Who Wouldn't Get the Joke? Vile Sovereignty, Vanishing Mediators, and Trump

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When trying to understand the rise to power of a demagogue whose swagger and popularity is only seemingly amplified by critique, perhaps a productive place to start is not with the individual, but in the shared, popular cultural landscape that captures a generalized mood. In the final scenes of the film <u>Joker</u> (2019), Joaquin Phoenix's character, Arthur Fleck, is committed to Arkham Asylum, where he maniacally laughs in the face of his psychiatrist (played by April Grace). Throughout the film, Fleck is afflicted by a mysterious condition that causes him to laugh excessively at socially inappropriate moments. In this scene, however, his symptom finds its content in the form of Fleck's accumulated insights into the hypocritical workings of power. Fleck's investigations into his own mother's history of madness has led him to suspect that he may be the bastard son of billionaire mayoral candidate Thomas Wayne. A trail of clues has raised the possibility that Fleck's mother's past institutionalization was used to cover over an affair Wayne had with her when she was working for him as a maid, and that the mother's seemingly mad obsession with writing letters to Wayne is grounded in a suppressed history of abuse and wrongful institutionalization. When Fleck breaks into laughter in front of the psychiatrist, she asks him, "What's so funny?" Fleck answers: "You wouldn't get the joke." He then murders her, off screen and limps away, his clownishly squeaking shoes leaving ominous, bloody footprints.

Though initially presented as an idiosyncratic psychological tick, Fleck's insuppressible laughter is ultimately revealed as the trace of hidden structures of privilege and social domination, indignities that Fleck is initially given to suffer subconsciously, as he is their very product. Fleck's gradual awakening to these realities transform him into the Joker, after he becomes disillusioned by the two surrogate father figures that sustain his hopes for recognition, in the form of T.V. talk show host Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro) and Thomas Wayne (Brett Cullen), who are symbolic of media and governing elites, respectively. The psychiatrist at the end of the film provides a third figure, representing biopolitical governance by trained experts whose power is grounded in their purporting to take care of populations. His mother's history, however, demonstrates to Fleck that such institutions' allegedly humanistic imperatives also secretly work in service of the privileged. When he laughs in the face of the psychiatrist, then, he does so from what the film presents as a position of superior knowledge into the social dynamics of power and corruption: the psychiatrist still believes "the system" is there to help people, but the Joker knows better.

Fleck's political "awakening" is complicated by the fact that the psychiatrist whom he dismisses and then kills is a black woman. Liberal audiences who might unblinkingly endorse the rough justice the Joker and his nascent followers dole out to figureheads of the white patriarchy, like Franklin and Wayne, could and should find pause with the final scenes of the film, where a disenfranchised and humiliated white man proves the "authenticity" of his vision by effectively telling a black woman that she doesn't understand systemic exploitation and corruption. This is offensive in a few immediate ways. Especially in the genre of the comic book action film, where recent attempts at progressive representational politics (Wonder Woman [2017], Black Panther [2018], Captain Marvel [2019]) have been praised critically, the film's curt disposal of a black woman in order that Fleck can self-actualize and metamorphose into the Joker raises critical alarm. And yet, the film is uncompromising on this point: the poignancy of Joker's vision consists in its rejection of both ensconced forms of white, patriarchal privilege and the seemingly more progressive "third way" identity politics that has allowed members of historically oppressed groups to gain access to positions of prestige and power.

If we recognize in the figure of the psychiatrist—both in her role, as the long arm of the carceral state in an age of austerity, and in her social position as a professional, authoritative black woman—echoes of the progressive neoliberal bloc that supported both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, then Fleck's dispatching of this figure marks him as representative of sections of the white, masculinist precariat whose distrust of contemporary, liberal democratic politics has helped propel the rise to power of populist figures like Donald Trump. And yet, disillusionment with the neoliberal moment extends well beyond the base of Trump supporters. Why, then, do we see these widespread discontents coagulating into support for atavistic demagogues whose popularity and power only seems to increase the more they flaunt the codes of decency, inclusion, and civic society? To the extent that the clownish performances of a figure like Trump seem strategically calculated to elicit outrage, liberal and leftist indignity only fuels the populist flames. At such an impasse, there is a risk that indulging in critical analysis of Trump, who seems to have successfully identified and exploited key weaknesses in the contemporary leftist discourse, will only buttress his support. Similarly, critiquing popular culture can seem ineffectual. Although we argue Joker has become a key cultural artifact of the Trump era, focusing debate around race and class, populism and taste, and spectacular violence, the film nevertheless also manufactures its own criticism, attracting the kinds of "engagement" that measures value in online mentions, interactions, and hot takes, and no longer in the esteem of key cultural tastemakers (Seymour 2019). For these reasons, it is a text that mediates our populist moment. Likewise in its relationships with its genre: as mentioned, the film upsets a tendency towards progressive representation in blockbuster, comic-book cinematic productions, and in so doing mirrors Trump's victory on the heels of the Obama presidency and the Clinton campaign, or what we will argue is a legitimation crisis of progressive neoliberalism.

Less palpably, the film seems to capture a dominant conjunction of public feelings today: Arthur Fleck evokes a mix of anxiety/insecurity at its breaking point (Dean 2020: 8-9) with an inchoate and often misdirected desire for revenge (Haiven 2017). As a structure of feeling in late neoliberal capitalism, these affective positions index specific class, race, and gender politics, which we explore below; but as Sara Ahmed (2014) teaches us, emotions are also performative, or social and cultural practices that produce specific outcomes. We want to examine the ways this film's insecure and vengeful subject is indicative of what has come to be known as a new populist moment in America and globally, but that we suggest is the reappearance of an older

and historically significant structure of sovereign power. <u>Joker</u> offers, in distilled and disguised form, a narrative expression of the genealogical strains of thwarted hope, historical compromise and roiling cynicism at work in the present moment. The current, carnivalesque mixture of disillusionment and buffoonery coupled with flagrant abuses of power points towards a structure that Michel Foucault identified, in the 1970s, as "vile sovereignty" and which helped smooth the transition to the biopolitically managed, petroleum-soaked consumer utopias of the post-World War Two era (2003b). With the fantasies of mobility and prosperity that informed the post-war period everywhere in dissolution or in flames, it is telling that this vile sovereignty should re-emerge in recent years in a more aggressive and startling form with figures like Trump.

