans the constraints of cultural norms (homosexuality, for example, is no impediment to reproduction; Evans 138). A major reason for Freud's objection to popular theories of perversion in his time (such as Kraft-Ebbing's) is that they wrongly import cultural and moral censure to bear upon a disposition Freud sees as "no great rarity," one that actually forms "what passes as the normal constitution" (Freud, Standard VII 171). Judging or condemning another as "perverted" both overlooks a shared disposition and subjects him, her, or them to cultural sensibilities that may lead to dehumanization, violence, and even death. Properly perceived, perversity as such is a universally shared human trait and is not to be judged, only understood.

Lacan parted ways with Freud by insisting on an important distinction between perverse acts, behaviors, and traits and a more recalcitrant perverse structure. Insofar as human sexuality itself is foundationally perverse and subject to constant cultural revision vis-à-vis the (social) contract, Lacan

⁷As Penney puts it: "It should go without saying that a genuinely antihomophobic engagement with psychoanalysis must object to any a priori connection of the strong sense of perversion with homosexuality" (11).

argued that a perverse structure must be located in a repeated disposition toward the Other that is relatively independent of the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality (Freud is critiqued here "for forgetting at times that the importance of heterosexuality in the Oedipal myth is a question of norms and not nature"; Evans 138). Behaviors deemed "perverse" have changed radically over time at the level of the cultural norm, which includes, of course, the biological too; Lacan argues that the perverse structure has not.

So what does it mean to say something or someone is structurally perverse? For Lacan one begins with the default of neurosis: a child first experiences a unity with the primary or maternal parent, which is usually challenged by a second parent. Begrudgingly or not, accepting the symbolic as a substitute for the maternal enables the neurotic to move into a shared, symbolic world. Unlike the more commonplace expressions of neurotic behaviors and acts, however, the difficulty in distinguishing between perverse acts or traits and structures has to do with a kind of in-betweenness: the perverse subject knows at some level a second parent forbids an exclusive identification with the primary parent ("No!"), but s/he refuses to share and "disavows" knowledge of the prohibition. Put in Oedipal terms, the pervert hears the dad's negative demand for substitution, knows that there is supposed to be a break with mom, but refuses to give her up anyway. For the pervert, there is an alienation from the primary parent because the "no!" is heard and registered, but he or she denies having ever heard it and refuses a separation from an assumed "unity" with the maternal body. The pervert both acknowledges and denies the social logic of substitution at the same time, even though he or she is capable of pretending compliance. Typically, the neurotic complies through the substitution of repression; the psychotic is oblivious and thus forecloses the process altogether; and the pervert knows what to do but disavows having such knowledge. The neurotic fumbles though with a more or less widely shared sense of what is right and wrong. Whatever the psychotic says, at base there is no understanding of what is or is not culturally appropriate. And the pervert knows what he or she does or says is wrong, but does or says it anyway: "I know well, but all the same ... " (Mannoni 71). It's this strange acknowledgment of social order and the simultaneous denial of the same that makes the structurally perverse so perplexing and (purportedly) unpredictable.

As an *act* or *trait* perversion is pervasive—I daresay it is standard in the "act" of abandon and what we often describe as "fun"—but as a structure perversion is very rare. The structurally perverse subject relates to others in alternately seductive and cruel ways—in ways that may seem to "connect" but in reality do not: at times the pervert refuses to accept the normative rules to which everyone else seems to submit like so many suckers, since s/he has an individual system of rules. On the other hand, the pervert understands cultural norms constitute a kind of game to get what he or she presumably wants. The pervert may "play along" for a while and, if so, will be a "pathos-less instrument of the Other's will" (e.g., as a torturer; Copjec

229). Either way, perversion is a shield from the anxiety that results from alienation without separation (Swales 1–19).8

