NOTES ON TRUMPSPACE

Politics, Aesthetics, and the Fantasy of Home

David Markus

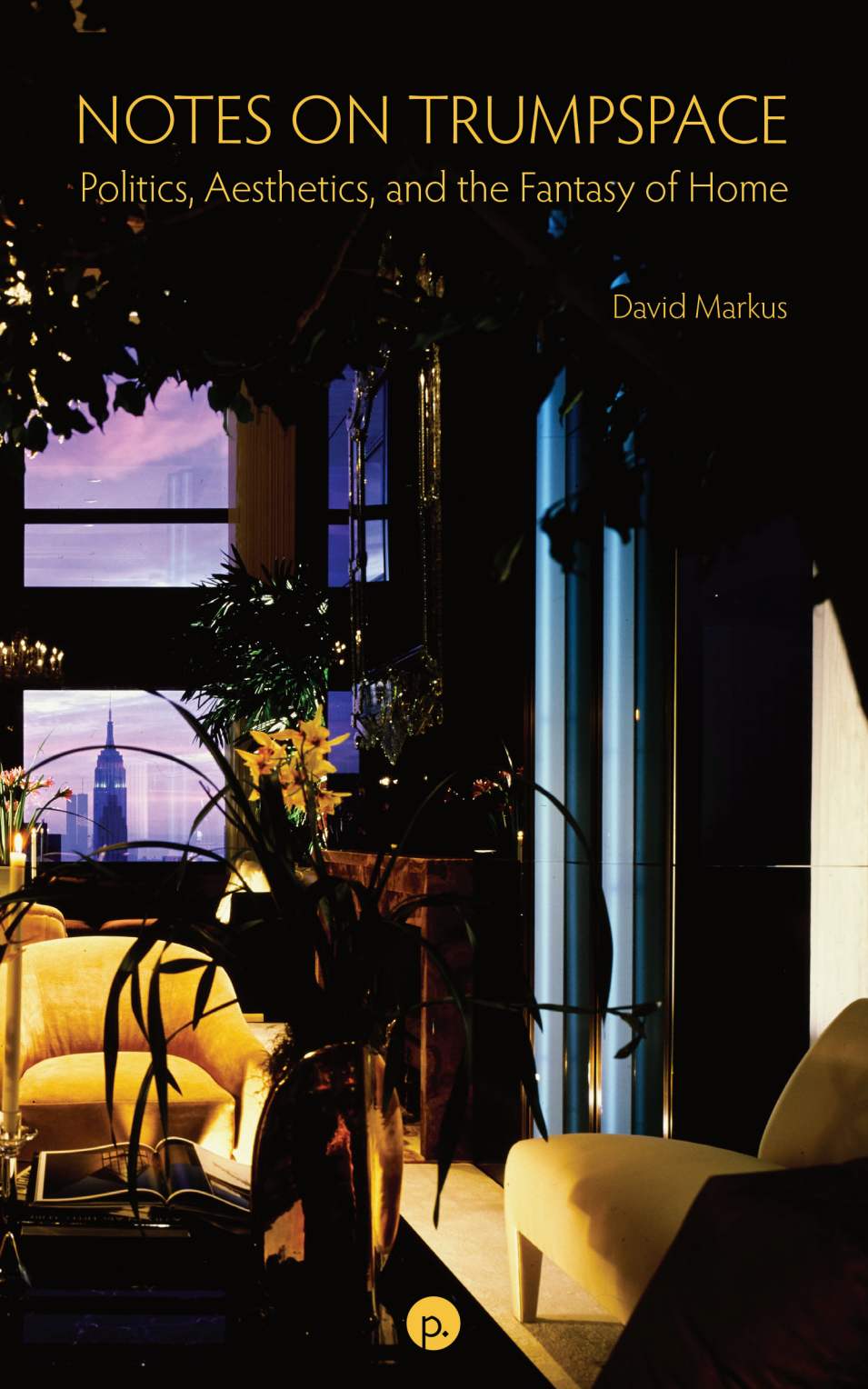

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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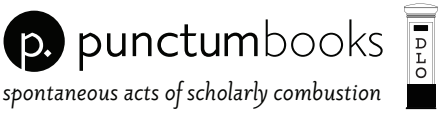

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Contents

Acknowledgments

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Your diamond in the sky. It seems a fantasy.
And you are home.

—advertisement for Trump Tower

Preface

Donald J. Trump's 2016 US presidential campaign and eventual arrival in the White House provoked, among other things, a surge of interest in the relationship between subjectivity and the production of public and private space. This interest was fueled not only by the fact that the forty-fifth president had made a career out of buying, building, and branding real estate, but by the way in which certain edifices bearing the name "Trump" invite reflections on their namesake. In the early months of his presidency, commentators probed the "secret psychoses" underpinning the "drippings of fine piss-yellow gold" that adorn a number of Trump properties.[1] They reflected on the relationship between Trump's enthusiasm for glossy materials and his broader fixation on "the surface of things."[2] Academic journals, meanwhile, began contemplating the implications of Trump's presidency for contemporary experiences of being-in-the-world. In his introduction to a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on "Dwelling in a Global Age," Alfred J. López draws a connection between a post-2016 election reality and the "portentous

1 Sam Kriss, "Pissologies," *The Baffler,* January 17, 2017, https://thebaffler.com/latest/pissologies-kris.

2 Corey Robin, "Interior Decorator in Chief," *Jacobin,* February 22, 2017, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/trump-interior-design-appearance-surface-art-of-the-deal-white-house-drapes.

[...] postwar time of Heidegger's 'Building Dwelling Thinking,'" observing that the election of Trump has "undoubtedly and dramatically altered America's — and arguably the world's — prospects for what Heidegger called dwelling (*Wohnen*)."[3]

Of course, such prospects had already been significantly altered in the decades since the German philosopher, and one-time Nazi party member, was writing. For Heidegger, whose essay was published in 1954, there is something profoundly out of joint in humans' relationships to the spaces they inhabit. The problem in what he calls "our precarious age" is that we have failed to think the "essence of dwelling" itself. This essence lies in the relationship between building and dwelling. Such a relationship might easily be neglected amid the proliferation of modern tract housing but can be retrospectively glimpsed, the philosopher suggests in his essay, by considering a hundreds-of-years-old peasant's farmhouse in the Black Forest. Here, intentional craftsmanship, architectural layout, and geographic siting ("on the wind-sheltered mountain slope") conspire to "let earth and sky, divinities and mortals enter *in simple oneness* into things." Although masses of people were left unhoused in the wake of World War II, in Heidegger's view, what is at stake is a more existential homelessness, which will only cease to be "misery" when we learn to "bring dwelling to the fullness of its essence."[4]

Heidegger's essay may have played a seminal role in discourses on dwelling, but even before it was published, its central propositions had been thrown into question by another famous German thinker's reflections on the "portentous" postwar period. In the early 1950s, Theodor Adorno was writing not as a former Nazi still dimly captivated — as Heidegger's idealizations of the Black Forest and peasant dwelling suggest he

3 Alfred J. López, "Dwelling in a Global Age: An Introduction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 2.

4 Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Basic Writings,* ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 362–63.

was — with *Blut und Boden,*[5] but rather from the perspective of a Jewish émigré who fled destruction in Europe for a US that had come into its own as a world power and capital of consumerism. In Adorno's writing in *Minima Moralia,* "dwelling, in the proper sense," is not simply a neglected practice that must be renewed; it is altogether "impossible." This has everything to do with the way property relations have infected the entirety of the domestic sphere. For Adorno, there is no sense in looking to the past for models of how to live today. "Anyone seeking refuge in a genuine, but purchased, period-style house," he writes, "embalms himself alive." Far from seeking out the "essence of dwelling" the best one can do is to live "an uncommitted, suspended" existence, not dissimilar to "the enforced conditions of emigration." In a striking passage, Adorno quotes Nietzsche's quip that it is part of his "good fortune not to be a house-owner," adding that "today […] it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home."[6]

One can only speculate about what these two thinkers would have made of dwelling in our own era. Set beside the quasi-profund marketing language of contemporary high-end property developments (about which I will have more to say in Chapter Three), Heidegger's words ring hollow in their resonance. His vision of dwelling brought to "the fullness of its essence" too easily reduces to a mysticized version of the acquisitive fantasy nurtured by every exurbanite with an interest in *elegantly simplistic* design. At the same time, Adorno's notion of "suspended life" finds its parody in what Kyle Chayka dubs "AirSpace": the

5 Heidegger's "Building Dwelling Thinking" reprises themes announced twenty years earlier in his radio broadcast, "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?" In the earlier text, Heidegger describes his cabin in the Black Forest, reflects on the authenticity of peasant life, and asserts that his work's relationship to his provincial surroundings "comes from a centuries-long and irreplaceable rootedness in the Alemannian-Swabian soil." Martin Heidegger, "Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?," in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker,* ed. Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981), 27–30.

6 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 38–39.

procession of comfortable, homogenously appointed apartments, cafes, and live-work spaces that a burgeoning population of global nomads has embraced as a lifestyle choice and antidote to the burdens of homeownership.[7] These two conflicting visions are synthesized in the thoughtfully designed home that is by turns lovingly lived in and rented out short-term on AirBnB. Take the Trump Tower condo that briefly offered guests willing to shell out $450 a night and submit to secret service screenings the opportunity to sleep in proximity to the presidential family residence some floors above as well as crowds of anti-Trump protestors on the streets below ("earth and sky, divinities and mortals" indeed).[8]

To consider contemporary paradigms of dwelling alongside the displacement, immiseration, and homogenization engendered as vast swaths of real estate are devoured by private equity firms, flipped by wealthy investors, or transformed into short-term rentals by middle-class homeowners seeking a passive source of income, and to then contextualize this state of affairs within the broader history of racial capitalism's uneven development, is to begin to understand where Fred Moten is coming from when he remarks, "fuck a home in this world, if you think you have one." Whereas Adorno's ethics of permanent suspension were necessitated by the irreparable destruction of a way of life that can never again be regained in its Heideggerian essence, Moten goes a step further — toward an existential "embrace of homelessness." He grounds the very notion of *home sweet home* in "possessive individualism," which, from the slave plantation to the settlement of the American West to the neocolonial systems of domination deployed under contemporary capital-

7 Kyle Chayka, "Welcome to AirSpace: How Silicon Valley Helps Spread the Same Sterile Aesthetic across the World," *The Verge,* Aug 3, 2016, https://www.theverge.com/2016/8/3/12325104/airbnb-aesthetic-global-minimalism-startup-gentrification.

8 Christina Pérez, "You Could Rent an Airbnb Inside Trump Tower? Here's an Inside Peek," *Vogue,* March 6, 2017, https://www.vogue.com/article/trump-tower-airbnb-photos.

ist logistics, has been defined by violence and oppression.[9] For Moten, writing in collaboration with Stefano Harney, the only vital realm of human connection, not to mention creative production, takes place as a form of "being together in homelessness" — that is, of improvising forms of togetherness outside of and in opposition to the sheltering domains of prevailing social, political, economic, and aesthetic institutions.[10] Perhaps it goes without saying that, in its focus on what I will be calling Trump-space, this book is far less about the possibilities engendered by this latter form of togetherness — save for a few concluding remarks that resurrect Harney and Moten's thinking — than it is about the destruction wrought by the coincidence of possessive individualism and ideas of home.

To return to Trump, then: López is undoubtedly right to suggest that the businessman's ascension to the rank of most powerful man in the world, on the promise of a "big, beautiful wall" testifying to his anti-immigrant, white nationalist, "America First" conception of the homeland, marks a woeful new chapter in the history of dwelling. What seems necessary to add is that from the construction of his first eponymous tower, billed at the start of the 1980s as "the world's most talked about address," Trump had already helped to reconfigure contemporary conceptions of dwelling.[11] As we will see in Chapter One, he did so in part by self-consciously renewing the legacy of the robber barons who once populated Fifth Avenue, while accommodating the new entrepreneurial subjectivity that emerged during the neoliberal era. Whether or not one accepts the argument that Trump's presidency, with its protectionist leanings, signals the beginning of a post-neoliberal era, it can be said that Trump has had a hand in shaping the neoliberal experience over the course of its most characteristic decades. Not only as a devel-

9 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "The General Antagonism: An Interview with Stevphen Shukaitis," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 140.

10 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Fantasy in the Hold," in *The Undercommons,* 96.

11 "Yap of Luxury," *Lapham's Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 43.

oper but as a politician, he has done so by wielding a carefully crafted fantasy of home.

It can hardly be a coincidence that Lewis Lapham opted to make "Home" the theme of the first post-2016 election issue of *Lapham's Quarterly.* In addition to quoting from both Heidegger and Adorno, the volume prominently features language from a 1982 advertisement for Trump Tower: "Imagine a tall bronze tower of glass. Imagine life within such a tower. Elegant. Sophisticated. Strictly beau monde."[12] For Lapham, the "beau monde" surroundings of Trump Tower and other so-called "super-luxury" properties like it, are the crystallization of an American Dream whose foundation, in Franklin D. Roosevelt's idea of a citizenry made up of "democratically endowed residents of homes," was quickly supplanted, in the postwar period, by the frantic pursuit of "castles in air."[13] To dwell, in such a context, means having not just one's head but, often literally, one's feet in the clouds (fig. 0.1).

The particular savvy of America's Developer-in-Chief has been to bring this fantasy down to earth by overlaying it with his particular brand of populist appeal — to make it not so much attainable, as accessible to the imagination of his enthralled constituency. When, not long before the election, Fran Lebowitz referred to the man she was certain would not become the future president as "a poor person's idea of a rich person," liberals widely applauded.[14] Lost on most was not only the elitism inherent to their delight but the power of the dynamic Lebowitz so pithily describes. As Lauren Berlant presciently suggested at the start of the Trump presidency, it is at our own peril that we ridicule the "Big Man's" uncanny ability to model an image of having it all that has made wide swaths of the voting public feel at home. Although Berlant confesses that they "never thought

12 Ibid.

13 Lewis Lapham, "Castles in Air," *Lapham's Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 18, 19.

14 Fran Lebowitz, quoted in Emily J. Fox, "Let Fran Lebowitz Soothe All Your Election-Related Worries," *Vanity Fair,* October 20, 2016, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/10/fran-lebowitz-trump-clinton-election.

Fig. 0.1. Trump International Hotel and Tower in Chicago. Photograph by Giuseppe Milo, September 15, 2018, Wikimedia Commons.

we'd have a leader with a combover," they recognize that it is precisely Trump's "commitment to a shameless life" that inspires what they term the "White Big Sovereign Electorate." It is largely because of his outlandishness that he has succeeded in nurturing among his followers "the fantasy of an outsized life."[15]

In keeping with the formula of "truthful hyperbole" outlined three decades ago in his bestselling book, *The Art of the Deal,* Trump's approach to everything from his vocabulary to his bank account has rested on a startlingly straightforward conviction: "people want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular."[16] It is significant for the present inquiry that this formula was perfected through the promotion of luxury real estate. Trump is the person who popularized the trend of exaggerating the floor counts of skyscrapers — an elegant solution to an inferiority complex that appears to have hounded him from early on in his career. Displeased that the General Motors Building in an architectural model of

15 Lauren Berlant, "Big Man," *Social Text,* January 19, 2017, https://socialtextjournal.org/big-man/.

16 Donald J. Trump and Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 58.

the future site of Trump Tower diminished the stature of his own building, the future president reportedly ordered that the former be sawed off at the top.[17] The anecdote provides humorous affirmation, were any needed, of the intimate link between the man's outsized personality and the physical monuments he has erected around the globe. Immovable symbols of a particularly American conception of achievement, Trump's buildings are the sites in which the fantasy delineated by his persona has been not only exteriorized but sold to the global kleptocracy in the form of extravagant, full-service condominiums. "To live *inside* fantasy" was the desire Rem Koolhaas identified with "Manhattanism" at the cusp of the neoliberal era.[18] That the era's most notorious peddler of fantasy dwellings — of the promise of dwelling inside fantasy itself — succeeded in peddling his way into the White House in 2016 is reason, indeed, to reexamine the links between the physical and psychological spaces that define our historical moment.