We first articulated the biopolitical implications of the return of the figure of the vile sovereign in an examination of the florid political career of Rob Ford, the Mayor of Toronto from 2010 to 2014 (Orpana & Mauro 2013/2014). Our analysis of Ford focused on creeping authoritarianism and cruelty in his right-wing politics, coupled with a new invulnerability to criticism in this pseudo-populist politician who gained popularity by spectacularly provoking liberal disgust. Our article came on the heels of a wave of attempts to update Marx's <u>Eighteenth Brumaire</u> for the present, studying the reactionary petit-bourgeois politics and class realignments signified by the rise of political leaders like France's Nicholas Sarkozy (Badiou 2008) or the U.K.'s David Cameron (Seymour 2010). We used Foucault's concept of vile sovereignty to unpack the specific difference of Ford's mayoralty in Toronto, which anticipated Trump's rise in several respects, but especially in its complex and antagonistic relationship to progressive politics. In revisiting Foucault's theory today, we return to our conjunctural analysis (Gilbert 2019), tracing ephemera of the moment and longer historical trajectories, and outlining the historical dynamics through which vile sovereignty reappears at the moment of neoliberalism's legitimation crisis. We characterize the vile sovereign's antics as a "vanishing mediator" that provides a destabilizing smokescreen during what is actually a precarious moment in the struggle for maintaining hegemony. With the demise of what Nancy Fraser (2017) calls "progressive neoliberalism," or the aggressive privatization of socialized wealth under a veneer of selective gestures of inclusion, does the rise of figures like Trump constitute a perpetuation of neoliberalism by other means? Or, does it signal the emergence of a new mutation in the circuits of global capital? A key question raised by our analysis is whether the kinds of activist solidarity needed to address pressing, collective concerns such as global warming, for instance, will be able to move beyond the factious tensions exacerbated by a figure like Trump's brazen flaunting of the codes that regulate much of contemporary leftist culture. By positing contemporary vile sovereignty as a vanishing mediator, we mean to draw attention to the political potentials of our times for eliciting broad-based solidarity that could effect substantial, systemic change.

Vile Sovereignty and Genre

Throughout much of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, it was a driving ambition of Marvel comic book mogul Stan Lee for his company's properties to find mass audiences on television and the silver screen (Howe 2012). A large part of Marvel's popularity with readers lies in its ability to exploit a void left in the comics genre in the wake of the moral panic over purported links between comic books and juvenile delinquency in 1950s America. The creation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954 as a means for the industry to self-police had the effect of suppressing much of the horrific, graphic content of comics, but also of dampening their subversive potential

to provide an outsider's perspective on the norms of mid-century America.[1] Into this sanitized world of post-war superhero comics, Marvel injected strains of psychological complexity and social realism, capitalizing on a muted return of the repressed legacies of the field. It was not until the threshold of the neoliberal era, however, that the subversive appeal of horror comics found dramatic new purchase when this suppressed generic strain was reunited with the sanitized superhero by Marvel's competitor, D.C. Comics, in the rebranding of their popular Batman character as The Dark Knight.[2] When this bleaker, grittier strain of comics narrative hit the big screen in 1989, Tim Burton's <u>Batman</u> became the fifth-highest grossing film in history and opened the door for what has become one of the most popular and lucrative film genres of the new millennium (Pereira 2019).[3] Further, it is not Batman himself, but the dark comedy of Jack Nicholson's treatment of the Joker that provides the signature for this emergent mass cultural form, where nostalgia for a superficial distinction between "bad guys" and "good guys" is complicated by biting psychological, social and political nuance.

We can identify the hero/villain dichotomy as a residual strain of nostalgia, itself inflected by the post-World War Two era, where the moral ambiguities of America's vexing entanglements in the South Pacific, or of Britain's struggles with a declining empire, found compensatory relief in appeals to the popular heroes of a seemingly more noble and simplistic past. This tendency is evident in the surprise success of the James Bond film franchise towards the end of the sixties, a genre whose spectacular tropes would inform the subsequent blockbusters of the seventies and eighties. But it also illustrated by some of the first examples of fantasy and science fiction to breach American prime-time television, with the success of such shows as <u>The Six Million Dollar Man</u> or <u>The Incredible Hulk</u> in the 1970s (Orpana 2016). In the 1980s, the nostalgia of the 60s and 70s for what American T.V. producer Harve Bennett called "the kind of heroes that we had known during those frightening five years of World War Two" (qtd. in ibid., p 22) has been hollowed out and flattened into Michael Keaton's grimly stoic Batman, while Nicholson's Joker steals the show with his cynical insights into the underbelly of the American Dream. The Joker's more recent popularity tells us something important about the fate of that nostalgia for a stable moral universe. His vendetta against the forces of order embodied by Batman is an example of the desire for revenge that Max Haiven calls a dominant affective position today, "at once a symptom and a structure" (2017: 6) of financialized, neoliberal capitalism. Noting the danger in politicizing revenge, Haiven nevertheless argues that vengeance by those whom global capitalism abandons or exploits is historically justified and perhaps an inevitable structure of feeling today. As an icon of that desire for revenge, today's Joker is a condensation of political desires animating both the left and right.

This genealogical sketch identifies the contemporary Joker as the offspring of what Michel Foucault calls "vile sovereignty" (2003b: 11-38). Vile sovereignty is an entanglement of power, discourse and prestige that paradoxically increases the more it transgresses established norms and values. While he models his notion of vile sovereignty on historical and fictional sovereigns, illustrated best by the obscene and opportunistic Ubu Roi from Alfred Jarry's 1896 play,[4] Foucault is most interested in applying vile sovereignty to the postwar psychiatric profession. At the time, Foucault argues, the spurious and unsubstantiated opinions of psychiatrists were used in court to decide upon the legal fate of individuals—and, we should add, popular culture. Foucault's thesis is that the biased 'expert' opinions of psychiatric professionals about the supposed psychological character of the accused helped shift the legal system from a juridical emphasis on "crime and offence," to a greater focus on "irregular forms of conduct that were put forward as the crime's

cause and point of origin and the site at which it took shape," creating a "psychological and moral double" to the criminal act itself (2003b: 17). By introducing a psychologizing discourse into the justice system, the often ridiculous and arbitrary pronouncements made by psychiatrists in the role of vile sovereign helped mediate a shift to the disciplinary focus on social norms and populations that we can now recognize, thanks to Foucault's later work, as a key element of contemporary biopolitics.