From the outside and especially from the neurotic vantage of the critic, the pervert seems to enjoy his or her transgressions or appears to take great pleasure in manipulating, exploiting, or punishing others; the more commonplace neurotic may even regard the pervert with jealousy or admiration ("I wish I could say things like that!"). Because of smiling or laughter we assume the pervert is taking great pleasure in our collective shock or secret admiration. But, Lacan avers, this is not so.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, the pervert's perceived transgressions are defenses, not in pursuit of enjoyment (jouissance) but rather constitutive of various disavowals issued to contain it. 9 The pervert is beholden, in a sense, to a ceaseless reliving of a primary bond with the first Other, and consequently, reckons with a position of unbearable passivity. The transgressions and impositions of a symbolic regime are attempts to (re)assert an active role, to achieve a sense of stability through control and mastery. Enjoyment is usually regarded as a loss of control, a form, however temporary, of "giving up," but this is not what the pervert is after or can achieve. Far from "the neurotic's wet dream" of the "liberated erotic connoisseur," the pervert is "fundamentally unfree, compulsively driven to repeat the same thing" (Verhaeghe 406). Inviting the gaze of others in order to control it is paramount.

The reason the distinction between perverse acts and the perverse structure is so perplexing is because the pervert is ultimately posed between two Others, so to speak: the bond with the inaugural Other of the primary parent and the second Other of the paternal figure and the social rule of law it ultimately represents, the symbolic itself. The structural pervert behaves as if s/he can make the first Other whole or complete (hooray!), but this is ultimately a passive position (boo! Verhaeghe 410-12). The pervert thus attempts to achieve an active position through a perpetual parade of disavowals, both recognizing and denying social order simultaneously. The grown-up pervert is aware of social norms but denies them, or only abides by some norms insofar as compliance can be parlayed to an advantage, and often in the expressed service of some grander (second) Other that only he or she alone can perfect (God, the nation state, "the people," etc.; see Fink 165-202). Because of the relentless recurrence of such strategies of disavowal, the pervert often seems to speak prophetically, declaring either a new or renewed path to law and order by punishing an exogenous threat, perhaps through exorcism or, as we have heard, by erecting a "big, fat, beautiful wall" (Finnegan)!

⁸Although perhaps a bit too technical for our purposes, I should note that the pervert's anxiety does not concern the classic, Oedipal fear of the paternal figure, but rather of maternal demands (Verhaeghe 421).

⁹⁴Perverts suffer from an excess of jouissance," and thus usually seek to limit it in perverse acts, sublimation, desire, or drugs (Swales 128-29).

Trumpeteering, or, Disavowal on a Stump

As I told everyone once before, [Anthony] Wiener is a sick puppy who will never change—100% of perverts go back to their ways. Sadly, there is no cure.

—Donald J. Trump (qtd. in Michallon)¹⁰

The preceding explication tempts us to rehash "The Donald's" obscene oeuvre, including his assertion of entitlement to women's bodies without consultation (Graham; Twohey and Barbaro). Trump's well-documented misogyny, however, reflects a larger rape culture, itself a form of perversion according to medical and legal communities, for whom the key determinant is the absence of mutually informed consent. Trump's verbalization of the unspoken norm of sexual aggression in US culture is consistent with the Lacanian concept of structural perversion, particularly with regard to Trump's repeated attempts to associate himself with established, (dis)respected politicians. In response to the charge of sexual harassment, Trump invited a number of women who claimed to have been abused by the Clintons to a presidential debate, not to transgress the norm "but in order to better revere it" (Copjec 209; see also Peters). What may seem to be a violation of a cultural convention is actually the obscene underside of normalcy, a condition Trump illuminates by insisting, Look! The Clintons did it too!

Structural perversity is not discerned in a single statement or act—which can be a violence in itself—but rather in a repeated orientation to others implied by a collective corpus of acts in spoken or written word and deed. An outrageous statement can be commonly perverse, but only those remarks that index an incessant denial of responsibility mark the contours of a perverse structure. Behavior and speech can point the way, but I would suggest that the rhetorical signature of a perverse structure is often a compulsively repeated disavowal at the levels of the statement, style, and genre.