I feel compelled to state that I never intended to write a book about Trump. This project began as a single chapter within a larger study on representations of luxury dwelling from the decade following the 2007–8 mortgage crisis. The chapters that follow, in their intersecting and overlapping form, are a testament to the ease with which one can find oneself lost in the Trumpian labyrinth. Yet they also attempt a few gestures toward an exit from the paradigm the forty-fifth president embodies (a paradigm that has by no means vanished in the wake of his electoral defeat). Each of the first three chapters were sparked by encounters with cultural objects that, though not explicitly centered on the Trump phenomenon, took on renewed significance in the context of his presidency. In the first essay, J.G. Ballard's novel *High-Rise* (1975) and Brett Easton Ellis's novel *American*

17 Vivian Yee, "Donald Trump's Math Takes His Towers to Greater Heights," *The New York Times,* November 1, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/02/nyregion/donald-trump-tower-heights.html.

18 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994).

Psycho (1991); in the second essay, Orson Welles's film *Citizen Kane* (1941); and in the third essay, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's contemporary art installation and video work *BROKER* (2016). The final two essays in the volume were prompted, respectively, by journalistic responses to the infamous press conference held by Rudolph Giuliani on the day of Trump's election defeat, and by the January 6, 2021 storming of the Capitol building. They are more directly focused on architecture, social space, and the political climate of a country forced, amid the Covid-19 pandemic and mass mobilizations on the part of the Black Lives Matter movement, to reevaluate its conception of national identity and home. Although this is a short book, the transhistorical and cross-disciplinary range of material it addresses speaks to the persistence with which fantasies of home have haunted the American experience. May it contribute, in some small way, toward exorcising the malevolent spirits it invokes.[19]

19 With the understanding that acts of exorcism are a tricky business, prone to merely conjuring repeatedly what they seek to conjure away. This may be especially true when it comes to the uncanny figure of Trump himself, as I acknowledge, by way of a different vocabulary, in Chapter Four. For a discussion of the ambiguities of exorcism and conjuring, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).

1

A Truly "Free" Psychopathology

The emergence of Donald Trump as a major public figure is announced in a mostly laudatory 1980 *New York Times* profile titled "Trump: The Development of a Manhattan Developer."[1] The article features a photograph of Trump, then thirty-four, standing behind a model of Trump Tower (fig. 1.1). Architecture has always relied on mythmaking, and this image follows a hallowed convention of depicting the male "genius" architect or doer alongside his creation. It is the same convention highlighted by Paul B. Preciado, who takes the similarities between a photograph of Hugh Hefner with an architectural model of the first Playboy Club and images of Le Corbusier in his studio as a jumping-off point for an analysis of the role of *Playboy* and modern architecture in the production of new forms of masculinity in mid-century America. Preciado argues that, as a case study in heteronormative culture under capitalism, "*Playboy* is for the contemporary critical thinker what the steam engine and the textile factory were for Karl Marx in the nineteenth century."[2] Although the scope of the present investigation can

1 Howard Blum, "Trump: The Development of a Manhattan Developer," *The New York Times,* August 26, 1980, M1.

2 Paul B. Preciado, *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (New York: Zone Books, 2014), 10.

Fig. 1.1. Donald Trump with a model of Trump Tower in New York. Donald Hogan/*New York Times*/Redux.

hardly do justice to the comparison, I would like to venture that Trumpspace — by which I mean to suggest the vision of dwelling and being-in-the-world promoted by Trump as both a real-estate developer and politician — is no less elucidating an object of study for our present neoliberal age than *Playboy* is for the mid-twentieth century.

The writer and architect Michael Sorkin once observed that Trump is Hefner's "virtual twin" in terms of his relationship to architecture, "leisure-oriented consumption," and women.[3] And it is true that, as the 1970s expired, the form of dwelling that Trump refers to as "super-luxury," was in some ways an extension of Hefner's monumental project.[4] This can be gleaned from a side-by-side examination of the marketing language for the *Playboy* penthouse and the original Trump Tower. In both advertisements the residence in question is described, in the first few lines, as catering to the "elegant" and "sophisticated" lifestyles of its would-be inhabitants. Both ads ask their readers to envision themselves arriving home in the evening and enjoying the sparkling views of the city from their exclusive perches. "It is just after dark," the marketing copy for *Playboy*'s penthouse apartment reads, "Coming down the hallway, we […] see the terrace and the winking towers of the city beyond." The Trump Tower advertisement echoes: "You turn the key and wait a moment before clicking on the light. A quiet moment to take in the view. […] Thousands of tiny lights are snaking their way through Central Park." Both ads also describe an array of amenities, while emphasizing the cutting-edge technology behind

3 Michael Sorkin, "The Donald Trump Blueprint," *The Nation,* July 26, 2016, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-donald-trump-blueprint/.

4 "Super-luxury" is a term Donald Trump has long used to describe the mix of high-end design details and amenities that his residence buildings offer to their wealthy clientele. Trump's particular vision of super-luxury brings together commerce and leisure with exclusive dwelling. The website for Trump Tower states that the building was "the first super-luxury high rise property in New York to include high-end retail shops, office space and residential condominiums." "History: Trump Tower, New York," *Trump Tower New York,* n.d., http://www.trumptowerny.com/trump-tower-new-york.

the various domestic conveniences at their prospective owner's disposal.[5] Both promise would-be clients the rarefied opportunity, in Koolhaas's words, "to live *inside* fantasy."[6] Indeed, the most memorable passage from the Trump Tower advertisement is quite explicit in this regard: "Your diamond in the sky. It seems a fantasy. And you are home."[7]

The parallels, however, only extend so far. First of all, the *Playboy* penthouse was, in Preciado's terms, a "male electronic boudoir," which explicitly deployed its numerous apparatuses (a turning cabinet bar, a reclining couch, a bed with headboard-mounted light dimmers) in the service of its owner's seduction routine.[8] By contrast, the long list of apparatuses on offer at Trump Tower ("maid service, valet, laundering and dry cleaning, stenographers, interpreters, multilingual secretaries, Telex and other communications equipment, hairdressers, masseuses, limousines, conference rooms") are geared not toward the production of sexual pleasure, but toward facilitating the professional lives of men and women alike in an increasingly globalizing world.[9] Yet whereas the *Playboy* penthouse, for all its outrageously misogynistic underpinnings, was essentially forward-looking in its conception, a space whose high-tech appliances and futuristic Saarinen-designed furniture were designed to reshape the "sexually inexperienced middle-class American male" and produce a "postdomestic" alternative to the single-family suburban home, the vision of dwelling offered by Trump Tower is tinged with nostalgia for a bygone era.[10] The building's elite aura is derived from its geographic proximity to the former Gilded Age family residences clustered around Fifth Av-

5 Joel Sanders, "Playboy's Penthouse Apartment, a High Handsome Haven for the Bachelor in Town," in *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity,* ed. Joel Sanders (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 54–67; "Yap of Luxury," *Lapham's Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 43.

6 Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994), 10.

7 "Yap of Luxury," 43.

8 Preciado, *Pornotopia,* 83.

9 "Yap of Luxury," 43.

10 Preciado, *Pornotopia,* 87, 84.

enue near Central Park. "It's been fifty years at least since people could actually live at this address," the Trump Tower advertisement informs its reader. "They were Astors. And the Whitneys lived just around the corner. And the Vanderbilts across the Street."[11] Finally, for the *Playboy* penthouse owner, "a man" who "dreams of his own domain, a place that is exclusively his," exclusivity was linked to privacy and personal space (the *Playboy* penthouse was presumably a secondary residence in most cases).[12] For the resident of Trump Tower, by contrast, exclusivity means being surrounded by subordinates and having one's private life perforated by managerial considerations: "You approach the residential entrance — an entrance totally inaccessible to the public — and your staff awaits your arrival. Your concierge gives you your messages. [… Y]our elevator man sees you home."[13]

Obviously, such differences owe much to the singular nature of the *Playboy* enterprise, which emerged from a specific socio-historical configuration within the postwar United States. There's nothing surprising about the lack of reference to specially designed seduction apparatuses in the marketing copy for Trump Tower. What is noteworthy, however, is the way in which the Trump advertisement breathlessly reiterates *Playboy*'s language of seduction in unveiling for us a dream home that seems designed for those with little time to dream of anything beyond their next business appointment: "If you can think of any amenity, any extravagance or nicety of life, any service that we haven't mentioned, then it probably hasn't been invented yet."[14] Stenographers? Telex? Multilingual secretaries? As a high-tech bachelor pad disguised as an office, the *Playboy* penthouse already aimed at a new intimacy between work and leisure. Yet it emphatically privileged sexual conquest as the sine qua non of male sovereignty. Trump Tower, which had to be marketed

11 "Yap of Luxury," 43.
12 "Playboy's Penthouse Apartment," 56.
13 "Yap of Luxury," 43.
14 Ibid.

to accommodate the increasing influx of women into the professional managerial world, reflects the outright dissolution of boundaries between the private and professional spheres, and the ascent of a new constellation of desire and self-affirmation, one inextricable from the possibility of attaining stratospheric, Vanderbiltian levels of wealth. With the right address and job title comes not only access to the latest array of cutting-edge business and consumer technology, but an empowering sense of exclusivity, entitlement, and autonomy. As we will see, this can very easily open onto forms of living "*inside* fantasy," in contrast to which the mid-century *Playboy* lifestyle seems charmingly innocent.

Trumpspace, as it figures in the remarks that follow, exemplifies two salient aspects of neoliberal culture: its constrictive hyperprofessionalism, on the one hand, and its obscene fantasies of unrestrained excess on the other. It is, I propose, a privileged arena within which to observe how these two seemingly contradictory tendencies overlap and become indistinguishable. Among the numerous commentators to have considered the significance of Trump-branded real estate in the wake of the 2016 election is artist and writer Liam Gillick, who discusses the architectural vernacular of Trump Tower within the context of mid-1970s and early-1980s postmodernism. In this chapter, I follow Gillick in returning to some of Fredric Jameson's seminal insights into postmodernism, arguing for their renewed significance in the era of Trump's presidency. Prompted by an allusion in Gillick's text to J.G. Ballard's novel *High-Rise,* I then turn to a brief analysis of how the exclusive dwelling space figures in the book as a prototype for Trumpspace. I conclude with a discussion of Trump's shadowy presence within Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991). As a paradigmatic figure within the period Ellis describes — a period that saw the rise, in New York City and elsewhere, of what Samuel Stein calls "the real estate state" — Trump was instrumental, I suggest, in affirming the relationship between the exclusive dwelling space and a pathological conception of individual freedom that continues to haunt the American psyche.

Always On

"A Building on Fifth Avenue" is how Gillick refers to Trump Tower, highlighting not only the surprising mundaneness of this structure freighted with so much symbolic weight but also the manner in which it *"takes its place politely within the existing power structure"* despite its supposed *"bad taste."*[15] Gillick likens the building to the Westin Bonaventure Hotel analyzed by Jameson in his classic account of postmodernism, observing how all pretenses to the utopian-modernist project of transforming the city around it have been abandoned. Rather, the "phenomenon of reflection" made use of by Trump Tower "repels the city outside," as Jameson says of the Bonaventure, instituting a scopic order designed to "achieve a certain aggressivity toward and power over the Other."[16] This surface reflectivity belongs to an *"aesthetic regime"* and *"a particular value system"* that, as Gillick notes, are *"more than thirty years old"*[17] — that, indeed, coincided with the reign of the last president who came to power under promises to "Make America Great Again."[18] The minimalistic incorporation of glass, granite, brass, and stainless steel, all of it polished to produce distortive mirror-like effects, summons *"the values of car production and kitchen design,"* both of which Gillick associates with *"individual desire."* Stepping into the funhouse lobby through one of the *"excessive"* number of entrances that make up the *"postmodernist double-revolving-doors-*

15 Liam Gillick, "A Building on Fifth Avenue," *e-flux Journal* 78 (December 2016), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/78/83040/a-building-on-fifth-avenue/. The italics in the quoted passages here and later on signal a mode of analysis and commentary that contrasts with the seemingly neutral (and unitalicized) descriptions of Trump Tower that run throughout the piece.

16 Quoted in ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 The reference is to Ronald Reagan. Matt Taibbi describes the slogan as "a backbone" of Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign. Matt Taibbi, "Donald Trump Claims Authorship of Legendary Reagan Slogan; Has Never Heard of Google," *Rolling Stone,* March 25, 2015, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/donald-trump-claims-authorship-of-legendary-reagan-slogan-has-never-heard-of-google-193834/.

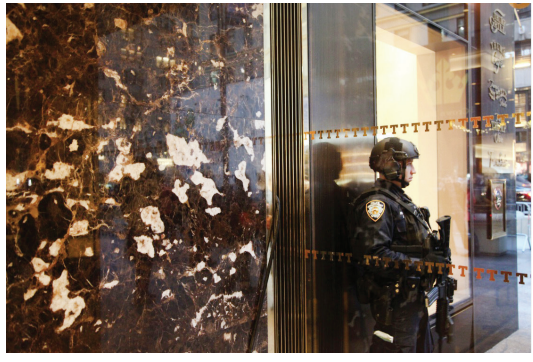
around-central-double-doors arrangement," one glimpses a *"con-fusion"* of glossy signifiers, a complex interlacing of commerce and consumption, business, tourism, and luxury living, all of it bound together somehow by the ubiquitous master signifier of the letter T, which appears gilded on glass windows or stamped into plates of brass.[19] If the Bonaventure's lobby anonymously enacts what Jameson describes as a spatial "vengeance" on the confused and bewildered guests passing through it, the vengeance enacted by the lobby of Trump Tower is of a more personalized origin.[20] Everywhere we look, we are made to know who owns this space. In this sense, the environment figures as a microcosm of the world that emerged in the wake of the 2016 election: one in which Trump's name seemed all but inescapable (figs. 1.2–4).

Developing ideas he first published around the time of Reagan's second election victory, Jameson characterizes "postmodern hyperspace" by its production of an "alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment," a disjunction ultimately analogous to "the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects." What "hyperspace" presents us with, he writes, is the "imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions."[21] Thirty years onward there can be little doubt that built environments have become only more complex and confounding as material technologies have advanced, new virtualities have been spawned, and digitally networked "smart space" has begun to crisscross the globe. If our sensoriums have expanded in the meantime, it is only to the extent that we have become increasingly reliant upon the technological prostheses we carry around with us in our pock-

19 Gillick, "A Building on Fifth Avenue."

20 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 43.