As suggested above, the history of modern superhero comics was shaped by this kind of vile post-war sovereignty when, in the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, the testimony of professionals such as the German-American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham was used to draw a spurious link between comic books and crime (Howe 2012: 29-31).[5] In the character of the Joker, we thus encounter something like an inversion of the uncanny doubling described by Foucault, where the suppressed, somewhat 'criminal' history of a genre's appropriation as the vehicle for biopolitical governance erupts into the narrative world of comics itself and, after 1989, the Hollywood blockbuster. Perhaps these suppressed, generic origins are the reason for the Joker's postmodern shiftiness and appeal: he remains the trace of a moment when the bid for class domination in post-war America was forced into the risky position of revealing itself, and so required a supplemental decoy in the form of psychiatric quackery. As the product of a vile sovereignty inherent in post-war biopolitics, the Joker acts out the narrative of his suppressed origins repeatedly, in numerous different versions (Garneau 2015). However, only at this late hour, when a now residual form of biopolitics is in the process of mutating into something different, does the story of Fleck's transformation into the Joker allow us to fully fathom this older nightmare and its relation to the real-world vile sovereigns currently capturing public fascination.

A Tale of Two Compromises

Before turning to the contemporary political theatre, Arthur Fleck has a few more things to show us about vile sovereignty's relationship to the biopolitical landscape of late neoliberalism. On the one hand, the insight provided into the familial and social origins of his crimes allows us, the audience, to play the role of psychiatrist and to psychologize, understand and perhaps even forgive his behavior. And yet, it is the psychiatrist who is slain by Fleck at the end of the film, suggesting that the film's work of interpellation cannot end with a merely liberal, lenient and sympathetic interpretation of his career. Rather, in response to the portrait of vile sovereignty Fleck's life reveals, the film encourages us to become a clown-masked follower of the Joker ourselves. With that said, he is also the node where police and asylum both meet austerity, deinstitutionalization, and the subsequent failure of the American family to act as a substitute for a social safety net.

This short-circuit between critique and interpellation provides the key to understanding the mechanisms of vile sovereignty that have informed Donald Trump's career as the forty-fifth President of the United States. The ideological conceit at the heart of this structure exploits genuine resentment grounded in the failings and contradictions of "third way" liberal-democratic governance, especially amongst the precariously situated white, working-class. On this question, Chantal Mouffe has described Trump's rise as part of a broader populist moment, after third-way neoliberalism, in Western politics from Europe to North America. For Mouffe, populism reconstitutes political struggle as a battle between "the people" and a political elite. She acknowledges that the left sees the elite as a capitalist oligarchy, and the right sees it as

liberal governmentality that threatens some ethno-nationalist fantasy of "the people" with open borders, sanctuary cities, and racialized outsiders (Mouffe 2018: 22). For its part, Joker plays to both populist variants, positioning Fleck against a wealthy oligarch in Thomas Wayne, but also against state liberalism, in the moments of antagonism with state-appointed psychiatrists. There is nothing surprising in a Hollywood film hedging its politics, or blurring the distinctions between two political positions in order to appeal to as broad an audience as possible. Joker's blending of left and right populisms, though, mirrors Trump's 2016 campaign, in which a populist candidate was able to criticize liberal governmental overreach **as well as** corruption and oligarchy—Trump was able to articulate both left and right populist ideas—and use both to fence in his political opponents as antidemocratic neoliberals. However, rather than offer a genuine alternative to a faltering and disappointing system, Trump's mixture of institutional critique, plutocratic populism, nostalgia, racism and misogyny, all delivered from the seemingly outsider position of a dark horse candidate, simply deputizes select portions of the disenfranchised to pursue cynical abuses of power themselves. Joker aptly illustrates this indulgence in seductive instances of "acting out": Fleck is elevated to the status of a folk hero through his acts of violence against mainstream media (in the form of talk show host Murray Franklin), established governing elites (in Thomas Wayne), but also women in general (in his fantasy relationship with his neighbor and in murdering his mother). These figures are then combined, condensed, and given a racialized form in the final scenes of the film when he laughs in the face of and then murders the psychiatrist.

It is easy to identify in the political iconography of this scene the well-tested, conservative ploy of dividing a potentially revolutionary underclass against itself through differential modes of exploitation grounded in the reproduction of gendered and racialized stigmas. Fleck's comment that the psychiatrist "wouldn't get the joke" effectively asserts that someone doubly subjected to historical disfranchisement, a black woman, would not understand discrimination and humiliation grounded in systemic exploitation. By channeling the resentment of disenfranchised white workers against African Americans and women, Joker's revenge fantasy thwarts the kind of solidarity that could lead to substantial change. Complicating this reading, however, is a statement made by Fleck's social worker earlier in the film. Also, a black woman, the social worker is depicted as a victim of precarity herself, as spending cuts coupled with a rise in demand for social services make her job difficult and exhausting. Unlike the psychiatrist from the end of the film, the social worker is wise to the role she plays as part of a biopolitical system designed to manage and contain rather than alleviate hardship. Eventually, the program that allows Fleck to see her once a month is entirely defunded, and in their last meeting, she flatly tells Fleck that the system doesn't care about either of them. However, the potential for solidarity inherent in this critique is lost by the end of the film when the Joker merely dismisses the other state-assigned psychiatrist as a stooge, then kills her.

Despite the white, male rage this act endorses, placing an African American woman as the last of the film's stand-ins for 'the system' does provide a grim critique of what Nancy Fraser has described as "progressive neoliberalism" (2017). In Fraser's argument, in order to legitimate the neoliberal project of upwardly appropriating formerly socialized wealth in the name of "efficiency" and "free markets," an aggressive attack on the social state was coupled with superficial gestures towards inclusivity and social justice in the form of third-way identity politics. While eviscerating the wages, benefits, and securities that a shifting contingent of mostly white, American workers had secured at the start of the post World War Two era of prosperity, neoliberalism attempted to sustain a myth of middle-class mobility through the strategic enfranchisement of select

members of minority groups and the massive expansion of consumer debt. This latter strategy bottomed out in the sub-prime mortgage debacle of 2008, when the risky borrowing that allowed formerly excluded subjects to pursue middle-class dreams of suburban homeownership went sour, precipitating a meltdown of the global banking system. That this collapsed happened on the watch of America's first black president, who then sided with the financial class by offering the banks massive, federally-funded payouts, did not help bolster Obama's winning campaign message of hope for something different.