Regarding the perverse statement, we have already noted that Trump's transcendental trope is *occultatio* (or variously *paralepsis* or *praeteritio*), most recognizably in speech that references something by denying it: "If she [Hillary Clinton] gets to pick her [Supreme Court] judges," Trump burped at a rally in North Carolina, "there's nothing you can do, folks. Although the Second Amendment people—maybe there is, I don't know" (Corasaniti and Haberman, par. 2). What makes *occultatio* the master trope of the perverse pattern is the relationship implied by such turns of speech as the "I don't know" coda: the speaker is an *instrument* of the symbolic order s/he denies, which is why s/he takes no responsibility for it. A day after Trump's allusion to Clinton's assassination, his campaign explained the remark was meant to reference

¹⁰Trump's comment was "tweeted" after New York politician Anthony Weiner was repeatedly exposed for exposing himself online to a number of women, destroying his political ambitions. For an overview, see Chozick and Healy.

the "tremendous power" of Second Amendment fanatics. Trump followed that, "[t] here can be no other interpretation... . I mean, give me a break" (Corasaniti and Haberman, par. 11).

Trump's fevered rain of innuendo is symptomatic of a perverse manner of speaking that is homologous with his deliberately cultivated, comical appearance (he knows he *looks* silly to others, and yet ...). Trump's bleached-blonde combover and frequently disparaged orange facial tone have been ridiculed for over a decade (Smith). The point here is that we do not want for examples of a perverse style, the hallmark of which is occultatio in speech, but that should be traced in the disavowals of deed, look, gesture, and attitude also.

Trump's rambling speechcraft and outrageous behavior, his frequent verbal contradictions—sometimes in the same breath—and his histrionic appearance and delivery are all hallmarks of the disavowal characteristic of a perverse style that acknowledges consensus order and denies it at the same time. Rather than repulsing potential voters, however, Trump's perverse style proved seductive. So how do we account for the appeal and persistence of the perverse statement and style? I think a useful answer to this question begins with a consideration of perversity as a genre that invites affective or emotional investment: it's not simply that Trump says perverse things or displays perverse mannerisms and fashions but that these cue or *repeat* a more familiar, relational, and thus anticipatory structure between self and other. However unpredictable we presume Trump's style to be, that it is intelligible at all suggests the repetition of something that we already feel and know: the contemporary conditions of spectatorship.

Television, or, Perversion as a Genre

The figure of Trump is as much a reflection of the attachment and disgust of followers and detractors as it is stylistic consistency: in our approval or condemnation of his rhetoric—if you are reading this, dear reader, then you too are implicated by dint of your attention—we are co-creators of a perverse possibility, especially in the after-inhalation of an objection. I suggest that this co-creative dimension of perversion is better discerned structurally as a series of relations that more closely cleave to genre, understood not simply as a stylistic mode or textured pattern, but as the "signature of an affective apparatus that both presumes and produces bodies-in-feeling" (Gunn 364; also see Campbell and Jamieson). For our purposes, genres are the names of forms that are repeatedly felt, or instances of the linguistic sedimentation of an affective recurrence into code and meaning. Although technically a genre helps us to reckon with affective repetitions in a meaningful manner, their relative stability is often in tension with the dynamism of

¹¹My thanks to Barry Brummett for pointing out that Trump's appearance suggests a homology with his speech; homologies or formal parallels between multiple dimensions of self-presentation are hallmarks of style (see Brummett).

the forms they designate, frequently registered in the objections of those who bridle at generic comparisons or labels because they necessarily and inevitably misname and constrain. Regardless, if a psychical structure is the term for a habituated disposition of relating to others—and ultimately the Other or symbolic order as such—we should expect something analogous for patterned discourses that overdetermine a structural disposition in genres through any series of objects in representation, manner, or deed (see L. Williams 2–14).