21 Ibid., 44.



Figs. 1.2–4. Images published alongside Liam Gillick's "A Building on Fifth Avenue." Courtesy of the photographer, who has requested anonymity.

ets today. Within this context, Trump's buildings inhabit a privileged position. In a video that accompanies the online version of his article "Fool's Gold: The Architecture of Trump," Ian Volner describes the Trump Organization's architectural portfolio and program as "completely lacking in order," a "kind of horrifying asymptote or lacuna in the middle of capital," and "a kind of a black hole," before going on to observe how this aberration seems analogous to Trump's political operations.[22] Volner not only affirms the hyperspatiality of Trumpspace, at least at the level of its radically disjunctive totality, he posits it as no less than a bend in the space-time continuum itself. But what of the organs and sensorium of the man responsible for engendering this vacuum-like singularity within both the architectural sphere and the spatio-temporality of contemporary politics?

Among the many things Trump appears to embody is the fantasy of a sensorial system or apparatus large and voracious enough to extend its mutant proboscides into every unseemly crevasse of our increasingly systematized, but mindbogglingly chaotic, contemporary global reality. This fantasy is as potent for the rural, white conservatives who praise the president's multinational business know-how (while somehow forgiving his membership among the distrusted global elite) as it is for certain paranoiac corners of the left, which became convinced after the election that for all of his ineptitude, Trump (or at least his Steve Bannon-led team of advisors) was playing an elaborate game of geopolitical 3-D chess. Such viewpoints may be largely confabulatory; but there can be none so tragic in its delusions as that of a Democratic Party that failed to recognize the extent to which Trump's sensorium is, by virtue of whatever horrifying mutation, far more attuned than that of the professional political class that opposed him in 2016 to the perpetually shifting, multi-surfaced, hyper-networked spaces of our current reality. Trump, in his unceasing self-promotion and convulsive, self-

22 Ian Volner, "Fool's Gold: The Architecture of Trump," *Artforum*, November 2016, https://www.artforum.com/print/201609/fool-s-gold-the-architecture-of-trump-64212.

styled managerialism, exposes something like the perverse core of the entrepreneurial subject. He both embodies and explodes the post-Fordist understanding of professionalism as, in the words of Paolo Virno, "a *subjective property,* a form of know-how inseparable from the individual person."[23] Difficult as it was for some liberal strategists to accept, Trump managed to become president not despite but because he is the kind of person who sends out tweets at 3 a.m. His days are filled with unceasing, obsessional media consumption and self-promotion. Like the lights that adorn the front of Trump Tower, which Gillick suggests were *"learned from Las Vegas"* and give the impression that *"time has been taken for a ride,"* the building's namesake and sometime resident is always on.[24]

Numberless commentators have pointed to the ways in which Trump has ushered in an unprecedented realignment of established social, political, institutional, and mediatic orders. However, one could just as easily assert that Trump's presidency represents no more — nor less — than the consummation of an *"aesthetic regime"* and *"value system"* that has not only been around for at least three decades, but that had already been forgotten and revived as retro well before the 2016 election.[25] From this perspective, the "alarming disjunction" Jameson felt back in the 1980s can be understood as both a diagnosis of his contemporary moment and prophecy of things to come. Likewise, the disorientation so many experienced within the social and political architecture of Trump's America appears symptomatic less of historical rupture than of postmodernism's belated vengeance.

23 Paolo Virno, "Post-Fordist Semblance," trans. Max Henninger, *SubStance* 36, no. 1 (2007): 44.

24 Gillick, "A Building on Fifth Avenue."

25 See McKenzie Wark, "Can Anyone Even Remember Postmodernism?," *Public Seminar,* October 31, 2014, https://publicseminar.org/2014/10/can-anyone-even-remember-postmodernism/.

Spaces of Exception

At the conclusion of his text on Trump Tower, Gillick points us to a passage from Ballard's *High-Rise* in which the luxury tower at the center of the novel is described as "a model of all that technology had done to make possible the expression of a truly 'free' psychopathology." Let us briefly consider the significance of Ballard's work for our present concerns. It is a fitting coincidence that Ben Wheatley and Amy Jump's film version of *High-Rise* was released in major theaters the same year Trump was elected president. The novel on which it is based is an extended inquiry into the relationship between psychopathology and the built environment. Published in 1975, the same year Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom, Ballard's book explores the perverse underside of the professional order with unsettling foresight. Gillick is coy about the connections between his detailed analysis of Trump Tower and Ballard's narrative. But what seems relevant to our investigation is the way in which the insomnia-fueled mayhem of the characters in *High-Rise* is tied to the near total identification with professional status that the building enables. Each of the "virtually homogeneous […] well-to-do professional people" that comprise the novel's cast of characters inhabits an apartment whose floor, size, and decor is a direct expression of their social rank. Ballard describes the building as "a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation." Surrounded by luxurious amenities, isolated from the rest of urban life, and left entirely to their own devices, the upwardly mobile gradually give themselves over to the frantic exploration of "any deviant or wayward impulses."[26]

It is a curious fact of the narrative that no outside authority intervenes in the chaos that ensues. The locus of the high rise, for Ballard, is a virtual petri dish in which to cultivate an extended thought experiment on the effects of atomization and the erasure of all but the basest and most materialistic values

26 J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (New York: Liveright, 2012), 47, 17, 47.

from human life. Some years before Thatcher's rise to power we are given a glimpse of what the logic of her often-quoted remark, "there's no such thing as society," looks like when taken to its extreme.[27] *High-Rise* depicts a social Darwinian dystopia: a dog-eat-dog world (the novel, in fact, opens with one of its characters casually devouring his neighbor's dog) that holds a dark mirror up to the self-ennobling conceptions of "rational self-interest" promulgated by the likes of Ayn Rand and her followers. In brief, when human beings no longer distinguish between themselves and their business titles, between their self-worth and their earning power, between their place in the world and the floor number of their luxury condo, the conditions are in place for a catastrophe.

In an essay from 2016 on Wheatley and Jump's "extraordinarily timely" film adaptation, Mark Fisher writes of the "bonfire of the regulatory apparatuses" and "the glorious shedding of all obligations to the poor and vulnerable" that accompanied the rise of the New Right in the 1970s.[28] One of the things *High-Rise* helps us to see is how the perverse allure of certain strands of the neoliberal project — signaled, at the political level, by the fixation on deregulation and regulatory reform, on the passage of *laws suspending laws* — lies in the fantasy of achieving a state of ultimate lawlessness, which must always find its space of (paradoxical, because inherently restricted) localization. "Secure within the shell of the high-rise," Ballard writes of the professionals that inhabit his novel, "like passengers on board an automatically piloted airliner, they were free to behave in any way they wished, explore the darkest corners they could find."[29] We have yet to discover the videotapes of Trump's alleged sexual deviances, the more outlandish of which may well be a product of liberals' own deranged fantasies. But for a contemporary permutation of the unregulated space Ballard envisions, one

27 "Margaret Thatcher, A Life in Quotes," *The Guardian,* April 8, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/08/margaret-thatcher-quotes.

28 Mark Fisher, "Revolt of the Elites," *Critical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (April 2016): 84, 87.

29 Ballard, *High-Rise,* 47.

need look no further than the private island of billionaire financier and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, whose private jet, dubbed "Lolita Express" by the tabloids, played host to both Trump and former President Bill Clinton, among other luminaries. Spaces of luxurious exception seem to work wonders on docile brains. Through an internalization of the German proverb, "the house shows the owner," exclusivity reinforces the sense that one is, often quite literally, *above* the law.[30] To make a "diamond in the sky" one's home is to find oneself elevated to the ultimate state of exception: the status of the star. And "when you're a star," as Trump has reminded us, "you can do anything."[31]

I Feel Free

The notion of a "truly 'free' psychopathology," which is conjured by the infamous words quoted above, hangs about another remark that emerged in the heat of Trump's quest for the White House, that is, for a still more prestigious address than that of his famed Manhattan penthouse. "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters," he told a group of supporters in Iowa before going on to clinch the Republican nomination and the presidency.[32] In the context of the preceding discussion, one is reminded of a scene from *American Psycho,* Brett Easton Ellis's early-nineties exercise in what Richard Godden calls "the poetics of deregulation."[33] Toward the end of the novel, which is set in the waning years of the Reagan era, Patrick Bateman finds himself on Fifth Avenue, "look[ing] up, admiringly, at Trump Tower, tall, proudly gleam-

30 "German Proverb," *Lapham's Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 81.

31 Ben Jacobs, Sabrina Siddiqui, and Scott Bixby, "'You Can Do Anything': Trump Brags on Tape about Using Fame to Get Women," *The Guardian,* October 8, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/07/donald-trump-leaked-recording-women.

32 Donald Trump, quoted in Kristen East, "Trump: I Could 'Shoot Somebody' and I Wouldn't Lose Voters," *Politico,* January 23, 2016, https://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/donald-trump-shooting-vote-218145.

33 Richard Godden, "Fictions of Fictitious Capital: 'American Psycho' and the Poetics of Deregulation," *Textual Practice* 25, no. 5 (2011): 853–66.

Fig. 1.5. Christian Bale as Patrick Bateman in Mary Harron's adaptation of *American Psycho.* Screenshot.

ing in the late afternoon sunlight." A moment later he has to "fight the impulse" to "blow […] away" two Black teenagers he observes standing in front of the building.[34]

Ellis has downplayed the repeated references to Trump in *American Psycho.*[35] But the novel offers a prescient vision of the position occupied by the future president within the structure of late capitalist American fantasy.[36] Set to the soundtrack of upbeat 1980s radio hits like Belinda Carlisle's "I Feel Free" — and, more famously, Huey Lewis and the News's "Hip to be Square" (fig. 1.5) — Batemen's life unfolds within a New York in which seemingly everything is possible. And yet Bateman, who pursues any and all forms of deviance with impunity, is a figure defined as much by his crushing sense of insecurity as by his smug

34 Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage Books), 385.

35 Kory Grow, "'American Psycho' at 25: Bret Easton Ellis on Patrick Bateman's Legacy," *Rolling Stone,* March 31, 2016, https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-news/american-psycho-at-25-bret-easton-ellis-on-patrick-batemans-legacy-175227/.

36 It is noteworthy that Ellis received perhaps the worst critical drubbing of his career for his commentary on American culture in the era of the Trump presidency. His provocatively titled work of nonfiction, *White,* has been derided as a lazy, reactionary screed that has more to say about the privilege and narcissism of its author than about our contemporary moment. See Andrea Long Chu, "'Psycho' Analysis," *Bookforum* (April/May 2019), https://www.bookforum.com/print/2601/bret-easton-ellis-rages-against-the-decline-of-american-culture-20825.

entitlement. The detailed inventories of designer attire and the menu items of upscale restaurants that occur with suffocating regularity in the book are not merely the self-satisfied descriptions of someone with the means to partake of luxury culture's finer things. They reflect a pervasive anxiety about what it means to be somebody, to make a name for oneself, in the purely transactional world Bateman inhabits.

The central male characters in Ellis's novel, for all their elitism, mostly appear as interchangeable — slightly better or less well-dressed — iterations of one another. They are expensive non-entities, nobodies, who are perpetually confusing the names of their colleagues, and being mistaken for one another by those same colleagues. If there is one exception it is Paul Owen, manager of the coveted Fisher account, whose ability, in Mary Harron's film adaptation of the novel, to score a Friday night reservation at the fictional restaurant Dorsia is a marker of *true* freedom.[37] But even toward Owen the attitude is less one of reverence than astonishment and contempt. Within this world of flimsy self-same semblances, of interchangeable Madisons and Turnballs and Ebersols and Halberstams, *Trump* signifies the ultimate. He is the genuine article, the unimpeachable authority on all things luxury, the man elevated to ubiquitous brand, the totally sovereign figure. Bateman will end up hacking Paul Owen's face in half with an ax for having a slightly better tan and professional profile than he does. But he won't dare to contradict Trump's glowing assessment, in a magazine interview, of the pizza at "Pastels" — even though Bateman admits he personally finds the crust a bit too "brittle."[38]

But then, as Lauren Berlant notes in their essay "Big Man," it's not so much Trump's "taste" that his followers share with the man, as his "intensity of appetite and his commitment to a shameless life." In our era this shamelessness is bound up with white America's desire, in the wake of the Obama years, to feel comfortable in its skin again, to indulge its casually suprema-

37 The name of the Owen character in Harron's film is Paul Allen.
38 Ellis, *American Psycho,* 46.

cist inclinations. For Trump's part, it involves the embrace of his own orange-headed cartoonishness, which is perhaps the true and final testament to the man's lust for grandiosity. As Berlant reminds us, "cartoon characters never die."[39] In the late eighties, fragile whites may have been less threatened by "politically correct" discourse, but Trump's public shows of racism and weaponization of upper-middle-class fear — expressed most blatantly in his response to the Central Park Five case[40] — were no less a part of his identity and appeal. At the same time, the *"glitter"* and *"glare"* that Edgar Allan Poe long ago associated with the American "aristocracy of dollars," and that now seems almost as cartoonish as the man's hair, were à la mode.[41] Still, the core of what the "Big Man" was selling, was the same, namely, "Big Man-style sovereign sovereignty." Except that here we should understand "sovereignty" not in the properly political sense intended by Berlant but in a discursive, mediatic, and fantasmatic dimension that is, itself, not without political consequences.[42]

To put it another way, among the band of feuding finance bros that inhabit Ellis's book, Trump is the Big Poppa. Like the father of the primal horde in Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo,* who hoards all the women to himself, he represents the exception to the rule of limited enjoyment. He is what Jacques Lacan calls the *au moins un* or "homoinzun" — that figure outside the law who fantasmatically assures those subjected to it that there is such an outside, that *au moins un* (at least one) has access to to-

39 Lauren Berlant, "Big Man," *Social Text,* January 19, 2017, https://socialtextjournal.org/big-man/.

40 See, among others, Jelani Cobb, "The Central Park Five, Criminal Justice, and Donald Trump," *The New Yorker,* April 19, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-central-park-five-criminal-justice-and-donald-trump.

41 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Furniture," in *The Annotated Poe,* ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 158, 157, 155.

42 Berlant is rightly critical of the facile manner in which political and personal (or practical) sovereignty are often collapsed in contemporary discourse. They emphasize the merely partial applicability that the concept holds outside the domain of absolute power. See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 95–100.

tal satisfaction or jouissance. Although he never appears in person in Ellis's book, at the level of signification his name stands for something more tangible than the mostly interchangeable cast of male characters. To quote Kenneth Reinhard's treatment of Lacan's concept, Trump is the "signifier that is not subject to [the signifier's] laws," he is "an 'exception,' the singular signifier that remains rigid, intransigent, and around which all other signifiers revolve."[43] At the level of material belongings, what Trump signifies, to borrow from *Trump: The Art of the Deal,* is "the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular" that advanced capitalism has to offer.[44] And yet, the very existence of Trump's 1987 bestselling guide to success reminds us that for all his hoarding he is a figure who not only embodies the fantasy of total attainment but also seems, however disingenuously, to want to enable others to share in the spoils. This logic can be mapped onto Trump's political persona.

Writing in the late aughts, Fisher observed that "one of the successes of the current global elite has been their avoidance of identification with the figure of the hoarding Father, even though the 'reality' they impose on the young is *substantially harsher* than the conditions they protested against in the 60s."[45] Such a statement can hardly be applied to the numerous "Big Man-style sovereign" leaders that have emerged since. It is far more the case that the inability of a less traditionally paternal order of "third-way" technocrats to prove their beneficence has conditioned the atavistic emergence of a new breed of strongmen who, if nothing else, are living testaments to the stunning potential for wealth and power accumulation under the prevailing political economic system. Still, it would be foolish to assert

43 Kenneth Reinhard, "Toward a Political Theology of the Neighbor," in Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 53.