The steady erosion of progressive neoliberalism's promise for greater social mobility and inclusion helped create the space of cynical disillusionment that contemporary vile sovereignty exploits. This cynicism, however, is coupled with resentment from the decomposition of an older compromise made between the post World War Two labor movement and capital. If we are to read Joker as illustrating the ideological resurrection of vile sovereignty that has informed Trump's political career, the cynicism anchoring the film needs to be recognized as the product of two distinct historical compromises: one Fordist and one neoliberal. The first, between labor and capital, led to the thirty or so years of industrial prosperity for Western nations in the period immediately after World War Two. To achieve this, the workers' movement sacrificed the press towards the socialization of the means of production in exchange for a greater share of the socially produced surplus, which was strategically granted in a manner that reinforced old and new divisions within the working class along racialized and gendered lines. Unrest over this arrangement, in turn, helped set the conditions for the new social movements of the sixties and seventies. However, rather than precipitating the press towards an expanded socialist democracy, as many on the left hoped and expected, demands from subjects disenfranchised by the Fordist era were countered by a shift to the more aggressive and less nationalistically bound form of neoliberal capitalism that has gained traction over the past five decades. The first, Fordist compromise of workers, who were essentially bought out with better wages and an expanded definition of what it meant to be "white" in the post-war period, set the conditions for the second, neoliberal compromise, where a select few of those excluded in the Fordist era made material and political gains in exchange for their complicity in further dismantling the social state and widening rates of inequality. Rather than "floating all boats," the neoliberal economic expansion based on the financialization of debt created the illusion of prosperity and upward mobility for some, coupled with the generalization of precarity for most.

We have already identified the psychiatrist at the end of Joker as evoking contradictions inherent in progressive neoliberalism as Fraser describes it. As a stand-in for liberal ruling elites, she provides an easy focal point for white, male resentment harbored by former beneficiaries of the decomposing Fordist compromise. This revanchist ire is aimed at a contemporary identity politics that members of the increasingly embattled, white underclass perceive as a site of humiliation due, in part, to an inability or unwillingness to perform the kinds of signifiers of distinction that more educated but still precarious, liberal subjects are able to summon via education and upbringing. In the face of this mounting, generalized precarity, one of the great tragedies of the contemporary left is the mobilization of a discourse of "social justice" as a mode of distinction that compensates for reduced material opportunities amongst the educated middle class. As Jodi Melamed argues in Represent and Destroy, these superficial gestures towards inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism serve the perverse function of maintaining obscene levels of racialized inequality. Though their origins are traceable to radical intellectual formations from the 1960s like Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies, the insurrectionary force of their representational politics

has been largely recuperated to a "woke" racial liberalism for the professional-managerial class, while they marginalize genuinely oppositional movements, and further undermine the building of solidarities that could provide friction to the rise of populism (Melamed 2011; Ferguson 2012). In the context of competition over limited resources, the policing of language and self-reflexivity about privilege becomes a strategy for occupying increasingly compressed spaces of respite.

This retreat into corporatist enclaves is a reaction to the failure of the social democratic movement to extend the post-war legacy of improved standards of living to those excluded from the Fordist moment: women, minorities, and anyone not conforming to the narrow ideals of the nuclear family. By co-opting the unrest expressed by these groups during the new social movements of the sixties and seventies, progressive neoliberalism effectively diverted a potentially revolutionary moment, placating dissident energies while simultaneously decimating the material supports to a more egalitarian society in the form of socialized wealth. This history helps us understand the ending of Joker. When Fleck-as-Joker faces the psychiatrist at the end of the film, we witness a condensed figure for the failed legacies of the first, Fordist compromise confronting a figure for the faltering legacies of the second, neoliberal compromise. The fact that the film presents this encounter as Fleck "speaking truth to power" is the ideological ruse, and the real joke the narrative is attempting to play on us as an audience. It is also the same divide-and-conquer strategy that Trump's Ubuesque performances are calculated to elicit and exploit.

A Biopolitical "Switch Point": Trump as Vanishing Mediator

For Foucault, the vile sovereign inhabits a zone of indistinction where "buffoonery and the function of the expert are one and the same" (2003b: 36). This double valence allows the Ubu to act as a "switch point" between institutional and discursive registers, whereby medical and judicial power becomes enmeshed (2003b: 35). Delivered during the Collège de France lectures of 1974-75, Foucault's portrait of the vile sovereign is part of his research into the intensification of societal control over bodies and souls that informed The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, first published in 1976 (1990). Though the figure of the Ubu does not appear in the latter work, the influential theory of biopower Foucault announces at the end of the book allows us to read the vile sovereign as key figure of contemporary biopolitical regimes. Crucially, while Foucault doesn't pursue the full implications of his articulation, the example of psychiatric buffoonery provides a figure whose job is to **establish** biopolitical governance while simultaneously **disguising** its ultimately partisan origins in the ongoing project of class domination. The Ubu thus veils a delicate and vulnerable moment in contemporary biopolitics: the ultimately groundless and arbitrary consolidation of the power to exercise power itself—not in an official recognized, democratic or political sense of the term, but in the Foucauldian sense of a new dispensation of norms, values and potentialities. Such moments require officious functionaries who are willing to sacrifice themselves on the altar of respectability, to negate themselves and play the fool, but in full seriousness, so that a new regime of norms, values and behaviors can establish its hold over the hearts and minds of the people.

Biopower grounds its legitimacy in the ability of expert administrators to provide for the health and well being of populations. Despite its orientation towards the "generalized good," the founding gesture of such a regime yet requires an ultimately arbitrary delineation between the protected population and those excluded from the life-sustaining apparatuses of the state. In Society Must be Defended, Foucault provides a genealogy of race discourse as one of the

key modalities by which biopolitical states distinguish between those who are "made to live" and "let" die (2003a: 241). In his development of Foucault's theory of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben (1995) identifies the separation of vulnerable, disposable "bare life" from the protected bearer of rights constituting "political life" as the foundational gesture of biopolitics. <u>Abnormal</u> provides an important corollary insight into this operation: the production of expendable, fugitive bare life requires a figure of authority who can cover over the arbitrary nature of the terrible decision about who is made to live and who left to die. In Foucault's analysis of what we can now recognize as one of the sites of the emergence of biopolitics in the medicalization of judicial discourse, it is the "childish discourse" of the expert psychiatrist, deploying a "discourse of fear" rather than one of science, who sacrifices his professional stature and reason at the very moment he becomes a celebrated biopolitical instrument of the state (2003b: 36). We can see these biopolitical imperatives of vile sovereignty at work in what have become two of the signature moments of the Trump administration, bookends to his four-year term: a spectacularly revanchist tightening of borders and immigration, the opening gambit of his political campaign and his most consistent position throughout his presidency; and the bumbling, negligent, and deceptive state reaction to the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump has been ramping up security and arrests along the US-Mexican border since 2018, when he announced a "zero tolerance" policy against those crossing into the U.S. illegally, including asylum seekers. This is part of the larger, anti-immigration position that helped Trump win the 2016 election, and which included inflammatory rhetoric that deployed racialized stereotypes to justify xenophobic policies—an "end of the myth," following Greg Grandin, of American capitalism's boundless expansion, and a reassertion of borders and nativism (Grandin 2019: 10-11). A biopolitical valence is evident in Trump's public assertions of Mexican immigrants and asylum seekers as criminals, drug dealers and rapists,[6] the invective of which is reminiscent of the opportunistic characterizations of accused individuals made by the post-war psychiatrists cited by Foucault (2003b). Then as now, the net effect of figures in positions of power making sociologically unsupported pronouncements on people's "character" to justify an otherwise arbitrary decision on who is to be excluded from the life-sustaining ambit of the state reduces strategically selected subjects to the status of bare life described by Agamben.