Considered as a perverse *structure*, genres require the specification of a subjective disposition that transcends the pleasures and pains of recognition in order to limn the contours of a *kind of orientation*. As a style, perversion lodges at the level of experience or trait; as a genre, perversion ceaselessly forges and reinscribes an identification that disavows established order and, morally and legally, regards others as interchangeable objects. To make the case quickly I resort to a personal anecdote about my own perverse enjoyments (but, trust me, do not hold your breath).

I confess that I originally became interested in understanding perversity as a persistent and now accepted cultural structure after watching and enjoying the recent, prime-time, "fictional" television programs Dexter (2006-2013), Hannibal (2013-2015), and American Horror Story (2011-present). These shows seemed unusual because of their encouraged identification with the violent anti-heroes that are more characteristic of cinema. Watching these shows, I found myself gasping at the absurd violations of social norms and puzzled by my enjoyment of them weekly or in days-long "binge watching" marathons: "Am I actually rooting for Hannibal!?!?" I worried in delight. "He eats folks' faces!" I started writing about what seemed to me a recent turn in popular, televisual entertainment that I was calling "prime-time perversion," 12 which I was arguing is a deviation from cinematic perversions because of its seriality and intimacy: "evil" villains in the cinema are often psychotic, but on television they are increasingly perverse. But then, just as I had sketched an argument and started to write it up, Trump bombastically interrupted my thinking through the speakers and screens of my home. As the Trump campaign deployed in the fall of 2015, it seemed to me that the success of these over-the-top televisual thrillers shared something with Trump's widely publicized stumping, that my gasping at the horrific violence of self-conscious fantasy worlds were of a piece with my gasping at the "real" exchanges of the Republican presidential candidate debates. Of course, we can argue that reality comprises fantasies and the critical distance they afford is the work of ideology as such (see Žižek, *Plague* esp. 3–44). Even so, what does my fascination with American Horror Story have in common with a widely perceived presidential horror show?¹³ And what do my televisual investments have to do with Trump's political investment scheme?

¹²Which, of course, is a nod to the groundbreaking work of Dow (see *Prime-Time Feminism*).

¹³The revolving retitling of the presidential campaign on the weekly HBO comedy tabloid, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, captures the horror show spirit: "Clowntown Fuck-the-World Shitshow 2016," or "Lice on Rats on a Horse Corpse on Fire 2016." Readers can review these weekly "titles" for the presidential campaign by visiting the show's YouTube channel.

The answer to these and similar questions came quickly from journalists in the form of proclamations that the emperor of our time is naked in many senses (see Murray and Ouellette). No sooner did Trump announce his bid for the presidency than pundits characterized the campaign as a form of "reality TV," the televisual format that made Donald Trump a household name via *The Apprentice* (Stuever). While its history and definition are still debated, reality television is now widely regarded as a ubiquitous if not dominant television genre, presumably unscripted and featuring personalities whose daily lives are documented or who are thrown into a conflict or competition (e.g., The Bachelor; Chopped). The more mundane perversity of spectatorship is achieved through a well-known duplicity: what viewers experience through the genre is the knowledge that "reality TV" is scripted and performed, or at the very least, manipulatively edited.

Reality TV begins to mark a departure from the consensual voyeurism of screened fiction by warping its "informed consent" character, a tacit contract of spectatorship that has been debated most conspicuously in terms of representations of sex and violence. Reality TV is conspicuous because of its transparent invitation to a contradictory investment from viewers that Dana Cloud has insightfully dubbed "the irony bribe." Offered as a counterpoint to Fredric Jameson's conception of the "fantasy bribe," 14 Cloud argues that reality television weirdly offers the rejection of the screened world at the same moment of its invitation:

the irony bribe is a strategic mechanism of a cultural text that invites audiences to identify with the pleasures of the reaction against taking seriously the patently ideological fantasy... . Ironically, the irony bribe naturalizes the worldview of a hegemonic text in the process of denaturalizing it. Irony is the fantasy bribe's Other *in its production of investment through disinvestment.* (415, emphasis in the original)