44 Donald J. Trump and Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Random House), 40.

45 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 14.

that "The Great God Trump," as Mike Davis has called him, is not in more ways than one a God who giveth.[46]

This is as true for the high-earners who stand to benefit the most from the president's trillion-and-a-half-dollar tax giveaway as it is for poorer Americans. Among Trump's unwavering base of supporters, it would appear that many experience the outlandish grandiosity of his personhood and presidency as itself a kind of generosity. His excesses can be thought of in terms of what Georges Bataille called "sumptuary processes," forms of spectacular expenditure along the lines of the potlatch.[47] Foremost among these must certainly be the proudly wasteful monument to racism that the president endeavored to build along the 1,954-mile United States border with Mexico. Trump, it seems, has never ceased to be a real-estate guy. The vision he offered to his electorate was that of an entire country transformed into a gated community, a mass-marketed version of *exclusive dwelling*—the very product upon which he built his fame and fortune. This brings us back to Bateman standing in front of Trump Tower with a murderous look in his eyes.

As the most notorious developer during a period in which the largest city in the United States was handed over to financiers and transformed into the gleaming capital of capital that it is today, Trump is a paradigmatic figure. Trump Tower is his signature achievement of the 1980s. By the time Bateman arrives in front of it, in the final pages of Ellis's novel, he has left a trail of wreckage across Manhattan. Thomas Heise has argued that Bateman is "a psychotic subject who embodies neoliberal theory and performs it through his repeated acts of disembowelment."[48]

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46 Mike Davis, "The Great God Trump and the White Working Class," *Jacobin,* February 7, 2017, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/the-great-god-trump-and-the-white-working-class/.

47 Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939,* ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 126.

48 Thomas Heise, 2011. "'American Psycho': Neoliberal Fantasies and the Death of Downtown," *Arizona Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 135.

Standing before a shining emblem of the city's sterile future, sneering at Black people and the unhoused, he might just as fittingly be described as "the Angel of Death [… T]hat gluttonous ravager of humans — capital." The quote, from a 1911 editorial by Abraham Cahan, is one that Samuel Stein places at the start of *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State,* a book that analyzes how capital ravages the urban landscape, "rushing in and out of spaces with abandon in search of profit and growth."[49] Even more than the collapse of boundaries between identity and job title it is, finally, the total identification of oneself with capital, in its most ruthless, alienating, and exploitative dimension, that constitutes a "truly 'free' psychopathology." Trump's cunning move has been not just to embody the fantasy that such a total identification is possible, by, among other things, making himself over as a brand, but to sell this fantasy as something you can own and occupy.

While Bateman does not live in Trump Tower, he does live among the stars (in the novel, Tom Cruise owns the penthouse in his building), and he has clearly bought into the fantasy held out by Trumpspace. No less essential than clothes and food to the inventory of luxury things that he unceasingly details are the attributes of his apartment: its flooring, carpet, furniture, art, and high-end consumer electronics. In the most extensive description we're offered of the space, a five-page-long paragraph that begins the book's second chapter, Bateman transitions seamlessly between his description of luxury objects and his description of himself as he goes about his morning routine. He is keenly aware, of course, that not everything he possesses is "the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular." While his "Duntech Sovereign 2001 speakers in Brazilian rosewood" may well be the best that money can buy, his "Wurlitzer 1015 jukebox" is "not as good as the hard-to-find Wurlitzer 850." Likewise, he still can't get a reservation at Dorsia. But he has "vowed" to get one before his 30th birthday, just like he has vowed to get himself "invited

49 Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (London: Verso, 2019), 1, 2.

to the Trump Christmas party aboard their yacht." In the meantime, his apartment suffices to reinforce a sense of his place in the world. It is, after all, an elegant and sophisticated space, tailored to the needs of the young professional accustomed to carrying out "murders and executions" on Wall Street by day, and who knows what else after work. And should someone at the office mistake him for Halberstam or McDonald — no matter. Patrick Bateman, after all, is only "an idea," "some kind of abstraction," "something illusory," and "fabricated, an aberration." At the end of the evening, he'll "say good night to a doorman [he doesn't] recognize (he could be anybody) and then dissolve into [his] living room high above the city." [50] It seems a fantasy. And you are home.

50 Ellis, *American Psycho,* 25, 24, 225, 177, 206, 376–77, 24.

II

Citizen Trump

That the Trumpian adage, "when you're a star, you can do anything," has been internalized by wealthy and powerful men from across the political spectrum has been affirmed many times over in the age of #MeToo. Although Jeffrey Epstein and his cohort are exemplary in this regard, there are many other case studies no less suitable to the present investigation into the "super-luxury" imaginary. Consider Dominic Strauss-Kahn, the disgraced former French Minister of Economy and another member of the international jet set's elite league of accused rapists. In 2011, Strauss-Kahn propositioned Nafissatou Diallo, the housekeeper sent to clean his three-thousand-dollar-a-night presidential suite at the Time Square Sofitel, with a question that perfectly encapsulates the paradigm: "Do you know who I am?"

The remark is preserved in Abel Ferrera's *Welcome to New York* (2015), a film starring Gérard Depardieu that is its own extended inquiry into the psychopathologies of luxury dwelling.[1] *Welcome to New York* is instructive as a twenty-first-century counterpart to Ferrara's infamously violent and debauched 1992

1 Abel Ferrera, dir., *Welcome to New York* (MPI Home Movie, 2015). The words "Do You Know Who I Am?" appeared on the poster for the film's initial release.

cop drama, *Bad Lieutenant,* starring Harvey Keitel.[2] In the newer New York story, the dirty streets of what was once "Fear City" have been replaced by the plush dwellings of the full-service luxury island that is Manhattan today. The locus of perverse power abuse, meanwhile, has migrated up the socioeconomic ladder. In the place of a hardboiled, drug-addicted member of the local authorities who were tasked with clearing away the city's riff-raff by whatever unscrupulous means necessary in the 1980s and '90s, we find a bespoke-suit-wearing, sex-party-organizing member of the global elite, responsible — as "caviar socialist" Strauss-Kahn indeed was, during his tenure as chief of the International Monetary Fund — for aiding and abetting neoliberal economic development around the globe.

Hollywood, of course, has long reveled as much in depicting the hubris and ultimate downfall of the wealthy and indifferent as it has in stirring the fantasies such figures engender. The flip side to the thrill of dwelling inside fantasies of lawless excess is the loss of any sense of self not affirmed by material acquisition. However convincing J.G. Ballard's and Bret Easton Ellis's visions of widespread societal complicity with this loss may be, existential crisis remains a contemporary affliction. Strauss-Kahn's self-assured "Do you know who I am?" would seem to be stubbornly haunted by its obverse: the self-directed question, "Who am I?"

This last question is one posed by Charlie Sheen's character in the film *Wall Street* (1987) as he stands on the balcony of his recently purchased, gadget-filled, meticulously decorated high-rise apartment, looking out at the iconic skyline before him as upon a newly arisen Babylon.[3] If Oliver Stone's film continues to serve as a searing commentary on the wave of excess that swept in during the Reagan years, this has only marginally to do with the legal repercussions of insider trading that Sheen's character is forced to face at the end of the film. Given the kid gloves with which financial fraudsters have been treated over the past three

2 Abel Ferrera, dir., *Bad Lieutenant* (Lions Gate, 2009).

3 Oliver Stone, dir., *Wall Street* (20th Century Fox, 2000).

decades, this conclusion now seems almost farcical. The more lasting commentary comes earlier on. It is encapsulated by the existential bewilderment expressed on the young protagonist's face upon realizing that his ascent to the glittering heights of financial dominance embodied by his aptly named mentor, Gordon Gekko, of "greed is good" fame, entails an experience of becoming-lizard that is somewhat less satisfying than expected.

Produced roughly three-decades apart, at the respective waxing and (prognosticated) waning of the neoliberal era, *Wall Street* and *Welcome to New York* illuminate historically specific manifestations of late capitalist, hetero-masculine pathology. But the psychologies investigated in these films have antecedents stretching back to the early days of American cinema. Perhaps the most enduring of all Hollywood representations of the emptiness accompanying the seemingly fulfilled desire to "live *inside* fantasy" can be found in no less seminal a production than Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. It may come as no surprise — though in some ways, we will see, it should — that Trump has referred to the celebrated classic as his favorite film.

Although Kane and Trump differ in ways that are essential to our unfolding account of the historical present, the parallels between them are as glaring as they are unflattering. Both are megalomaniacal, developmentally arrested children of wealth who feel that it is their birthright to break all the rules of the existing order and live only according to the mandates of their insatiable appetites for power and prestige. The startling lack of aesthetic order that Ian Volner observes in the Trump Organization's architectural portfolio reflects something of the "incontinent collectionism" that Lewis Lapham associates with "Citizen [William Randolph] Hearst," whose hoardings served as the inspiration for Kane's monstrous warehouse of antique art and miscellany.[4] (It is, of course, within this warehouse that Kane's sled, emblazoned with the word "Rosebud," lies buried.) Like Kane, Trump is a figure desperate for adoration but seem-

4 Lewis Lapham, "Castles in Air," *Lapham's Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 18.

ingly incapable of finding in the opposite sex anything more than another possession. Like Kane, Trump parlayed his wealth and fame into a life built around controlling the twenty-four-hour media cycle—a thing that Kane, the newspaper mogul, is credited with inventing in Welles's film. There is also the desire for affirmation in the political sphere at whatever cost. But perhaps most pertinent to our inquiry into Trumpspace, is that both Trump and Kane are figures whose sense of personhood appears intimately connected to their lavish dwellings.

In this chapter I discuss architectural metaphors in *Citizen Kane* and their relevance to our understanding of Trump. I also look at a short but illuminating video by Errol Morris wherein the documentary filmmaker interviews then-citizen Trump about his interest in Welles's film. If the parallels between Kane and Trump are instructive, I propose, it is because the latter has thus far been able to inhabit, with relative impunity, the chaotic and fragmented psychology that, in the case of the former, ultimately only leads to disaster. Trump, it would seem, is less the mirror image of Kane than a kind of through-the-looking-glass version of him. The consequences of this appear not only to elude Morris but to conjure a fearful perplexity endemic to liberal critics of Trump, and exemplified, more recently, by the perspective taken by Morris within his heavily criticized film on Steve Bannon.[5] Yet comprehending the centerless labyrinth of Trumpian desire in its full and unsettling dimension is essential if any effective counter-politics is to be waged.

"I" Formations

In attempting to make sense of Trumpspace, it is difficult to escape the crudely Freudian impression that grandiose architecture is something ingrained within the image-repertoire of compensatory masculine fantasy. One recalls Denis Hollier's discussion, in *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges*

5 See Errol Morris, dir., *American Dharma* (Fourth Floor Productions, 2018).

Bataille, of the radiant continuity embodied by the Notre-Dame de Reims Cathedral in Bataille's first published text. Appended to one section of Hollier's analysis is a quote from Freud's essay on fetishism: "The dread of castration erected itself a monument by creating this substitute."[6] Hollier's argument is that Bataille's subsequent writings were aimed at destroying this original substitute-fantasy of architectural completion, which arose as a compensation for the spiritual and cultural ruptures brought about by the First World War. But the quote from Freud might easily serve as a baseline theory for approaching Trump's own physical and imaginary constructions, so long as we keep in mind that such a theory leaves numerous complexities undisclosed.

In the realm of psychoanalytic thought, a more nuanced articulation of architecture and its relation to subjectivity can be found in Jacques Lacan's well-known essay on the "Mirror Stage." Although Lacan's theories have been widely applied and debated over the past half-century, the specifically spatial dimension of his thinking in this well-known text is often overlooked. As Lacan theorizes it, the mirror stage — this supposedly pivotal moment in psychological development when the young child first recognizes their image in the mirror — occurs *prior* to the more literal confrontation with castration referenced by Freud. For Lacan, the "spatial capture" of the infant with the "gestalt" image of their "exteriority," reflects a "primordial Discord," a sense of internal fragmentation that the adult subject's "ego defenses" are perpetually tasked with repairing. Before positioning "the inertia of the *I* formations" as the very foundation of neurosis in modern culture, Lacan observes how these formations are deeply entwined, in the unconscious, with architectural imagery. "The *I* formation," he writes, "is symbolized in dreams by a fortified camp, or even a stadium — distributing, between the arena within its walls and its outer border of gravel-pits and marshes, two opposed fields of battle where the subject bogs down in his

6 Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille,* trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 19.

Fig. 2.1. Xanadu as depicted in the opening sequence of *Citizen Kane.* Screenshot.

quest for the proud, remote inner castle whose form (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario) strikingly symbolizes the id."[7]

Lacan's spatialization of the psyche, here, suggests that the pathological pursuit of "castles in air," which Lapham diagnoses, is implicated within a more fundamental fantasy than the one cultivated by postwar America's culture of aspiration. The vivid imagery calls to mind the paradigm of princely dwelling represented in *Citizen Kane* by Xanadu, the elaborate estate (to which Trump's Mar-a-Lago has sometimes been likened) that appears in the opening shots of the film and that figures as a walled-off, castle-like monument to Kane's massively inflated sense of self (fig. 2.1).

In Lacanian terms, Xanadu can be understood as a stand-in for the imaginary identifications through which the subject attempts to master its own "primordial discord." *Citizen Kane* is

7 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the 'I' Function," in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English,* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2006), 77, 78.

largely structured around its protagonist's undoing: an "aggressive disintegration of the individual," not unlike that associated by Lacan with the moment in analysis in which the analysand's "'orthopedic' […] totality," their fantasmatic investment in an image of individuated personhood, comes to be shaken at the unconscious level.[8] The illusion of integrality embedded in the sheltering image of an obsessively secured home is shattered in dramatic fashion in Welles's film. The hall of mirrors that multiplies Kane into an infinite array of surface reflections in an iconic scene toward the film's conclusion suggests the vertigo that can suddenly envelop any modern day Narcissus who has identified too strongly with their own image. But the narrative of Kane's life also provides us with a preview of the larger historical trajectory of modernity's troubled relationship to dwelling, the same trajectory that Trump's enterprise appears to crown.

The hermetic existence Kane leads inside Xanadu at the close of his life is a grotesque parody of the domestic vision encapsulated by the snow globe that appears in the film's opening scene, with its tiny cottage set within a winter wonderland. When the globe falls from Kane's hand at the moment of his death and smashes to pieces (fig. 2.2), fragmenting into an array of reflections of the palatial dwelling around it, we witness a startling prognostication. From a moment historically proximate to New Deal policy implementation, we can already see the disintegration of FDR's vision of "democratically endowed residents of homes on the range or the ground," and its replacement by the vision of a future defined by the frantic pursuit of "castles in air."[9] Kane lives and breathes the devastation of this obsessive vision. Imprisoned within the walls of the castle he has built to fortify his sense of self, his final days are spent in shame and solitude.

It may be difficult to imagine a less ignominious fate for Citizen Trump. Already there is much to suggest that the man is as

8 Ibid., 78.

9 Lewis Lapham, "Castles in Air," *Lapham's Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 18, 19.

Fig. 2.2. Kane's snow globe: emblem of a lost vision of dwelling. Screenshot.

plagued as he is pleasured by his own meretricious visions of grandeur. Still, it should give us pause that Trump actually succeeded in his political ambitions, and on a much grander stage than the one sought by his fictional counterpart (in Welles's film, Kane's comparatively modest bid for Governor of New York is a scandal-ridden failure).