However, despite the comparisons that we might be tempted to make between this kind of biopolitical strategy and the atrocities committed by Nazis against Jewish people and other minorities, the strategic intent of Trump's vile sovereignty differs significantly. While historic fascists mobilized the discourse of race and nation with the actual intent of creating a racially "pure" society, there is a cynical self-reflexivity to the way contemporary vile sovereignty strategically draws from these past formations. Granted, sections of Trump's base might genuinely believe in resurrected fantasies of white, patriarchal nationhood, but Trump's biopolitical performances merely mobilize this discourse in service of the further evisceration of the bureaucratic welfare state. It is in this dimension that Trump's enactment of vile sovereignty constitutes the perpetuation of neoliberalism by other means. The promise to make (white, masculinist) America "great again" is merely a means to the implicit end of liquidating the bureaucratic barriers to the upward appropriation of collective resources. A key question we must hold in mind is whether this tendency, once pushed past a certain, possibly immanent point, should even still be called "neoliberalism."

There are indicators that the class project of neoliberalism is passing into an august phase, where the valorization of capital has accelerated past "accumulation by dispossession," as David

Harvey (2003) has it, and into unstable, financialized investments in short term returns. We might call it the buyback era, as financial investment since Trump's election is overwhelmingly directed towards inflating stock prices rather than expanding productive activity (Brenner 2019); the most profitable companies create "platforms" for the collection of rent from the circulation of capital and not the production of new values (Srnicek 2018). Jodi Dean asks whether today's economic system might more properly be called "neo-feudal," as opposed to capitalist, typified by virtual and real spatial partitioning, and the collection of rents more commonly associated with medieval fiefdoms than the smooth, borderless world of productive capital flows imagined by late twentieth-century globalization theorists (2020: 2). This rentier capitalism has also entailed significant investment in energy futures—perhaps the key growth area in capital accumulation of the past decade (Malm 2016: 370)—and on oil and gas exploration across an uneven geography linking financial speculation, logistical networks, extraction sites, and points of consumption, all creating a planetary climate emergency (Arboleda 2020).

Who better to oversee the shift to rentier capitalism than a real estate president? Trump's background as a real estate dealmaker was key to his presidential run, and we can see this ethic shaping his administration. Turning white house staff positions and cabinet appointments into a revolving door of hirings and firings based on who is helping the Trump brand seems more like a real estate company's relationship to its agents than a functional political administration, and makes for fascinating political theatre. But outside the beltway, Trump is busy transforming American border and immigration policy around the idea of the country as a gated community. This is where his cynical white nationalist signaling—never quite organized enough to be called a political project or movement—comes to the surface. A key tenet of Trump's approach is border regulation and selective trade protectionism, both of which only make sense as the theatre of white nationalism: as Grandin argues, Trump's border wall is most potent as a virtual and unfinished project, a symbolic critique of America's racial heterogeneity, and one that Trump can rail against in perpetuity (2019: 8-9). Trump's vile sovereignty reflects the cranky self-importance of a bad landlord, wanting only to grant access to "the best people," making a great show of evicting critical reporters from press briefings, yelling "get him out of here" at rally protesters. Trump takes America's Puritan "city upon a hill" myth and transmutes it into the next gated golf club, the next downtown Trump tower, the next velvet roped investment opportunity. Rentier capitalism's upward accumulation of capital needs a form of social license or legitimacy, and Trump's strategy is to literalize the idea of rentierism, to perform it and embody it, and to forcibly exclude any dissent.

The disastrous fallout from this attempted feudalization of the socius becomes apparent each time a collective, biopolitical crisis exposes the ineffectuality of reactive, corporatist responses to mounting ecological pressures that transcend human borders. The evisceration of the social state, and the inability of private enterprise to truly address the void, has become painfully apparent each time a hurricane or natural disaster strikes the U.S. or its territories. Though it is still the early days of the crisis at the time of this writing, the Trump administration's response to the COVID-19 pandemic already promises to be a definitive site for the attempted consolidation of a newly authoritarian, biopolitical capitalism. Trump's response to the event has thus far betrayed the dizzying blizzard of hybridized, quick-fix half-measures, zigzagging contradictions and self-aggrandizing opportunism that we have been conditioned to expect, and that support our reading of vile sovereign as covering over a vulnerable, transitional moment in the maintenance of established power hierarchies. Highly prominent are the neoliberal strategies Naomi Klein

has called "disaster capitalism," in which moments of collective crisis are used to "push through policies that systematically deepen inequality, enrich elites, and undercut everyone else" (Solis 2020; Klein 2007). This is evident in Trump's turn to the private sector as a key player in responding to the pandemic, an action that follows upon protracted assaults on America's disease-response infrastructure.[7] Following Trump's mass dismissal of expertise and the erasure of institutional memory, his seizing control of the nation's productive capacity after a long period of neoliberal financialization will encourage stock market inflation without an accompanying expansion of production: an illusion of growth that might look good on paper, but actually siphons more public funds towards the banking class. Through all the bluster and bumbling in Trump's early response to the pandemic, clear themes have emerged: an indifference to principles of public health and to the widespread provision of virus testing and health care; a strictly performative consolidation of power, in the form of a national emergency declaration and the specter of wartime economic dirigisme, but this strictly to further enrich private health companies; a widely repudiated xenophobic nationalism that frames the virus as externally-sourced (i.e., Trump's racist use of the term "Chinese virus"); and intensified rounds of credit creation in order to support the financial sector and the stock market, the administration's demonstrable priority through this pandemic. Decisions about economic realities that govern who will be "made live and let die" have never been more vicious or more transparent. Calamitous as all of this is, it yet forms a continuum with sustained political trends of the past several decades. Whereas the "progressive neoliberalism" described by Fraser dismantled the social state under the guise of a superficially progressive cloak of "inclusion," Trump merely continues this project under the reversed polarity of shamelessly pursued, biopolitical **exclusion**. It is here that we might recognize Trump's vile sovereignty as a "switch point" of the kind described by Foucault (2003b: 35); while the post-war psychiatric sovereigns heralded the emergence of the disciplinary mechanisms buttressing the social state, the buffoonish, biopolitical strongmen of the Trump era herald its demise and potential transformation into something different.