While such a conflicted identification is the basic labor of spectatorship, for Cloud the reality TV genre is an especially visible "ironic oscillation of investment and irony among viewers" that absolves them of responsibility, often explicitly (415). All screened narratives disavow through fantasy; for Cloud the "irony bribe" elevates this function to an almost unequivocal and grandiloquent abjection: "Can you believe she said that?" gasps the spectator; the producer responds, "that is too horrible, let us replay the clip!" Without such a bribe, how else do we contend with the ways the Cable News Network (CNN) framed all of their televised debates among candidates as "smackdowns" or boxing matches, 15 replete with rousing music, chiaroscuro facial profiles and odd, introductory biographies? And

¹⁴For Jameson, the fantasy bribe immerses spectators in a story-world that screens, in both senses, "the psyche against the frightening and potentially damaging eruption of powerful archaic desires and wish material" (141; also see Cloud 415).

¹⁵I reference the sportscast framing of CNN's broadcasts in Internet search engine slugs. A story titled "Who Won the Presidential Debate?" was slugged as, "Presidential Debate: Who Won Clinton-Trump Smackdown?"

are such spectacular contests not often "rigged," as Trump ceaselessly declaimed (see Johnson)? Political contests presumably concern long-term decisions about policies that will effect the lives of millions of people, and yet by suggesting presidential debates are akin to reality TV or sports programs, cable news networks help to cultivate a kind of investment in ironic oscillation that would render voting either as an inconsequential game or only an optional responsibility. ¹⁶ Disavowal is what, increasingly, the genres of cable news, reality TV, and horror have in common, representing a swerve from the perversity of the human condition (Freud) toward a cultural strategy or patterned disposition toward others (Lacan).

A neurotic electorate votes for more traditional candidates, any of whom represent a presumed consensus of established order. But who would vote for a perversion of the established order that Trump has come to represent? At first blush self-identified "liberals" may be tempted to say a public that supports a Trump candidacy expresses a psychotic structure. But sustaining such a disposition over the long haul seems implausible, if only because it is hard to imagine how a community of private Idahoes — or even Kansans, whatever is the matter with them — could agree about anything. If Trump support is reflective of neither a psychotic nor a classically neurotic electorate, then we *might* conclude that only a perverse electorate elects a Trump, a constituency that regards politics as a game from which they are distanced and even immune, much like a video game in which three lives are promised in the event of failure.

To suggest that our recent election marked the emergence of an aggregate, perverse voter—at least in the mediated, political imaginary—does not and should not obviate the serious, socioeconomic, and historical realities that hastened an unexpected presidency; class disparities and increasingly dire social, educational, and economic disenfranchisements have been widely reported and discussed as significant empirical factors in the election (e.g., Tyson and Maniam). Serious inquiry into the materialist bases of the contemporary configurations of power must continue; the point here is the discernment of a structure or pattern replicated among different mediated strata. The imperative of media convergence and the "reality" of our present political circumstance suggest perverse articulations transcend the scene or screen you are in.

The "Fuck It!" Electorate

Political perversion denotes a style and genre of disavowal, and the genre is directly discerned in the ironic spectatorship of reality TV-cum-presidential campaign. In this particular regard, Trump is party to a cultural production. He is not the neverbefore-seen aberration that public commentary on his persona proposes. We have certainly experienced such perversion in "entertainment" (before *Donahue* and *Oprah* there were, of course, the artful deceptions of P.T. Barnum, who also ran

¹⁶This trend is parodied by a 2006 film by Paul Weitz, titled *American Dreamz*, in which a US president becomes involved in a spoof of the vote-by-text talent contest show, *American Idol*.

for office; see Adams)—and politics too (e.g., George W. Bush; see Hallsby; Rubenstein). Arguably, politics is the most perverse genre of discourse because the conditioned affordances of duplicity are central to it. From Plato forward, political rhetoric has often been described as an ironic and often flattering cosmetic (cynically stated, political discourse is the egg that made the reality TV chicken possible). Understanding genres as relational structures also suggests that Trump supporters are as much an invention of their discussion as they are any actually existing persons; the voter for Trump is brought into being by the same generic structure that makes notice of his aberration possible at all. 17