Errol Morris filmed his short segment on Trump's appreciation of *Citizen Kane* in 2002. More than a decade later, in an interview prior to the 2016 election, the documentary filmmaker divulged his observations about the man who would soon be president. Asked by his interviewer if Trump is cognizant of the import of Kane's deathbed murmurs, which might appear to signify a "search for […] significance in a life that's become meaningless," Morris responds that "Trump sees nothing." He goes on to quote a line from G.K. Chesterton, which Jorge Luis Borges makes use of in his 1941 review of *Citizen Kane*: "there's nothing more frightening than a labyrinth without a center."[10]

10 Anthony Audi, "Errol Morris on the Time He Filmed Donald Trump Missing the Point," *Lit Hub,* October 27, 2016, https://lithub.com/erroll-

Holding off, for a moment, on how these words might apply to Trump, let's consider them in the context of Borges's review.

The image of the centerless labyrinth describes both Kane and the puzzle-like architecture of the film itself. But it also unavoidably evokes the role played in the film by the built environment. Xanadu, which Borges calls "a palace that is also a museum," is both centerless and labyrinthine.[11] As its own symbolization of the film and its protagonist, it conjures one of modernity's key spatial reference points: Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* (fig. 2.3), the eighteenth-century architectural etchings in which "anguish," to quote Manfredo Tafuri, "makes its first appearance in modern form." Like the *Carceri,* the space in which Kane dwells appears both vast and imprisoning (fig. 2.4); metaphorically, it is a space whose "destroyed […] center" and "'totality' of […] disorder," as Tafuri says of Piranesi's work, are markers of an existence built on the ashes of an older value system, at once "liberated and condemned" by its own logic. Piranesi and Welles are each responding to shifting historical tectonics, the complexities of which set the imagination reeling. Just as Piranesi's labyrinthine spaces ominously anticipate the "global, voluntary alienation" that awaits post-Enlightenment society,[12] the world Welles conjures, through an array of interlacing structural and spatial metaphors, offers a presentiment about the future of capitalism's mass production era and the information age to come. Although Kane undoubtedly figures as a forerunner of this era, he is also its victim. The architect of a centerless labyrinth, he despairs upon finding himself lost within his creation. How does this compare with Trump and his position vis-à-vis the spatiality and system of values indexed by his name?

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morris-on-the-time-he-filmed-donald-trump-missing-the-point/.

11 Jorge Luis Borges, "An Overwhelming Film ('Citizen Kane')," in *Selected Non-Fictions,* ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999), 259.

12 Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development,* trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 19, 18.

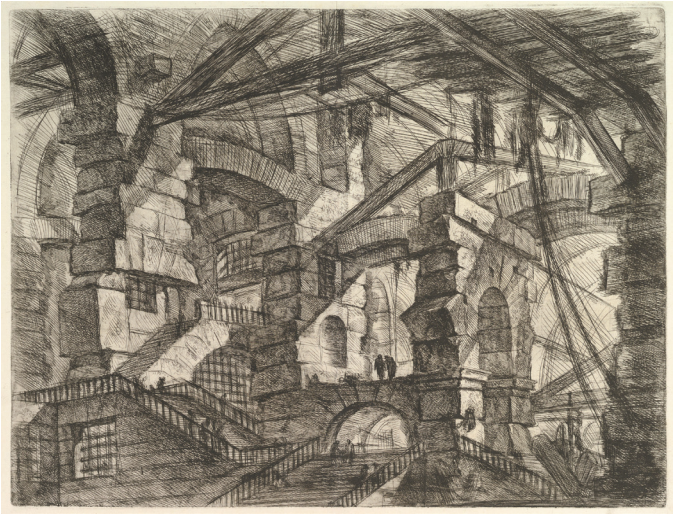

Fig. 2.3. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Le Carceri d'Invenzione,* plate XIV: *The Gothic Arch,* etching 16 × 20 in, c. 1745–1750, Wikimedia Commons.

As we know, one word for the more advanced capitalist age that Kane anticipates is *postmodernism*. To return to Fredric Jameson's account, this era is at least partly defined, relative to the modern period that preceded it, by the manner in which a sense of "schizophrenic disjunction," formerly associated with acute anxiety and loss, "becomes generalized as a cultural style," losing in the process its relationship to any "morbid content" and instead opening the way for the euphoric experience of "joyous intensities."[13] In the first chapter of this book, I ventured the provisional thesis that postmodernism has only, belatedly, enacted its full vengeance in the era of Trump's presidency. If this is the case, then perhaps it has something to do with the way in which Trump doesn't so much see "nothing," as Morris

13 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 29.

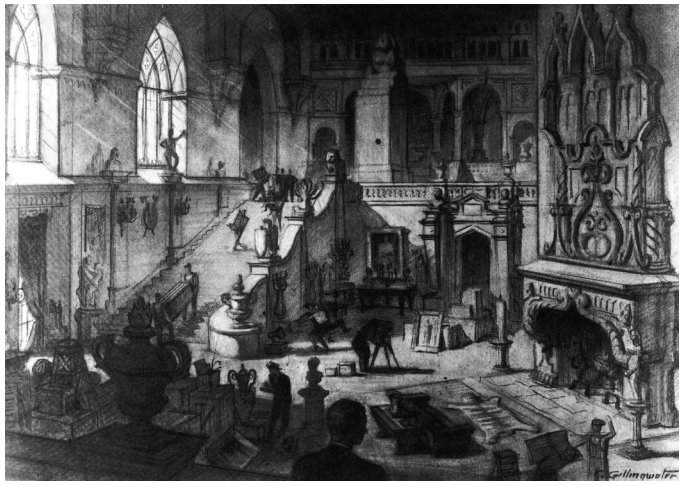

Fig. 2.4. Pre-production sketch of Xanadu's Great Room. Various features of the space (e.g., the gothic windows, broad staircase, and towering ceiling) recall those depicted in a widely circulated etching from Piranesi's *Carceri*. But there are also numerous scenes from the film itself that suggest a Piranesi-esque vision of infinite disorder, among them the final images of Kane's warehouse of hoardings. Album/Alamy Stock Photo.

suggests, as he doesn't see anything so anguish-inducing about dwelling within a labyrinth of meaninglessness appearances.

For a contemporary Trumpian counterpart to the hall of mirrors in which we glimpse Kane's disarrayed selfhood (fig. 2.5), we might return to the mirror-surfaced, logo-inscribed architecture of Trump Tower. Citing Jameson, Liam Gillick associates the latter with the "logic of the simulacrum," but rather than a "morbid" marker of anguished fragmentation, this is a space within which "the production of brands and identities takes place" in vertiginous, but seemingly joyous, superabundance.[14] Of course,

14 Liam Gillick, "A Building on Fifth Avenue," *e-flux Journal* 78 (December 2016), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/78/83040/a-building-on-fifth-avenue/.

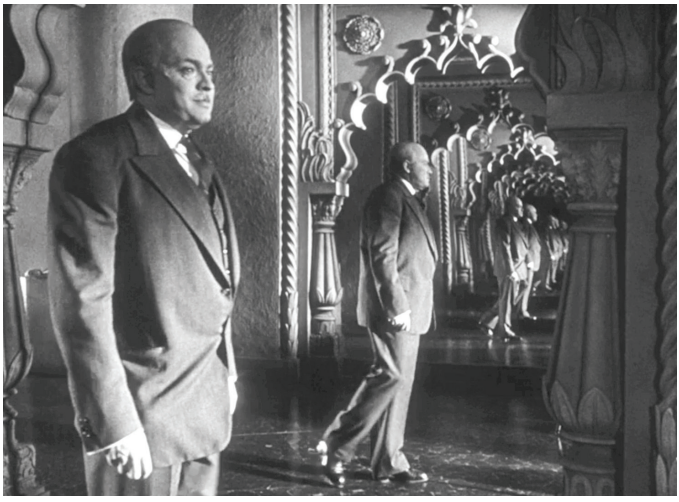

Fig. 2.5. Kane reflected in a hall of mirrors. Screenshot.

if the latter appears to us as such, it is partly because Trump has somehow managed, in his own life and in spite of the well-documented failures that might have debilitated him, to continue to surf the disjunctive surfaces of the chaos he has created. Kane himself, as Borges observes in his review, is "a simulacrum, a chaos of appearances."[15] But Welles's film leaves viewers with the comforting thought — still nurtured by many Americans up until roughly midnight on election day 2016 — that such a figure is destined to come apart at the seams before ever managing to imprison an entire nation within the centerless labyrinth they've built around them. Trump has shattered this illusion.

A True Simulacrum

The danger of someone like Kane or Trump succeeding in their political ambitions lies in the potential emergence of what Morris calls "a world where there is no truth or falsity. A world of

15 Borges, "An Overwhelming Film ('Citizen Kane')," 259.

randomness, a world of chaos. A world of appearances with no substance."[16] What is, finally, alarming about the future president's commentary on *Citizen Kane* is not that it demonstrates a lack of interpretive ability but rather that it affirms how well-adapted to such a world he really is.

Despite Morris's disparagement that Trump "sees nothing," when the filmmaker asks his interviewee about the significance of "Rosebud," he receives a perfectly competent response. In Trump's view, Kane's famous final word has something to do with "bringing a lonely, rather sad figure back into his childhood."[17] It is an answer that appears to reflect an understanding of *Citizen Kane* rooted in what Noël Carroll terms the "Rosebud interpretation." In this well-established reading, Kane's seemingly inscrutable personality is in fact explicable on the basis of some form of loss, experienced early on in life, and never entirely compensated for, despite all of his worldly acquisitions. Howsoever he might resemble an array of disconnected fragments, the labyrinth of his life actually does have a center — or a point of decentering — that renders the man legible to the careful reader. If this is Trump's understanding of the film, it is noteworthy not only for its basic insightfulness but also because it cuts against a second canonical interpretation. This second interpretation is what Carroll calls "the enigma interpretation," which proposes that the point of the film is to illustrate that "the nature of a person is ultimately a mystery."[18] The reading Borges offers is a classic example of this interpretation; in his estimation, "the fragments" of Kane's life "are not governed by any secret unity."[19] Carroll's assessment is that each of the two contradictory canonical interpretations are encouraged by structures within the film that persist in "dialogical" relation to one another, and that

16 Audi, "Errol Morris on the Time He Filmed Donald Trump Missing the Point."

17 NewsHunter29, "Donald Trump Movie Review - Orson Welles' - "Citizen Kane," *YouTube,* August 20, 2015, https://youtu.be/aeQOJZ-QzBk.

18 Noel Carroll, "Interpreting 'Citizen Kane,'" in *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 153, 154.

19 Borges, "An Overwhelming Film ('Citizen Kane')," 259.

this "dialogical interpretation" is, in fact, the most appropriate one.[20] This may well be the case. Yet one of the remarkable things about Trump's commentary is that it makes Kane appear, at least by comparison, far less the centerless labyrinth that others have judged him to be.

Asked to give a word of advice to Kane, Trump promptly answers: "get yourself a different woman."[21] Morris sees this remark as evidence that Trump is "missing the point" of the film. In his view, Trump's identification with Kane is so complete ("Kane is Trump," he says at one point) that he's blinded to the more generally problematic aspects of the man's behavior and can only point to mere particulars. "The problem that Charles Foster Kane is having," says Morris, "is not because of a bad marriage choice. The problem is he's an empty, hollow man, a simulacrum of a human being."[22] Except that for a truly empty, hollow simulacrum of a human being, there are no problems — or at least this seems to be the very wager of Trump's existence.

As Mark Singer observed long before the 2016 presidential election, Trump is someone who "aspired to and achieved the ultimate luxury, an existence unmolested by the rumblings of a soul."[23] Who can say what wintery reminiscences of Jamaica Estates, Queens — the former president's childhood neighborhood — will haunt the man on his deathbed. We can only note that thus far Singer's assessment appears to have held true. And thus, beginning from Morris's observations, it might be better to say the following: first, that Trump actually sees the general "problem" with Kane very clearly, since he is no less than its affirmative embodiment; and second, that if he points to the particulars in Kane's life, it is only because they are symptomatic of Kane's inability to become the total simulacrum he seems desperately intent on becoming. In this sense, we should un-

20 Carroll, "Interpreting 'Citizen Kane,'" 162.

21 "Donald Trump Movie Review - Orson Welles' - "Citizen Kane."

22 Audi, "Errol Morris on the Time He Filmed Donald Trump Missing the Point."

23 Mark Singer, "Best Wishes, Donald," *The New Yorker,* April 2011, https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/best-wishes-donald.

derstand Trump's advice to Kane as simply one particular application of the more general rule by which Trump would have Kane live. As President Trump's seemingly endless string of cabinet reappointments starkly affirmed, "Get yourself a different _____" is just the sort of advice he gives to himself whenever a hitch in his plans arise. Morris seems to recognize this. As he puts it, mimicking Trump: "if I have these kinds of marriage problems, I just move on." But what Morris doesn't see is that precisely because Kane is unable to fully embody this "just move on" principle, he is not quite Trump. The truth is more disturbing: Trump is the yardstick by which to measure the shortfalls of Kane's own hollowness. It is Trump who is the true "chaos of appearances," the real fake.[24]

What Trump tautologically affirms as the antidote to any would-be psychological hang-ups is the all-out embrace of substitutive desire, the joyous surrender to disjunctive surface-level phenomena, that has characterized his own personal, professional, and political life. It is the same ecstatic embrace of "a world of appearances with no substance" that is suggested by his concluding remarks, in Morris's video, on the significance of the word "Rosebud." In the end, Trump's real interest in the word, and perhaps in his favorite flick, can only be secondarily related to Kane's troubled past. After all, it is precisely because Kane is troubled by his past that he remains a mere imitation of himself, a simulacrum of a simulacrum. Instead, what Trump appreciates most about "Rosebud" is that, apart from any meaning it might be said to carry, indeed, as a purely nonsensical signifier, it has kept audiences captivated for decades. What really gets Trump going is that "for whatever reason," at the most purely operative level, "Rosebud works!"[25]

24 Audi, "Errol Morris on the Time He Filmed Donald Trump Missing the Point."

25 "Donald Trump Movie Review - Orson Welles' - "Citizen Kane."