Foucault tellingly describes this expert clown as "sheltered, protected, and even regarded as **sacred** by the entire institution and sword of justice" (2003b: 35, emphasis added). Unlike Agamben's **homo sacer**, who is completely and ultimately **arbitrarily** stripped of all protections, the vile sovereign is protected **because of** his demonstrated disqualification from the protocols of authority, law, and rationality. If bare life is the figure of the hunted fugitive, who cannot possibly deserve the banishment from all protections that biopolitics demands, then the vile sovereign is inextricably bound to her as the figure granted an **undeserved immunity from all persecution**. Such extravagant immunity can only truly be demonstrated if the subject who enjoys it explicitly and publicly flaunts the protocols of decorum, legality, and rationality that his office would normally demand. The zone of indistinction that the Ubu helps create and then inhabits by his actions is thus necessarily the site of a paradoxical performance by which power grounds itself through excessive transgression: in the full light of public scrutiny he must ritually and repeatedly debase himself in order to persist, and though he seems to be granted an uncanny immunity, there is often a steep price to be paid for such a career.

Firstly, this price consists of being alienated and set apart from his fellows. Of course, estrangement from the general run of humanity is the price exacted by all exceptional privilege, but the Ubu doubly refracts this estrangement in his separation from both larger humanity **and** the subset of the ruling class in service of whom his antics are performed. There is a ruse of history at work here insofar as the Ubu sees himself as the exceptional player who, due to his unique

abilities, is able to outflank the very establishment to whom he is, in reality, a kind of minion or lapdog. For the Ubu to properly perform his role, the knowledge of his actual, historical function must be hidden from the vile sovereign himself. Even if he begins his career with a kind of ironic detachment or reflexivity, this critical distance soon drops away as, intoxicated by a power that seemingly knows no limits, his actions push the drama towards its conclusion. Whatever form this may take, as a biopolitical "switch point," his exceptionality establishes new norms.

At work here is the logic of the vanishing mediator, of the extraordinary figure who, under the belief of recovering fidelity to a seemingly lost essentialism of the past, actually creates the conditions for the solidification of something new and unforeseen. Fredric Jameson (1973) first identified the vanishing mediator as a central, organizing idea of Max Weber's thought, in which Protestantism serves as a vanishing mediator between feudal and mercantile capitalist modes of production. Jameson posits that superstructural, cultural elements become mediators that, more than merely passively responding to infrastructural changes, help catalyze a transition between distinct historical epochs: "A vanishing mediator in the truest sense of the expression," writes Jameson, "serves as a bearer of change and of social transformation, only to be forgotten once that change has ratified the reality of the institutions" (1973: 80). The irony that fully emerges in hindsight is the manner in which a vanishing mediator, while unwittingly acting in service of an unforeseen future constellation, believes itself to be the champion and guardian of the very traditions whose demise and transformation it signals.

When vile sovereignty takes the form of a vanishing mediator, appeals are made to a fictitious former grandeur that, as a virtual entity, is always-already lost: nostalgia for what never truly existed covers over a destabilizing void, wherein future possibilities lie dormant and smothered by reactionary appeals to the past. With this distinction in mind, we can identify slogans such as "Make America Great Again" as similarly grounded in phantasmal nostalgia for a past that never was. Trump's vision of American greatness is an idealist fiction structuring the present moment, a pastoral mirage of an imagined era when Americans produced the same commodities they consumed and a burgeoning middle-class enjoyed improved standards of living. In reality, post-war prosperity was grounded in a number of factors, not least of which were workers' struggles of previous decades, which secured the post World War Two compromise between capital and labor. Facing an insurgent, disciplined, and activist workforce that had just returned from fighting Fascism abroad, American industrialists could afford to buy the pacification of labor with improved wages due to the relative global advantage enjoyed by American capital (and perpetuated by a series of ongoing military efforts). The new confinement of (middle-class) women to the reproductive sphere, and the postwar racial formation of whiteness to include historically racialized groups from southern and Eastern Europe, but redouble the exclusion of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous people, were all part of the postwar settlement to which Trump's borrowed slogan refers.[8] It is to this tower of cards, now decimated by decades of neoliberal financialization, that Trump's selective nostalgia refers; his political career depends on his projecting the fantasy of being a neo-feudal, biopolitical "strong man" who, through personal skill and unorthodox methods, can tame and rationalize the global forces that his supporters blame for the waning of the Fordist dream.

If a vanishing mediator is always selectively backward-looking in this way, then what prospects are there for a future after Trump? What happens when he vanishes? Before turning to this question, one caveat needs to be addressed. A vanishing mediator must not be mistaken for the vanishing of mediation itself. It may be that there is a felt difference, a new directness, in our

imagined relationship to this vile sovereign, especially after neoliberalism's evisceration of the postwar settlement. As a project, neoliberalism has generalized precarity, undermined labor and environmental protections, and increased the number of people whose livelihoods are susceptible to market volatility.[9] Precarity and vulnerability, however, are more than economic, and express themselves on the terrain of identities: the mass feminist response to Trump's election, in the form of annual women's marches, indicate that electing a misogynist accused several times over of sexual assault is re-traumatizing to anyone exposed to rape culture and gender-based violence in its many forms. Likewise, re-traumatization might well be an increasingly generalized condition, as Trump's justice department turns a deaf ear to Black communities critical of state violence carried out by police, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement targets immigrant communities, continues to deport thousands, and violates human rights along an increasingly militarized southern border. The political has always been personal, but perhaps not quite so intimately felt as in recent years.

Nevertheless, this intimacy is not an indication that we are in an unmediated relationship with sovereign power, but rather that mediation has been displaced to another level, another configuration. Again, following Jameson's analysis of Weber, the cultural and superstructural dimensions of a social transformation need to be carefully attended to in any analysis of social and political transformation. Competing with the Fordist nostalgia on which Trump opportunistically built his candidacy, there has been, on the left, the political desire to do away with mediation as such, and to constitute a new populist historic bloc that will democratize the nation's institutions. We might take our lead from the dialectical transformation that culture takes under Srnicek's platform capitalism (2017), where the appearance of directness in online sociability and participation are nevertheless delivered on new software and hardware infrastructures, which have simply moved the question of mediation onto a new plane.[10] Or, returning a final time to Phillips's Joker, Fleck's rise as a reactionary populist hero at the end of the film is built on genuine grievances and injury, but his perception of his relationship with his oppressors is a political fantasy. He imagines a direct, unmediated relationship to an economic power with Thomas Wayne and cultural status with Murray Franklin. That imaginary relation to power is seductive—indeed, it is the film's ideological ruse, as we have argued—but by subscribing to it, as Fleck demonstrates, we become clowns, fighting ghosts from a badly-remembered past.