Cloud's isolation of the irony bribe as endemic to the reality TV genre helps us to see how the voter and spectator of our screened lives today are united in the structured project of disavowal: default or consensus order is affirmed in the same gesture of its veto, which is ultimately a renounced responsibility. Such an understanding of free-range generic structures, retrospectively discernable across discursive plateaus, makes a figure like Trump paradoxically an inevitable consequence of publics that have been cultivated for generations. As one cultural critic puts it,

Look, Donald Trump was inevitable... . We have raised two generations of Americans who believe that anything the government does is horrible, all politicians are corrupt, ah ... Washington is evil. And then every commercial we ever see, politically, on frankly on both sides of the aisle ... is how the other guy is a bum, the other guy should be in jail, the other guy is a pervert, whatever. Well, if you raise two generations of kids to believe that about our own government ... you can't then be surprised that eventually someone would run for president who is absolutely anti-government... . Did we know it would be Trump? No, but it would be someone like him. ("Jerry Springer")

Such astute observations are from a tiller of this kind of political disposition: Jerry Springer. We should also expect the political philosophy of a Trump supporter to be homologous to the Trump figure: spectacular, grandiloquent forms of protest akin to throwing chairs at a wrestling match, "MAGA!" ("Make America Great Again"), or "Fuck it, I'm voting for Trump!" ("Fuck it") At this juncture it should no longer shock us that "Fuck it!" is an apt term for the disposition of the most celebrated and bemoaned kind of Trump supporter. 18

"Fuck it!" is not, however, a revolution — quite the opposite, for such an orientation disavows both the presumed, dominant social order as well as any need to fundamentally and systematically change it: Declaring "Fuck it!" and "Make America Great Again!" in the same breath is an almost perfect condensation of disavowal, the rejection of an order that one would restore. That a number of Bernie

¹⁷The suggestion here is that audiences and publics alike are constituted or achieve self-coherence as "texts" or through texts in circulation (Hartley; Warner).

¹⁸As a political philosophy, "Fuck it!" can be read as a Habermasian public by other means (see Lunt and Stenner). My thanks to Paul Johnson for this reference.

Sanders supporters—a candidate who proposed a "revolution" of *reform*—would sooner vote for Trump than Clinton provides added evidence that the presidential election for the Trump supporter is less about policy than it is a sense of wounded identity (Friedersdorf). Second Amendment gun fanatics opposed to "common sense" regulation policy are not really concerned about policy; they are rehearsing an outsider or victim identity (see Collins 737–56). So, too, are "Trump supporters" so widely discussed in mass media: the social-order-as-usual is a game they do not have to play, or if they play, only at a distance without a sense of consequence or responsibility.

At this juncture Slavoj Žižek's thinking and the insightful elaborations of Matthew Sharpe and Geoff Boucher are useful for describing a public that would support a perverse presidency: Žižek argues that in the West, democratic cultures seem to be moving toward a kind of generalized perversion, a collective identity in which a people are losing faith in a shared authority or law. This is not to say that individuals are becoming clinical perverts, but rather, that collectively our speech and behavior evinces a perverse structure through a series of disavowals: the government is broken; Congress is dysfunctional; exogenous others are taking our jobs; or, of course, "fuck it!" Such convictions both recognize the existence of the social order and deny it at the same time, having now dispensed with the kind of authority that used to be a stabilizer by proxy (originally a monarch, then a paternal figure or expert, and now what?). There is, in other words, a structural parallel between the perverted figure who hears the second parent but disavows the demand to separate, leaving the external authority in a position of powerlessness, and a collective, cultural denial of symbolic authority (e.g., the President of the United States, climate scientists, and so on). 19 In his earlier work Žižek described the average, cultural subject of our time as a "pathological narcissist":