Out of the Labyrinth

What the analysis above once again affirms is that Trump is something like the ideal postmodern subject. Whereas the world of mere appearances that defines Kane's life leaves him anguished and dissipated, longing, or so it would seem, for that *one thing* that will restore a sense of unity to the fragments, Trump is right at home in the labyrinth, amid the sound bites and simulacra that comprise his existence. In contrast to Kane, who, for all his striving, remains not just hung up on the past and thereby condemned to an earlier historical paradigm, Trump is a postmodern protean. Unburdened by childhood memories or personal attachments, he can reinvent himself on a dime, and is perfectly comfortable surfing the waves of the now, trading in the currency that Fredric Jameson, in a more recent essay reassessing his own cultural and historical categories, refers to as *singularities*. By this he means events, or effective non-events, defined by their unexpectedness and ephemerality, the sense in which they take place not only within a centerless spatiality but within "a pure present without a past or a future."[26]

At the political level, Trump's alarming faithfulness to the logic of singularities and simulacra has threatened to usher in what historian Timothy Snyder has referred to as an era of "postmodern authoritarianism." As a countermeasure to this threat, Snyder offers a series of proposals, many of which ("Defend institutions," "Remember professional ethics," "Contribute to good causes," "Be a Patriot") place what is itself an alarming faith in an established order whose failures are at least partially responsible for the resurgence of right-wing authoritarian politics in the first place.[27] Not surprisingly, the sorts of platitudes Snyder puts forward have been echoed by legions of so-called moderates on both sides of the political aisle in the time since

26 Fredric Jameson, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* 92 (March/April 2015): 113.

27 Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

Trump's election. Among Democrats, the call to stay the course of liberal-centrist politics has been coupled to an extensive campaign within the surrogate media to paint Trump's presidency as an aberration — the result of a perfect storm of contingencies that must be treated locally without fundamentally reconfiguring the course set by the Obama years. But the astonishing fact that roughly a third of the nearly 700 two-time Obama-supporting districts nationwide went for Trump in 2016 can hardly be accounted for on the basis of Russian meddling, James Comey's questionably timed reopening of the Clinton email investigation, or anything else that liberals have clung to in an effort to distract from past blunders and maintain their foothold within a decaying political system.[28]

Far from an isolated glitch in the otherwise smooth-running program of technocratic governance, the outcome of the 2016 election appeared to many commentators to have followed events in England and on the European Continent in announcing the arrival of what Chantal Mouffe has called a "populist moment" in global politics. By this term Mouffe indicates a moment of crisis in the neoliberal order in which populations aggrieved by the established systems of governance are reasserting themselves en masse and are open to being swayed by one or the other of two opposed movements: a "transversal," democratizing politics of economic redistribution on one side and a politics of ethno-nationalist resentment on the other — to wit, socialism or barbarism.[29]

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28 See Kevin Uhrmacher, "These Former Obama Strongholds Sealed the Election for Trump," *The Washington Post,* November 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/2016-election/obama-trump-counties/. A brief glance at the map included in the *Washington Post* article is enough to destabilize an array of assumptions about the reasons for Trump's success.

29 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (London: Verso, 2018). In Mouffe's account, a "transversal" politics is one aimed at "creating a popular majority independent of previous political affiliations" (83). For a stringent critique less of Mouffe's diagnosis of the political moment than of her prescriptions for how it should be met, see Thea Riofrancos, "Populism without the Peo-

In the context of the United States, the liberal establishment has presented its politics as a nostalgic alternative to the disruptions of the present, one that offers a return to decency, rule of law, and a less cozy relationship with the Kremlin. As a countermeasure to Trump's white nationalist dog-whistling it has sought to appeal to a more inclusive brand of nationalist sentiment.[30] But the political singularities currently being wielded toward reactionary ends will not be outmatched by the propriety, love of country, or self-gratifying outrage of those few fortunate enough to have benefited from the political economic status quo. Nor, in plain fact, has the extreme right been subdued by the hedging strategies of overpaid consultants for whom political life has never existed as anything other than a professional career. Over the past decade, liberal centrism's electoral ineffectuality, indexed by the roughly 1,000 seats lost at all levels of government during the Obama years, has been demonstrated no less resoundingly than its inability, on its own terms, to provide the conditions for a tolerably equitable society. Bidenism, as of this writing, has done little to hold back the swelling tides of extreme right politics. Given the stakes of the present impasse and the exasperating tactics the right is willing to deploy in the service of barbaric policies, the question for those opposed to authoritarianism can no longer be how to preserve, or return to, a "normal" state of affairs. Within a belatedly manifest postmodern political landscape that has produced all the bewilderment once associated by Jameson with the architecture of the Bonaventure, the question for any resistance worthy of its name is whether or not it can grow new organs and learn to expand its sensorium, and its political imagination, to previously unimaginable but today urgently necessary dimensions.

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ple: On Chantal Mouffe," *n+1,* November 23, 2018, https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/populism-without-the-people/.

30 For a dissection of inclusive nationalism and liberal think tank-style managerial politics, as typified by the writings of Yascha Mounk, see Daniel Denvir and Thea Riofrancos, "Zombie Liberalism," *n+1,* August 23, 2018, https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/zombie-liberalism/.

If contemporary culture has a role to play in this venture, that role is far from straightforward. The sublime experience of the world aesthetically transformed into fragments of pure surface phenomena already led Jameson to ponder the destruction of the "semiautonomy of the cultural sphere" three decades ago.[31] Under the prevailing order, determining the extent to which even the most forward thinking works of art can engender political potentialities or are condemned to merely supporting, or, at best, symptomatizing underlying structures has grown still more challenging. Yet one can hardly deny that left-liberal politics — from the radical to the benignly self-congratulatorily — suffuse the discourse around contemporary culture today as never before. Boris Groys has written of the importance of "art activism" in what he refers to as an age of "total aestheticization." In his view, this recent, and in some ways, unprecedented, variety of contemporary art achieves its power not only by figuring as a tool for direct political struggle but by prefiguring "the coming failure of the status quo in its totality."[32] In the next chapter I turn to a work of video art created and exhibited on the precipice of the 2016 election that not only subtly foreshadows the implosion of status-quo liberalism signaled by Trump's victory but also gestures toward the self-annihilative limits of hyper-professionalization glimpsed in fictional works like *High-Rise* and *American Psycho.* Once again, the "super-luxury" dwelling space will figure as a privileged arena within which to track the pathological limits of late capitalism's subjective idealizations.

31 Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 48.

32 Boris Groys, "On Art Activism," *e-flux Journal* 56 (June 2014), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/.

III

Sky Couture

Filmed in an apartment on the seventy-seventh floor of Trump World Tower, and initially exhibited at Postmasters Gallery, New York in October and November 2016 (overlapping with the US presidential election), Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's video *BROKER* examines the pathological underpinnings of "super-luxury" dwelling and its place within the broader culture of capitalist achievement. The twenty-six-minute-long looping video centers on the activities of a high-end real estate broker, played by Gillian Chadsey, who appears trapped in a never-ending tragicomedy (fig. 3.1). Each morning she meticulously prepares for a client walk-through that will invariably leave her in a state of disarray. The first part of her daily ritual involves carefully reciting the sumptuous details of the residence and its furnishings and appliances (fig. 3.2). At one moment, she enters a trance-like state while various marketing platitudes spill from her lips to the sounds of a vexingly placid score composed by musical artist Lori Scacco. "Influencing others isn't luck or magic, it's a science," her auto-tuned voice sings. "There are proven ways to help make you more successful as a marketer or politician." Throughout the video we are provided glimpses of the apartment from the point of view of cameras embedded throughout the space — components of an elaborate security system. One of them even captures the broker from inside the designer fridge,

Fig. 3.1. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 3.2. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

as she carefully adjusts bottles of "Pellegrino sparkling" and "Evian flat." Nothing in this environment exists separately from the value bestowed upon it by its brand or perceived luxury.

The broker in the McCoys' video, who appears intent on utterly internalizing the speech and gestures of her vocation, is a shining emblem of not only the upwardly mobile working woman in today's society, but also of late capitalist professional achievement more generally. Over the course of the video, however, she will also come to embody the physical and psychological tolls engendered by the ceaseless demands of "entrepreneurial subjectivity" — of *being* conceived of as being on the clock. Despite the broker's remarkable conformity to professional ritual, her performance eventually devolves into a series of failed gestures. Ultimately, her position within the video can be thought of as a kind of limit case for the subordination of the body to what Lauren Berlant calls the "pressured affectsphere" of contemporary hyperprofessionalization.[1]

The much-anticipated client walk-through the broker finally performs for the camera is interrupted when she happens upon a number of out-of-place artworks, which crop up as reminders of the messy world beyond the apartment's secure boundaries. Suddenly, the spell cast by the discourse of achievement is broken. The broker enters a state of bewilderment and ataxia. For a fleeting instant, she seems intent on rebelling against the strictures of her professional life. She takes vengeance on her neatly pressed blazer, tearing its sleeves off through a series of erratic gestures. But her professional existence, it is now confirmed to us, is her only existence. The language of luxury marketing is the sole language she speaks. As the day comes to a close, the broker sits on the edge of the bed, spent, somnambulistic but still droning on in an affectless voice about the empowering attributes of the architecture around her.

1 "More and more," writes Berlant, "even when asleep, one is never closed for business. This is the pressured affectsphere of entrepreneurial subjectivity, the form of life forced to be on the make." Lauren Berlant, "On Persistence," *Social Text* 121, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 33–37.

Soon, the video loops back to the beginning of its cycle. We see the broker's hands arranging a series of brochures with the Trump Organization logo printed on them. The broker's voice, which has resumed a more professional tone, can be heard over a series of establishing shots of the apartment: "Let us look at the facts of luxury, the incredible resources brought here, deployed here, at this time." It is an invitation that strikes us as coming from not only the salesperson but the artists who created the video, as though they were beckoning us to contemplate the greater ramifications of the excesses on view.

In what follows, I'd like to take up this invitation to "look at the facts of luxury" by examining two interrelated aspects of the McCoys' work: (1) the *architecture* of the apartment in which it is set, along with the significance of high-end architecture more generally within the video, and (2) the *objecthood* of the luxury consumer products and artworks that appear within the video and that, to some extent, compose its supporting cast of characters. In looking carefully at the aforementioned "incredible resources" arrayed before us, and the role they play in structuring the protagonist's existence, my aim is to further develop an account of the type of subjectivity interpellated by the highest reaches of luxury culture. As we have already seen, the subjectivity in question is one that is evacuated of internal ambivalence, of any impulse that might disrupt the seamless logic of marketing and consumption. Yet what *BROKER* suggests is that it is also susceptible to destabilization from the slightest infiltration of alterity. This has consequences for how we might conceive of the allegorical value of *BROKER* vis-à-vis the tense historical and political context in which it was initially exhibited. The fact that the video is set within a Trump-branded building and was on display at the time of the 2016 election tempts us to read the work through a political lens. Yet, far from being a straightforward critique of any single individual or movement, the McCoys' work provokes circumspect consideration of the political entities it subtly invokes, even as it paints a ghastly picture of the culture of acquisitiveness that has more generally defined our era.

Architecture

For more than two decades, Brooklyn-based couple and artistic collaborators Jennifer and Kevin McCoy have been concerned with the relationship of the body to the spaces it interacts with and inhabits. The duo's installations, sculptural miniatures, and videos have explored the psychogeography of suburbia, airports, art spaces, shopping malls, luxury resorts, and Silicon Valley tech campuses. In recent years, their work has focused on the alienation and environmental degradation engendered by capitalist development. *BROKER* follows the McCoys' *Eichler Series* (2014) — a sculptural mash-up between the architecture of various corporate headquarters buildings and Joseph Eichler-designed middle-class houses — in exploring the contemporary imbrications of commerce and dwelling. Among the cultural developments scrutinized in the video is the phenomenon of the contemporary starchitect.

BROKER was shot at Trump World Tower, an unremarkable skyscraper located at 845 United Nations Plaza in New York and designed by Costas Kondylis, one of Trump's "go-to" architects.[2] The broker in the McCoys' video, however, attributes the building to "Pritzker Prize–winning architect Christian de Portzamparc." This misattribution can be read as a subtle slight directed not only at de Portzamparc, the more reputable architect, but also at the validating institutions of an architectural industrial complex that sees its star figures as transcending the vacuous symbols of status to which they are often reduced in the context of real estate transactions. De Portzamparc is an interesting fig-

2 As David Dunlap observed in his *New York Times* obituary for the architect Kondylis, who passed away in August 2018, he "did not so much have an aesthetic style as a business formula. He provided developers with efficient, marketable, dependable, comfortable buildings. The designs won few prizes or critical plaudits, but they also caused few headaches for those who financed and built them." David W. Dunlap, "Costas Kondylis, Go-To Architect in a High-Rise Town, Dies at 78," *The New York Times,* August 24, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/24/obituaries/costas-kondylis-dead.html.

Fig. 3.3. Christian de Portzamparc's One57 as seen from Central Park. Photograph by Qbkingfilm, April 26, 2014. Wikimedia Commons.

ure in this regard as someone who, early in his career, designed public housing projects and cultural centers before graduating to the corporate headquarters of Louis Vuitton and condos for those who can afford such luxury brands. Almost nowhere is the decadence of twenty-first-century architecture more visible than in de Portzamparc's One57, a residential skyscraper that appears more than once within the dramatic skyline visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the apartment in the McCoys' *BROKER*. Situated on "Billionaires' Row" on 57th Street, One57 was briefly the most glamorous building in a neighborhood that, prior to the completion of Hudson Yards, was New York's reigning poster child for confused civic priorities (fig. 3.3).[3] It would be reductive to posit, on the basis of one example, a stark dichotomy between a supposedly utopian architectural modernism, which sought to change the world around it, and a postmodern architecture subservient only to the machinations of capital. Yet one can hardly ignore how the arc of de Portzamparc's career reflects architecture's shifting ambitions in the postwar period. To borrow a remark made by Reinhold Martin, whose scholarship has emphasized the haunting of postmodern architecture by the specter of modernism, the work that de Portzamparc is best known for today is of a variety that may well have "finally succeeded in exorcising Utopia's ghost."[4]

On the Pritzker website, de Portzamparc describes his creative evolution in terms that are consistent with the antiregulatory rhetoric of personal liberty and choice used to justify the

3 Developed by diamond-merchant-turned-developer Gary Barnett, whose company Extell has been accused of a range of unscrupulous practices, the largely uninhabited skyscraper is a giant investment-opportunity-cum-tax-shelter. For a discussion of how buildings like One57 operate as tax shelters for the wealthy, see Kriston Capps, "Why Billionaires Don't Pay Property Taxes in New York," *CityLab,* May 11, 2015, https://www.citylab.com/equity/2015/05/why-billionaires-dont-pay-property-taxes-in-new-york/389886/.

4 Reinhold Martin and Jonathan Crisman, "Conjuring Utopia's Ghost," *Thresholds* 40 (2012): 14. See also Reinhold Martin, *Utopia's Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

displacement of social welfare planning by market-driven capitalism.[5] "Architecture seemed to me to be too bureaucratic, and not free enough compared to art," he remarks, "and the modernistic ideals which I worshiped before, seemed to me unable to reach the richness of real life."[6] In *BROKER,* the liberal individualism underlying such sentiments is reflected in the on-screen descriptions of the dwelling space: "Here we can let go of the old idea of politics," the broker tells us; "here we can move beyond the geometry of institutional limits" and toward an "infinity of possibility. […] The use of space empowers relentlessness. Each element propels you toward your greatest moment." As at least one reviewer of the McCoys' fall 2016 Postmasters exhibition observed, this language shares something with the anti-institutional rhetoric used by Trump on the campaign trail.[7] It's also reminiscent of the "truthful hyperbole" that the developer turned politician has used to "play to people's fantasies" for more than three decades.[8]

When it comes to architecture, Trump's strategy of playing to fantasy has been most characteristically expressed in a series of buildings defined by what Ian Volner terms their "gold everywhereness" — an excessive incorporation of showy, polished reflective materials.[9] These aesthetic details have captured the imaginations not only of would-be condo owners but of Trump's critics. Associating the "streaky shiny marble and drippings of fine piss-yellow gold" that adorn numerous

5 David Harvey notes that "it has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of wonderful-sounding words like freedom, liberty, choice, and rights, to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power." David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119.

6 Christian de Portzamparc biography, *Pritzker Architecture Prize,* https://www.pritzkerprize.com/biography-christian-de-portzamparc.

7 Mira Dayal, "Jennifer and Kevin McCoy: 'BROKER,'" *SFAQ/NYAQ/AQ,* November 21, 2016, http://sfaq.us/2016/11/jennifer-kevin-mccoy-broker/.

8 Donald J. Trump and Tony Schwartz, *Trump: The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987), 58.

9 "Ian Volner on the Architecture of Trump," *Artforum,* n.d., https://www.artforum.com/video/ian-volner-on-the-architecture-of-trump-64410.