An Oily Background to Spectral Finance

Trump's political career is the product of a phantasmal investment of hope on the part of his supporters that is in line with his earlier, shadowy career as what Žižek calls a "purely virtual capitalist." Much like the fantastical promises of future dividends that encouraged the reckless investments leading to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, Trump's "cash 'net worth' is practically zero, or even negative, yet [he] is considered 'wealthy' because of the prospect of future profits" (2001: 42). Trump's erratic actions as President, his "keep them guessing" tactics and destabilizing influence can now be leveraged, within the ethereal world of financialization, to reap personal profits for his family holdings. The dreamlike realm inhabited by Trump and his supporters, where persistent abuses of power seem only to lead to greater status and success, are the inflection, in reality, of a different scene altogether. In much the same way dreams and fantasies disguise and displace much less glamorous realities, so too does the ethereal Fordist nostalgia summoned by Trump obscure a much more mundane, elemental scene that is the more likely source of the

economic uptick of U.S. fortunes over the past several years.

This has to do with the economy of oil, and specifically with changes in fracking technology that has made Texas' Permian Basin "arguably the hottest oil-and-gas play in the world," launching, for the first time in history, the U.S.'s accessible oil reserves past those of either Saudi Arabia or Russia (Wright 2017). An aerial view of this region courtesy of Google Maps reveals the landscape etched like a circuit board, so thoroughly has it been inscribed by the networks of access roads and "Christmas tree" valve posts used to inject fluid and remove oil from the ground in the fracking process.[11] The technological advances that have allowed for the exploitation of Texas' non-renewable oil and gas reserves dramatically reversed the fortunes of the U.S. oil industry, which in turn has buoyed the U.S. economy. We might also see the sudden availability of cheap, high-quality U.S. gas as one of the key, material underpinnings of the brand of Fordist nostalgia mobilized by Trump, with its fantasies of the return of American industrial prowess and personal mobility. As the slippery support to Trump's career, fossil fuels might thus be characterized as a dreaming substance that both propels and shapes the particular fantasies of race, gender, nation and prosperity buttressing contemporary vile sovereignty.

Following Cara Daggett, we can recognize the recent rise of authoritarian, white, patriarchal rule in Western nations as part of the "combustible convergence" forming in reaction to climate change and the pressure it puts on ways of life and modes of differential privilege that have been enabled by fossil fuels (2018: 29). At the same time, we should be cautious of "the tragic ethos demanded by global environmental justice" (ibid: 27) as a framing that might help encourage the reaction it critiques. So long as energy transition is posited as a loss of freedoms, rights, mobilities, it will likely continue to exacerbate the kinds of Fordist nostalgia—or would a better term be "petro-nostalgia" (ibid: 31)?—that buoys figures like Trump.[12] In facing these cultural undercurrents, it is up to artists, activists and scholars to articulate and imagine the coming changes in ways that make them enticing: how could energy transition be an opportunity for cultivating better relationships, lifestyles and societies? Imre Szeman and Jeff Diamanti (2017) challenge leftist practice to seize the opportunity. They describe the shift to mixed forms of energy as,

> the greatest social experiment in human history: a planned, plotted and predetermined shift from one kind of society—the petrocultures we inhabit today—to another. At Petrocultures [research group] we see this energy transition as an opportunity for a transition to the kind of society long imagined by the Left: collective, equitable and just in all of its practices and principles.

As leftists, we need to embrace our historical role as the caretakers of this utopian impulse, combining it with sober, even cynical analysis of current material and cultural conditions. If the connection between Trump's vile sovereignty and oil is correct, it also underpins his role as vanishing mediator to whatever social-political formation will emerge in the coming decades, as all of us grapple with the urgent need to transition to post-petroleum infrastructures and cultures. It is uncertain whether the capitalist mode of production can even survive a shift away from the massive surpluses of both wealth and energy provided by fossil fuels. This question is raised by Andreas Malm's (2016) research into the political-economic factors that lead to the rise of steam power as the key motor of the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Malm refutes ideologies of technological determinism and "progress" by showing how the shift to steam was effected primarily in order to facilitate the individual competition amongst industrialists over access to cheaper labor markets in large city centers. Similarly, without the potent and portable fuel source of petroleum, it is difficult to imagine how the networks of transportation facilitating capital's

global pursuit of discounted labor and production could possibly function (Malm 2016: 327-366).

Despite the promise of social transformation offered by the current need for a rapid energy transition, there is a danger of falling victim to new forms of vulgar materialism in the idea, for instance, that a change in energy infrastructures can guarantee a more egalitarian society simply by virtue of a technological shift from fossil fuels to renewables. Malm aids our thinking here by highlighting the key role the political economy plays in the energy transition. He points out that although renewables like solar power have the potential to put an end to energy scarcity, it is financialization itself that poses a barrier to such an infrastructural shift: "When the average stock is owned for a mere twenty-seconds, why would [financiers] underwrite a long-term project for exploiting the flow [of renewable energy] with little in the way of guaranteed revenues?" (2016: 381). A growing, interdisciplinary field of humanities focusing on the study of "petroculture" wagers that the factors that will determine the political and social characters of emergent energy regimes—whether they will be more democratic, egalitarian and participatory or much less so— are not primarily technological, but cultural, political and economic.[13] If the appearance of reactionary, populist leaders in the West is any indication, the potential for greater democratic and egalitarian energy systems, with all their messy complexities, seeming inefficiencies and challenges to the status quo, are currently being co-opted by authoritarian figures like Trump who can offer solutions that seem much more simple and direct. And, if our characterization of such figures as vanishing mediators is correct, these vile sovereigns could signal the rise of newly authoritarian forms of state capitalism, or they could be the spark that, in provoking widespread dissent, triggers an explosive shift to something altogether different.