The narcissistic subject only knows the "rules of the (social) game," enabling him to manipulate others; social relations constitute for him a playing field in which he assumes "roles," not proper symbolic mandates; he stays clear of any binding commitment that would imply a proper symbolic identification. He is a radical conformist who paradoxically experiences himself as an outlaw. (Looking 102)

A later name Žižek deploys for this conservative narcissist is the pervert, the person who no longer yields authority to social norms but rather regards them as rules that only those other idiots truly believe in. The symbolic evaporation of the authority of the presidency, signified so starkly by South Carolina representative Joe Wilson calling president Obama a liar in the middle of a live, nationally televised address

¹⁹Some readers may wonder at what level the effects of perversion register: clinic or culture? Lacan's answer is both because the subject's psyche is an expression of structural positions that are part of a larger "economy of discourse" (see Lundberg, *Lacan in Public* 130).

(see Holan), marked the explicit boiling over of a heretofore simmering perversion endemic to our politics.

One might suppose that the thrill of this brave, new, perverse world is the possibility of radical self-fashioning: in the absence of anchoring authority, I can be who I want, I consume what I want, and so forth; there is no "no!" and so, well, I get to enjoy anything!²⁰ Yet Žižek warns this is actually a scary situation, for "when the 'pacifying' symbolic authority is suspended, the only way to avoid the debilitating deadlock of desire ... [is] a despotic figure which stands for the primordial jouisseur [master who enjoys]: we cannot enjoy because he appropriates all the enjoyment" (Ticklish 315, emphasis in the original). In other words, when the social order is presumed to have eroded, when there is no authority figure, the door for a Master Punisher or surrogate "primal father" is reopened (see Freud, Group 69-77).

Donald Trump is a Pervert

Dorothy: "Oh, you're a very bad man."

Wizard: "Oh, no my dear. I'm a very good man. I'm just a very bad wizard.

—film version of The Wizard of Oz

In this essay I have argued Trump's rhetoric is perverse because of a litany of disavowals (1) at the level of the statement (occultatio); (2) at the level of style; and (3) at the level of genre. Such a remarkable consistency among multiple rhetorical contexts indexes a perverse psychical structure, or a disposition or set of strategies for relating to others characterized by the absence of doubt and the simultaneous acknowledgment and denial of consensus order. I have advanced "political perversion" as the term for the homologous coherence of disavowal at many levels of political discourse. Trump's rhetoric is unquestionably the guiding exemplar, but I also acknowledge that the style and genre precede him: political perversion is not "new," we are only now witnessing—and forcibly so—its most naked and grotesque iteration in contemporary US political rhetoric.

Translated into our current political predicament, political perversion is also the name for public demands that disavow consequences and refuse responsibility. These demands may concern gun rights, same-sex marriage, abortion, or immigration, but regardless of the issue, the disavowing-and-demanding pattern indicates a collective longing for a newer order—newer fundamentalisms, newer belief systems, renewed racisms, outbursts of violent individuals and groups laying down their own rules (e.g., mass shootings), forms of radical conformity, and, in the end, the demand for a powerful Master who will cut through all the crap. 21 Trump says

²⁰Political philosopher Jodi Dean dubs this with the more inclusive "whatever being" (see *Blog Theory*).

²¹For an alternative account of the "politics of demand," see Lundberg, "On Being Bound" (1-20).

what he means, except that he does not; Trump's the real deal, except that he is not. He will build a wall and keep them out, although we really do not believe such a wall is feasible. He will return an older sense of order, or rather, he will reinscribe an existing order without difference. Because many of our screens now regularly feature the "unspeakable" and "senseless" norms of violence, we are compelled to recognize that violence has a certain sense and is spoken about all the time. What makes our political moment so patently perverse is that, to put it colloquially, many of us *know* that the ends do not justify the means, but we do it anyway.²²