Fig. 3.4. Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas. Photograph by Steve Jurvetson, January 6, 2017. Wikimedia Commons.

Trump-branded buildings with their owner's supposed sexual proclivities, Sam Kriss offers a memorable vision of the president as a urine-fetishizing neurotic (fig. 3.4).[10] Liam Gillick rejects facile invocations of "dictator chic" in his own reflections on Trump Tower, but, as we have already seen, the line from J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* with which he concludes his text confirms an assumed relationship between obscene fantasy and the surplus of logo-emblazoned glass and brass Gillick takes pains to describe: "Secure within the shell of the high-rise, like passengers on board an automatically-piloted airliner, they were free to behave in any way they wished, explore the darkest corners they could find."[11] Perhaps it is notable, then, that in the stark spatiality of the apartment in the McCoys' video, and even in the broker's hyperbolic descriptions of the residence as offering an "infinity of possibility," one encounters something altogether more sterile. It is not just that the vulgar trappings of Trumpian glitz are nowhere in sight. It is that the affect we tend to associ-

10 Sam Kriss, "Pissologies," *The Baffler,* January 17, 2017, https://thebaffler.com/latest/pissologies-kris.

11 Liam Gillick, "A Building on Fifth Avenue," *e-flux Journal* 78 (December 2016), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/78/83040/a-building-on-fifth-avenue/.

ate with Trump, the same that has led to characterizations of the president as "pure unrestrained and unfiltered id," feel absent or muffled.[12] The flat tone of the broker's voice in this segment of the video contributes to the sense that the vision of excess on display here is one that has been drained of its fecundity, leaving only a coldly abstract or mathematical idea of limitlessness.

We will recall that the *Playboy* penthouse, in Paul B. Preciado's account, was "designed to endlessly convert work into leisure," offering its (white, male, heterosexual) owner a transgressive reprieve from "his suburban house and his lawn."[13] In *BROKER,* by contrast, leisure has been altogether subsumed by work. The apartment, as it is presented to us, is geared not toward allowing its inhabitants to transition out of their business attire whenever the moment strikes but rather toward perpetually "empowering" and "propel[ing]" them to the sorts of abstract heights that are only invoked with a straight face in corporate managerial contexts. The only figure who can be said to inhabit the apartment, and who thus serves as a kind of surrogate for its would-be owner, is the broker herself — and her life is the very antithesis of leisurely. In the appointments schedule on her tablet, which we glimpse at one point, the item "relax" is categorized as "work," while her aforementioned "recitation" of marketing jargon is listed as a "personal activity." In both instances there is the suggestion of a collapse between personal and professional life that is central to the video's account of contemporary subjectivity.

In the McCoys' video, the broker's grandiloquent architectural-theoretical excursus culminates with the assertion that the apartment is indeed "not a respite," in the sense traditionally associated with home, but is rather "the center of the vortex." Which vortex, precisely? And what might this have to do with the idea of limitlessness described above? One answer lies in the

12 David Martin, "Trump Is Unrestrained and Unfiltered Id," *Huff Post,* August 17, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/david-martin/donald-trump-is-unrestrained-and-unfiltered-id_a_23078288/.

13 Paul B. Preciado, *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy's Architecture and Biopolitics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2014), 86.

broker's references to the "ever-shifting skyline," which affirm the old real estate adage "location, location, location" in manifold ways. Critics like Herbert Muschamp and Fabrizio Gallanti have noted that Trump's buildings are often less perceivable as architecture than as signifiers of wealth and achievement.[14] In the present context, the relatively unremarkable architectural styling can be understood in terms of architecture's subversion to the function of conferring a sense of lofty stature and voyeuristic supremacy.[15] Perhaps even more than the apartment's architectural details, it is its view of the city around it and its proximity to the heavens that the broker emphasizes. At one point in the video, she describes the apartment as a "skybox"; at another point it is "sky couture." Would-be occupants are given an unobstructed view of a city that, however teeming with life down below, has, from this vantage, been tamed, reduced to an image, a snow-globe metropolis, by virtue of the "totalizing" function Michel de Certeau associates with the act of beholding from on high.[16]

Perhaps more vitally, what the apartment would seem to offer its inhabitants on the basis of this voyeurism is a sense of emplacement within the very heart of the process of capitalist

14 Herbert Muschamp, "Trump, His Gilded Taste, and Me," *The New York Times,* December 19, 1999, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/arts/121999trump-architecture.html, and Fabrizio Gallanti, "Blinded by Bling: On the Absence of Architecture in Trump World," *Interwoven: The Fabric of Things,* http://kvadratinterwoven.com/blinded-by-bling.

15 Voyeuristic supremacy, it would seem, is something near and dear to Trump. Michael Kruse quotes two separate sources describing Trump as someone who was perpetually "looking down" from his perch in Trump Tower. See Michael Kruse, "How Gotham Gave Us Trump," *Politico Magazine,* July/August 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/30/donald-trump-new-york-city-crime-1970s-1980s-215316.

16 Of the experience of viewing Manhattan from the top of the World Trade Center, de Certeau writes how one is transformed into "an Icarus flying above […]. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance." See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Vol. 1: History of a Research Project,* trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92.

Fig. 3.5. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 3.6. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

accumulation itself. After all, in the age of "the real estate state," the gargantuan forest of luxury buildings that continue to proliferate in Midtown Manhattan at a dizzying rate — and in seemingly direct correlation to the city's unhoused population — is nothing if not a concrete embodiment of the prevailing global economic system.[17] If leisure is for losers, and sexual seduction a drain on productivity, at least there is pleasure to be had in watching the most powerful economy in history whirl around you. This, then, is one version of what it means to live at the "center of the vortex," and to feel an "infinity of possibility." Freedom, as it is posited here, is less a matter of exploring the "darkest corners" of one's imagination as per the characters in Ballard's novel. Indeed, imagination appears to have taken a back seat to the Icarian experience, returning to de Certeau, of "looking down like a god," not merely as a tourist fascinated with the sudden legibility of the urban fabric below but as a stakeholder in the great pageant of capital accretion itself (figs. 3.5 and 3.6). In the culture of acquisitiveness explored in the McCoys' video, no possession enchants more than this.

But in actuality, who else, other than the broker, are the breathless beholders and observed observers of this spectacle of accumulation that so completely perverts the relationship between architecture and inhabitation, between building and dwelling? One answer is: nobody. Many of the apartments in Trump's buildings are the property of investors who never intend to dwell there. As Volner has written: "Emptiness is the leitmotif of the Trump Organization's portfolio, and it is what makes all its buildings so horrible, so chilling, in a way that has little to do with their architecture."[18] Of course, a similar sense

17 Samuel Stein notes that "global real estate is now worth $217 trillion, thirty-six times the value of all the gold ever mined. It makes up 60 percent of the world's assets, and the vast majority of that wealth — roughly 75 percent — is in housing." Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (London: Verso, 2019), 2.

18 Ian Volner, "Fool's Gold: The Architecture of Trump," *Artforum,* November 2019, https://www.artforum.com/print/201609/fool-s-gold-the-architecture-of-trump-64212.

of emptiness, in all senses of the term, could be ascribed to the buildings of any number of luxury development companies operating in cities around the globe. Relevant, here, is Rachel Weber's observation that Trump's mode of operating as a developer "shows professional practices common to the development industry" as a whole, practices, that are "not situated outside of the system of financial valuation and production [but] are, in fact, constitutive of it."[19]

In the late 1990s Fredric Jameson had already suggested that one of the consequences of real estate development in the age of financialization is the encroaching sense that our cities have become so antithetical to human dwelling that even the ghostly traces of what such an activity might have at one time meant are being expunged. "Urban renewal," he writes, "seems everywhere in the process of sanitizing the ancient corridors and bedrooms to which alone a ghost might cling."[20] The description is an apt one in light of the apartment in *BROKER,* even though, as we will see, there is a ghostliness that refuses to be exorcized in the McCoys' video. For now, let us simply note that the would-be exorcists in question are enmeshed in a system and ideology that transcends political affiliation, and certainly extends far beyond the network of nefarious dictators, media moguls, right wing lobbyists, and third-rate hucksters with whom Trump tends to be associated. Here, another answer to the question above — the question of who the intended inhabitant of the apartment in *BROKER* is — can be ventured.

A long list of unsavory swindlers, from "Russian mobsters" to Paul Manafort, have owned real estate in Trump's buildings, but the only potential clients we catch sight of, displayed momentarily on another tablet, are conspicuously of another variety (fig. 3.7). Hailing from the racially homogenous, Democrat-leaning town of Larchmont in Westchester County, New

19 Rachel Weber, "Edifice Rex: Egos, Assets, and the Financialization of Property Markets," *The Avery Review* 21, January 2017, http://averyreview.com/issues/21/edifice-rex.

20 Fredric Jameson, "The Brick and the Balloon: Architecture, Idealism and Land Speculation," *New Left Review* 1, no. 228 (March/April 1998): 45.

Fig. 3.7. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

York, the "McClintocks" (as the name perhaps suggests) come off as just the sort of cookie-cutter, high-achieving white suburban "moderates" that largely composed the target electorate of Trump's *opponent* in the 2016 presidential election. The brief glimpse we are given of their client profile does two things. First, it reminds us of the incessant suburbanization of New York and other large cities, that is, the implantation into urban contexts of what Sarah Schulman calls "the values of the gated community."[21] Second, it helps us to understand the video as gesturing not only toward Trump and his ilk in its representation of the paradigm of dwelling and achievement we have been discussing but also — insofar as the "McClintocks" can be taken as representative of an entire demographic — toward the liberal, rule-of-law-defending beneficiaries of American professional-class meritocracy. Samuel Stein observes that the New York City government has long operated under a "bipartisan consensus" with respect to the engineered inequality and forced displacement (at a rate of one-hundred-thousand people per year) of its

21 Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 30.

citizens through inherently racist, neoliberal urban policies.[22] In this regard, Trump's vile white supremacy is no less connected to the city and industry in which he built his business empire than it is to the rural swaths of "deplorable" country that, one suspects, he'd hardly spent much time in prior to his run for president. As *BROKER* appears to subtly register, the historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in real estate.

What is it, then, about the vortex of capital that holds such transcendent hypnotic allure for ethnonationalist kleptocrats and professional-class liberals alike? In the American context, to even pose the question has been to signal a kind of apostasy for at least the last three decades. It is, however, something that Jameson could still ponder with some befuddlement in the 1980s. Stricken by the market-fundamentalist frenzy that was just hitting its stride, Jameson remarked on how "astonishing" it is that "the dreariness of business and private property, the dustiness of entrepreneurship, […] investment banking and other such transactions" — we might add *real estate speculation* — "(after the close of the heroic, or robber baron, stage of business) should in our time have proved to be so sexy."[23] Today, it is clearer that we are once again living in a "heroic, or robber baron" era of business, and, as Jameson was quick to realize, the full-scale financialization of the economy has only solidified the hold of the market on the popular imagination.[24] But there are

22 Stein, *Capital City,* 79–115. For relocation statistics, see Adams Nichols, "Over 100k NYers are Forced from Homes Each Year, Research Finds," *Patch,* May 24, 2019, https://patch.com/new-york/new-york-city/over-100k-nyers-are-forced-homes-each-year-patch-pm.

23 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 274.

24 In "Culture and Finance Capital," an essay which proceeds from a reading of Giovanni Arrighi's *The Long Twentieth Century,* Jameson explicitly poses a series of questions about the hypnotic power of the market in light of the (by that point) dominant reign of the economic system bequeathed by the "Reagan-Kemp and Thatcher Utopias." En route to a more elaborate analysis of the abstractions and deterritorializations of finance capital, he also provides an insight that — as he is well aware — is as simple and self-evident as it is unsatisfying: we have returned to "the most fundamental

other factors involved in present-day capitalism's powerful allure, factors compelling us to redirect our gaze to the interior attributes of the apartment in *BROKER*.

Objecthood

Much of the action in *BROKER* involves the protagonist describing the luxurious things around her. We hear about "white Caesarstone" countertops and the faucets, which are "custom-designed" with "very bespoke detailing" and modeled after "a vintage coffee machine." Moving through the apartment we see modern furniture, decorative vases, and a perfectly polished chrome teapot. In one corner of the room is a Robert Mapplethorpe monograph, an object about objects. On the coffee table lies a copy of the four-hundred-page volume *The World in Vogue: People, Parties, Places,* in case there was any confusion about the global culture of luxury into which we have entered.

This rarified vision of dwelling is understood to be all the more alluring by virtue of its advanced technological features; from the appliances, which are "of the highest grade," to the aforementioned surveillance system and other "smart" devices allowing the resident to precisely calibrate their living environment to their needs. Jameson suggests that the "technological bonus of pleasure" afforded by the new consumer gadgets that began to flood the markets at an unprecedented rate around the same time that "the market" itself took on a newfound fascination is of such a nature as to necessitate a new category of consumption. He calls this new form of consumer enjoyment "the consumption of the very process of consumption itself" (a thing familiar to anyone who has gazed at a screen just to admire its picture quality), and he posits it as integral to the success of consumer capitalism.[25] Arguably this type of consump-

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form of class struggle." Fredric Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 247, 246, 247.

25 Ibid., 275–76. This paradigm is captured beautifully in a recent Samsung ad featuring a man whose unblinking eyes stare in amazement at a television broadcast of a football game, despite the fact that "he's more of a golf

tion is not unique to advanced technological products. But it is hard to deny that consumer technology today serves as the primary apparatus through which capitalism insinuates itself into fantasy — its mesmeric, seemingly self-validating "miracles" encouraging what Jameson describes as a euphoric "surrender of human freedom to a now lavish invisible hand."[26] In our contemporary moment this is exemplified by what Jonathan Crary describes as the increasing eclipse, by the "attention economy," of what was "once called the everyday."[27] Increasingly, there is hardly a moment in which existence is not subject to technological capture and, therewith, forces of monetization that grow more insidious all the time.

Such is the condition of domestic life heralded by the "Internet of Things," which promises to digitally network every surface of the spaces we inhabit. In the quasi-futuristic world of *BROKER,* we are provided a glimpse of this new form of domesticity. As the video's protagonist tells us, the apartment's luxury brand appliances ("Viking," "Miele," "La Cornue") are "all completely connected to the network, to your mobile devices, *to you.*" In such a context, architecture — already subject, in the age of the contemporary starchitect, to the principle of "brands over products" and subverted to the value bestowed upon it by the real estate market — need only facilitate access to various sites of consumer ritual, defined increasingly by the second-level enjoyment of consuming "consumption itself." The homeowner hardly even needs to look out the window, for here, encircled by miraculous objects and propelled toward their "greatest moment," they are already at the center of the vortex.

Whether or not there was ever any utopian thrust to the project of living "*inside* fantasy" that Koolhaas associated with Manhattanism more than thirty years ago, what *BROKER* helps us to see is both the mesmeric power and the frightening vacuity

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guy." See "Samsung QLED TV TV Spot, 'Can't Look Away,'" *iSpot.tv,* https://www.ispot.tv/ad/dDwX/samsung-qled-tv-cant-look-away.