At such a moment of indeterminacy, it is important for social practice to recall the lessons of past transitions, such as the emergence of neoliberalism. With the potentially revolutionary new social movements blossoming out of the fissures and contradictions of the Fordist compromise, many on the left who predicted the expansion of socialist democracy were surprised by the ability of neoliberal capitalism to co-opt the twin demands for enfranchisement of minorities and meaningful "self-actualization," while simultaneously dismantling the socialized structures that workers had fought a long, hard battle to secure. Activists mistook the rigidly paternalistic, hierarchical and state-enmeshed form of industrial capitalism to be definitive of capitalism as a whole, and were outflanked by neoliberalism's ability to deepen the marketization of society under the pretense of catering to individualized desires and identitarian niches. The contradictions inherent in Trump's performance of the biopolitical strong man are symptomatic of the ultimate failure of the globalized, neoliberal market to accommodate human flourishing in advanced, Western nations at even a basic level, let alone fulfilling higher, cultural needs. With the failure of both Fordist paternalism and the neoliberal individualization of risk and innovation, Trump gives us the worst of both worlds: in place of the welfare state bureaucracy with its plodding reliability we have the caprice of a childish autocrat whose boasts of "exceptional negotiation skills" are more realistically grounded in the chance exploitation of a resource that is destroying the planetary conditions for life.

Conclusion: Beyond Vile Sovereignty?

Leftists should resist the temptation to see the career of a figure like Trump as an opportunistic atrocity committed by an odious "vile sovereign" who needs only be replaced with a more palatable leader in order to return to some vestige of decent, democratic politics. To take comfort

in such reflections is to reiterate Trump's own displacement of structural issues onto corporeal subjects, the expulsion of whom spuriously promises to restore society. Agamben's figure of bare life resurfaces here as the hidden, unifying substance underpinning the biopolitical machinations of the vile sovereign. But our analysis exposes a further mineral dimension in that the biopolitical crisis works to obscure Trump's dependency on circumstantial developments in the American oil industry.

It is this dependency that most strongly reveals Trump's presidency as a vanishing mediator, insofar as his brand of white, masculinist nostalgia for a bygone age of industrial flourishing cannot outlive the pending, global transition from fossil fuels confronting us. While Trump's antics seem calculated to monopolize our attention with ever more scandalous offenses to propriety, accountability, and morality, we should pause to reflect on the extent to which such abuses might be distracting us from the more radical possibilities for change the current moment offers. Rather than scrambling to frame new responses to vile sovereignty in the faltering register of neoliberal pretenses to inclusivity and good governance, we should seize the moment of political opportunity signified by the vile sovereign, whose increasingly bizarre responses cover over a moment of great weakness, vulnerability and indeterminacy when global capitalism is in the process of sloughing its neoliberal skin.

What is to replace the neoliberal moment that now, itself, holds nostalgic appeal compared to the troubling uncertainties heralded by threshold figures like Trump? An emergent formation might already be intuited in new varieties of capitalism on the rise in Russia and China, where demands for democracy and freedom of speech are being quashed in the name of the damage such protests are allegedly causing to "the market." Figures like Trump can be viewed in the light of such developments as truly vanishing mediators: strong authoritarian men who, even as they mesmerize populations with their nostalgic visions of a "return to former greatness," are working in service of inhuman market forces that constitute the only authority our global community currently knows. The key question of our times is whether a new global coalition can be forged out of the fragmented, fractious, identitarian corporatisms that, in the wake of the dissolution of the third-way, neoliberal compromise, now seem bent on devouring **each other** rather than turning their collective energies towards resisting the globalized logics of capital. With the doomsday clock of ecological collapse ticking louder by the day, the pressing need for such a new collectivism should not be difficult to discern, if we can only avoid being baited and manipulated by clowns with bad hair who have ascended to seats of power that the failures of our watch have left exposed.

Endnotes

1. For the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency and the Comics Code Authority, see Lent et al. 1999; Nyberg 1994; Nyberg 2009.

2. The late 1980s is the consensus breakthrough for the Joker, though the character first appeared. Some credit the Joker's turn from gimmick villain to an icon of revenge in, of all years, 1973, with the story "The Joker's Five-Way Revenge" in Batman 251 (Reisman 2019). Surely coincidence, but 1973 is significant for global capitalism as the end of the Fordist expansion and a crisis in economic growth that has been deferred into the present: more details below.

3. Although it was not until the new millennium that Warner Bros. fully adopted the "Dark Knight" moniker with the Dark Knight Trilogy (2005 – 2012), the benchmark 1989 Batman film was heavily inspired by contemporary comic books that recast the story in grittier tones: The Killing Joke, by Alan Moore and Brian Bollard (1988) and The Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller (1986). According to Forbes, Joker is the most profitable comic book film to date (Mendelson 2019).

4. The parallels between Trump and Jarry's odious patriarch have not been missed by contemporary artists. Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel celebrated President's Day in 2018 by issuing a call for playwrights to produce a five-page sketch placing the Trump administration in the land of Ubu Roi (Steinkopf-Frank 208). Rosanna Hidyard has published a new and updated translation of Jarry's play, Ubu Trump (2017).

5. For a nuanced treatment of Fredric Wertham's career that challenges the portrait of his cultural conservatism, see Beaty (2005).

6. These remarks were made at Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech in June of 2015. For a full transcription, see: https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/

7. The White House press conference on March 13, declaring a national emergency, is a case in point: Trump congratulated himself for closing off air travel to China a few weeks before, announced new federal money for private health providers to design a COVID-19 test, and avoided all questions about his disbanding of existing governmental health infrastructure, namely the White House's pandemic response team (The White House 2020).

8. As widely noted, the term was first used in Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign, and by several other politicians since.

9. Recent economic research into inequality is surveyed in the literature review "Economics After Neoliberalism" (Naidu, Rodrik, and Zucman 2019).

10. A longer research programme might compare this shift towards an unmediated relationship to the sovereign with cultural expressions equally impatient with mediation in various cultural forms: in literature, the rise of autofiction, but also of flarf poetry; the post-critical turn in the humanities; the renewal of attention in Deleuzian, new materialist, and phenomenological theories of human-natural entanglement; the resilience of reality-TV genres, and particularly the emergence of "realness" as a mode of self-fashioning and gender performance; podcasting over terrestrial radio; soundcloud mixtapes over blog-based music curation; documentary over news; and as mentioned above, narrowcasting channels, and the rise of platform-based social media.

11. The southeast corner of the New Mexico-Texas boarder points towards the centre of the Permian Basin region. This Google Map shows the thousands of pump heads that dot the landscape: https://www.google.com/maps/place/Texas,+USA/@31.7516006,-102.1764362,17304m/

12. Daggett notes her use of this term was borrowed from a conversation between Dominic Boyer, Cymene Howe and Timothy Mitchell on the podcast "Cultures of Energy," episode 57, 16 February 2017.

13. See, for starters, Szeman 2019; Szeman and Diamanti 2019; Bellamy and Diamanti 2018;

Szeman and Boyer 2017; Szeman, Wenzel and
Yaeger 2017; Petrocultures Research Group
2016.

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