With a widened sense of the "generalized perversion" endemic to postmodern culture, we are better able to take up again the perplexing problem of moral judgment—which, of course, I have deliberately withheld and commuted all the same in the familiar but serious gesture of the tease. From antiquity, the rhetorical critique of ethical proofs has been justified with reference to the conditions internal to a given speech or discourse, as Campbell has demonstrated so well (*The Great* esp. 72–96). Less constrained to "the text," few have noted that Edwin Black's "longstanding antipathy" toward Nixon finally went there (Benson 482), to the first persona, "to the man," but only the *homo* as a vehicle of linguistic expression: "Nixon was the medium of a sporadically incontinent candor. Sometimes his resentments burst through the enveloping veneer of his unction, and those accidental ruptures made him a kind of honest man" (Black, "Nixon" 26). The "kind of" qualifier is a hallmark of disavowal, and so we might conclude that for Black Nixon was perverse, but in a non-moral sense. Black never abandoned the Wizard of Oz Rule, but he started to push beyond the "persona" toward the "personal."

Accepting our posthumanist druthers, however, does not mean we should avoid moral judgments—as if we can! Rather, our posthuman predilection means judgment is never final, complete, or certain, leading us to a discomfort analogous to that which the pervert provokes. There is no essence behind the drapes—but the drapes still matter! In this regard the conception of rhetorical personae may remain useful in the register of the political, but it is also and decidedly diminished insofar as it connotes or promotes fantasies of mastery; at the very least, the example of Trump's rhetoric weakens the utility of persona as a critical concept.

Because a psychical structure troubles any tidy distinction between the culture and the clinic, a rhetorical conception of perversion tempers the terminal tone of the political with an unfinished ethic, recommending judgment as a ceaseless, never-ending reckoning. Whatever elusive singularity remains "after the subject" (Cadava, Conner, and Nancy), moral critique must rest on a responsibility—a response-*ability*—that Diane Davis has shown us is not grounded in a juridical subject but in a rhetoricity, or "an affect*ability* or persuade*ability*" that is the condition of the act (*Inessential* 2–4, emphasis in the original). In the backdrop of the steady and knowing destruction of the world,

²²It should be said that Žižek's diagnosis of a generalized perversity is complicated, involving the interplay of the superego (a cultural force that demands everyone to "enjoy!" in a sort of punishing consumerism) and a kind of symbolic figure (the Ego Ideal) that has been removed in the liberal pursuit of an Enlightened society (the "decline of symbolic efficiency" or "authority"; see Sharpe and Boucher esp. 139–64).

directly felt in environmental disasters and dramatic climate changes right outside our windows, with urgency Davis enlists Jean-Luc Nancy to argue it is "more necessary than ever today, still today, to embrace a responsibility that does not duck and roll into anthropocentric safety zones, that resists both a panicked 'return to the subject' as if only a Subject can save us, and the obscene, chest-beating, 'posthumanist' presumption of the subject's 'simple liquidation,' which itself amounts to a grotesque display of said hubris" ("Rhetoricity"). To proclaim Donald Trump is perverse in the easy sense of dismissal, to describe him as a "psycho" or "fascist," retreats to a paradoxically dangerous safety zone. To proclaim Donald Trump is nothing more than a perverse phantasmagoria produced in the simulacra of culture rehearses much of the same, denying that these hands and body are mine.²³

To assert, as I do, that Donald Trump is perverse is to say something about an actually existing human, but such an observation does not lodge at the level of his essence any more than it would diagnose a medical condition. Perversion is ultimately a label for a habituated manner of relating to others discernable in gestures sustained over time and retrospectively perceived. To say that Donald Trump is perverse is to say that the technique of disavowal is dominant in his discourse and that there is a profound failure by Mr. Trump to take responsibility for his speech, but also that the identification of the perverse structure should not foreclose the possibility of his ever doing so. Futurity is key and its embrace affords the responsibility of respect due to the living (and dead). In other words, "Yes, but ..."

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²³The phrase is Butler's: "If the body is what inaugurates the process of its own spectralization through writing, then it is and is not determined by the discourse it produces ... this body is neither a surface nor a substance, but the linguistic occasion of the body's separation from itself, one that eludes its capture by the figure it compels" (Senses 35).

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