26 Jameson, "Culture and Finance Capital," 274.

27 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 75–76.

of its contemporary manifestations. The video's achievement lies in part in the way it allows us to observe askance, to see the performative dimension within, the spectacle that is super-luxury dwelling. There is a creeping unease produced by the McCoys' video that is similar to that produced by the picture-perfect dwellings and automaton-like inhabitants of the fictional town in the 1975 film *The Stepford Wives*. This owes as much to *BROKER*'s cinematic language as to Chadsey's dead-eyed smile and tranquil delivery. Especially unsettling is the work's initial transition from depictions of its protagonist carrying out her drab professional duties to the longer of the video's two musical numbers, a segment in which the broker addresses the camera directly as the unearthly synth chords of Scacco's soundtrack swell and a dolly zoom further disorients our senses. In the figure of the hypnotized salesperson-hypnotist, we glimpse a terrifying closure of the subject within its system of prestige-bestowing objects. When the interlude concludes, and the broker returns to tidying up the apartment, it is difficult to see the space in the same way. One senses a maleficence lurking beneath the "herringbone parquet floors."

BROKER is obviously not the sort of materialist account of the production and global circulation of commodities that one finds in the work of artists as diverse in their approaches as Allan Sekula and Amie Siegel. Quasi-fictional rather than documentary, its focus is not directly on the social forces underlying the availability of the luxury goods it spotlights but on the discourses and affects surrounding their consumption. One can nevertheless assert that the objects in the McCoys' video, like the art and objects of empire that W.J.T. Mitchell has analyzed, represent "all the crafts, skills, and technologies that make imperialism possible" — that they are, indeed, a kind of "synecdoche for […] the whole Borgesian archive of empire" and thus for the very idea of empire itselfm Moreover, we have "the total domination of material things and people, linked (potentially) with totalitarianism, with 'absolute dominion,' the utopian unification of the human species and the world it inhabits; or the dystopian spectacle of total domination, the oppression

and suffering of vast populations, the reduction of human life to a 'bare life' for the great masses of people."[28] Insofar as this is registered in the video, it is, once again, by way of the broker's sales pitch. With rehearsed delectation, she offers the would-be owner and heavenly sovereign a vision of the "unification" of material belongings and subjectivity, as well as of technology-abetted control or "dominion" that is no less than imperial. It furthermore cannot be forgotten, particularly considering the immediate urban geography referenced in *BROKER,* that this promise of empowered "relentlessness," like the larger project of empire of which it is a part, is bound up with vast immiseration. At a moment when millions of dollars in tax breaks are being handed out to investors in high-end real estate, an "all-time record" number of New Yorkers are sleeping in shelters.[29]

Of course, in the age of Trump, any discussion of the objects of empire is likely to conjure blatantly exploitative excesses such as big game trophies or blood diamonds, the respectively banned hunting and sales of which Trump took measures during his time as president to once again allow. It might also provoke consideration of the imperialist fantasies suggested by the oversize "dictator chic" period furniture that decorates the president's own Trump Tower apartment.[30] As we already know, however, this is not that kind of space. Perhaps the closest we get to any overtly scandalous sense of excess is the Mapplethorpe book, and its contents remain safely stored away between its book covers. Moreover, the very fact that it appears in the apartment should indicate to us, once again, that we are within a space outfitted to appeal less to the sordid Trumpian imagi-

28 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Empire and Objecthood," in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 154.

29 Giselle Routhier, "Fate of a Generation: How the City and State Can Tackle Homelessness by Bringing Housing Investment to Scale," *Coalition for the Homeless,* https://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/state-of-the-homeless-2018/.

30 Peter York, "Trump's Dictator Chic," *Politico Magazine,* March/April 2017, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/trump-style-dictator-autocrats-design-214877.

nation than to the globe-trotting, *Vogue*-reading, white, well-educated liberal: the sort of people who know that the spoils of empire are meant to be tastefully concealed beneath a patina of decency, the aegis of global foundations, diplomacy, philanthropic efforts, and things of that nature.[31] The sort of people, for instance, who might organize to have Trump's name removed from the face of their apartment complex, as the tenants of New York's West Side Highway-facing Trump Place did in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, and then celebrate the successful mitigation of their shame as an "empowering act of protest," while continuing, quite shamelessly, to talk up the building's "impeccable" services.[32]

In the news item just cited, which was circulated giddily on liberal social media in the wake of Trump's election, one catches a whiff of the "horrifying hypocrisy" Georges Bataille associated with the ruling class of his own era for presuming that it might be "capable of *acceptably* dominating the poorer classes," so long as it managed to exhibit restraint or, in his phrasing,

31 Research into the purchasing habits of Democrats and Republicans confirms a division in the social signaling privileged by each group. The authors of a recent study suggest that Republicans spend more on luxury products and are more concerned with "vertical" hierarchy than Democrats, whereas the latter tend to privilege "horizontal" uniqueness. See Nailya Ordabayeva and Daniel Fernandes, "Better or Different? How Political Ideology Shapes Preferences for Differentiation in the Social Hierarchy," *Journal of Consumer Research* 45, no. 2 (August 2018): 227–50. It is notable, however, and perhaps indicative of the fact that there is less daylight between Trump and his wealthy liberal counterparts than is often pretended, that *Vogue* coffee-table books appear to be a staple of Trump's own lavish Louis XIV-inspired penthouse. See Ben Ashford, "Inside Donald Trump's $100 Million Penthouse: Gold-Rimmed Cups, a Toy Personalized Mercedes for His 10-Year-Old Son, a $15,000 Book and Some VERY Risqué Statues," *Daily Mail,* November 10, 2016, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3303819/Inside-Donald-Trump-s-100m-penthouse-lots-marble-gold-rimmed-cups-son-s-toy-personalized-Mercedes-15-000-book-risqu-statues.html.

32 Caleb Melby, "NYC's Trump Place Apartments to Drop Name amid Tenant Outcry," *Bloomberg,* November 15, 2016, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-11-15/manhattan-s-trump-place-to-change-name-use-street-addresses.

"maintain sterility" with respect to its visible excesses.[33] What *BROKER* affirms is that, in the world of super-luxury, even the most sterile expenditures come at a cost that is more than monetary. The "sky couture" before us may be tasteful enough in its unobtrusiveness, but the subjectivity it indexes and interpellates is troubling precisely for the manner in which it equates morals with good taste, the *right* sort of expensive coffee-table book, designer brand, or luxurious apartment complex.

Here, it is worth recalling Hal Foster's essay "Design and Crime," an early twenty-first-century update of Adolf Loos's "Ornament and Crime." As Foster argues, the "world of total design" birthed at the turn of the nineteenth century and reenvisioned according to modernist principles has, in actuality, only reached its zenith "in our own pan-capitalist present." Today, everything from domestic interiors to the drugs people take to the DNA they pass on to their children bears a "designer" label. And, as Foster observes, it is often the name on the product as much as the thing itself that the consumer of luxury goods desires and identifies with, performing "a self-interpellation of 'hey, that's me'" each time they catch sight of their brand. The effect of all this increasingly abstracted objecthood on subjectivity, according to Foster, is "the production of a new kind of narcissism, one that is all image and no interiority — an apotheosis of the subject that is also its potential disappearance."[34]

It is just such an apotheosis that the protagonist in *BROKER* embodies, not only by virtue of the luxury brand names and marketing platitudes that make up the extent of her vocabulary but also through her very gestures, which have been purged of all but the faintest traces of spontaneity. The staged apartment, for its part, shows no signs of living inhabitants. Walter Benjamin's scattered remarks on the birth of interior space

33 Georges Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939,* ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), 125.

34 Hal Foster, "Design and Crime," in *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)* (London: Verso, 2003), 19–20, 25.

and bourgeois dwelling are useful when it comes to theorizing the subjectivity in question. "To live means to leave traces," writes Benjamin.[35] While the "soulless luxuriance" of the apartments that figure in nineteenth-century detective fiction may have been "true comfort only in the presence of a dead body," they were nevertheless filled with objects designed, so long as their doomed occupants were alive, to emphasize their *living* movements.[36] Indeed, for Benjamin, it was precisely through the "abundance of covers and protectors, liners and cases," on which the "traces of objects of everyday use" can be observed, that the forensic imagination of Edgar Allan Poe and his successors came into being.[37] In *BROKER* this dialectic of life and death is sublated into the protagonist's day-to-day existence, which is lifeless in a strict Benjaminian sense. When the broker is not subordinating her speech to the "soulless luxuriance" around her she is busy maintaining the pristine presentability of the space, which means perpetually erasing all traces she has left within it. Over the course of the video, we see her polishing the mirror in the bathroom, arranging pillows on the couch, and picking fuzz from the carpet (fig. 3.8). This obsessive enactment of household duties traditionally associated with women's work, which parallels the broker's meticulous self-maintenance and maquillage, can be understood as registering the asymmetric pressures placed on professional women. At the same time, her efforts to keep every designer-branded surface of the apartment in pristine, merchandisable condition contributes to the impression that this is an interior space suitable for a subject that, irrespective of gender and its masquerades, is "all image and no interiority."

Importantly, for the McCoys' commentary on our cultural moment, this also means that this interior space is one that is unsuitable for art — at least for any art not immediately reduc-

35 Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings,* ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 154, 155.

36 Walter Benjamin, "'One-Way Street' (Selection)," in ibid., 65.

37 Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," 154, 155.

Fig. 3.8. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

ible to its value as a luxury item (or concealable within the pages of a coffee-table book). Reflecting on the emergence of "thing theory" and the broader interest in material culture that took hold at the start of the twenty-first century, Mitchell observes that "objecthood […] seems to have decisively triumphed over what [Michael] Fried understood to be art."[38] In the present context, that triumph must be understood as coextensive with the triumph of the particular object that is the commodity. In its extreme form, such a triumph implies the elimination of the autonomous artwork: the reduction of aesthetic value to market value, or, at best, to design value — to a given work's complementary capacity within a preconceived scheme or system. As a work in which luxury consumer products vie for the leading role, *BROKER* helps us to visualize this "total" order of commodity-things. But it also places in question this order's totalizing potential. As the work crescendos, we see that the broker's efforts to maintain the space in its hermetic perfection are unsustainable. When a series of unplaceable pictorial artworks appear within the apartment, seemingly out of nowhere, the pristine world before us begins to crumble. What the McCoys'

38 Mitchell, "Empire and Objecthood," 153.

video therefore appears to imply is that the full emergence of commodification ironically conditions the return of art as a potentially destabilizing force.

Nicholas Brown's work on the "real subsumption" of art under capital is applicable here. Brown argues that under present-day neoliberalism, "the assertion of [artistic] autonomy" in relation to the culture industry, which was essential to modernism but antithetical to postmodernist pastiche, "becomes vital once again." Moreover, whereas modernism's relation to the market can be understood, retrospectively, as "nothing other than a deeper commitment to classical political liberalism," manifest through the establishment of a "restricted field" of autonomous expression within the broader cultural sphere, art nowadays faces its potential commodification, insofar as it faces it at all, in a more directly antagonistic manner. "Autonomy today," writes Brown, "is locked in a life or death struggle with the market." The vitality of the autonomous work of art depends upon its ability not only to cut against the gravitational pull of the market or surreptitiously repurpose popular cultural forms but also to mediate its relationship to the wider political economy in such a way as to produce a "minimal" counterpolitics.[39]

This is the stage onto which the art object enters the diegesis in *BROKER* — only we have to envision here a market that has already claimed victory in a way that is at once more decisive (if possible) than in our own era and, by virtue of this decisiveness, Pyrrhic. For the world of *BROKER* would seem to be one in which any expression of the semiautonomy of the artwork, its merest resistance to prevailing structures of codification, is a threat to the coherence of the system as a whole. The artworks that appear, unexpectedly, within the more private recesses of the apartment, as though born into being through a chink in the repressive armor of luxury culture, are only minimally disturbing. (In the bathroom is a painting of a man with blood pouring

39 Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption under Capital," *Nonsite.org,* March 13, 2012, https://nonsite.org/editorial/the-work-of-art-in-the-age-of-its-real-subsumption-under-capital.

from his head; in the laundry closet is a work depicting a face smeared with a pinkish substance.[40]) But they resist easy assimilation into the protagonist's lexicon of "very bespoke" attributes and thus register less as objects than as abject "things" — sources of destabilizing ambivalence.[41]

What is essential here is not so much the nature of the objects themselves, which hardly fit into the categories of "positive historicism" or "aestheticization of genre" that Brown offers as worthily autonomous challengers to the "heteronomy" of the market. It is rather the way in which these objects — embedded in a work that is, indeed, "a theory of itself" in the sense Brown argues is necessitated under present conditions — are made to figure an unassimilable remainder within an otherwise totalizing system. Their uncanny emergence suggests that for all the seeming implausibility of autonomy in our market-dominated era, it is, rather, as Brown asserts, "the claim to universal heteronomy that is implausible."[42] In this sense, for all of the work's apparent pessimism regarding the ever-escalating obsession with material accumulation and the reduction of the everyday to consumer ritual, *BROKER* invests the work of art with an estimable power to interrupt the dominant paradigms of desire and consumption, staking a claim to its own autonomy in the process.

Ultimately, the notion that there is an unassimilable remainder to the operations of the market is reflected in the gestures of the broker herself. The appearance, in the apartment, of the unplaceable art-object-Thing, disarticulates not only the system of objects the protagonist has taken such care to describe but,

40 The painting in the bathroom is by Angela Dufresne; the second work is by Geoffrey Chadsey.

41 "Things," as Mitchell states, "have a habit of breaking out of the circuit, shattering the matrix of virtual objects and imaginary objectives." Mitchell, "Empire and Objecthood," 156.

42 Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption under Capital."

with it, the subjectivity that has been molded by that system.[43] From the moment the video's protagonist catches sight of the artworks, her carefully rehearsed professional routine is thrown into disarray. She undergoes the bout of bewilderment, proprioceptive breakdown, and fleeting refusal that I described at the start of this essay (figs. 3.9–3.11). In this moment, she bears testament to the minimal difference that prevails between her being and the vision of total interpellation she had earlier seemed to embody. How, finally, are we to understand this moment of disturbance vis-à-vis the immediate political context surrounding the McCoys' video?

Breakdown

For those who viewed *BROKER* at Postmasters Gallery in the aftermath of the 2016 election, when protestors were gathering in front of Trump Tower on a nightly basis, the video might have seemed to possess an unsettling prescience. In its portrayal of a hypersurveilled, consummate professional woman who, despite her exhaustive preparation, is undone at the pivotal moment, the work anticipates what remains — along with 9/11 and the 2007–2008 market crash — the most significant glitch in the institutional logic of twenty-first-century US history. The pressed jacket worn, and later torn, by the protagonist in *BROKER* already rhymed unavoidably, if unintentionally, with the all-white suit worn by Hillary Clinton at the Democratic National Convention, in a purported nod to the women's movement. Roughly two weeks after the video's premiere, the breakdown it depicts would be echoed by Clinton's bewildering downfall. In the lead up to the election, the former first lady, senator, and secretary of state, whose prior life had seemed nothing if not a long rehearsal for the role of president, would find herself, like the McCoys' broker, lost in a Trumpian funhouse, turned about

43 For an account of the object as produced through the interaction of "subject-Thing," see Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 20–24.

Fig. 3.9. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 3.10. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 3.11. Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *BROKER,* 2016, video, 28'. Screenshot. Courtesy of the artists.

in a vertiginous echo chamber of empty slogans and "truthfully hyperbolic" sentiments. If *BROKER* is foremost a response to the culture of professional achievement in general, it nevertheless lends itself, once again, to considerations of the particular place of women's labor within a prejudicial social sphere that still privileges male dominance. In this regard, the work might be read in relation to the labyrinth of culturally ingrained antagonisms and expectations that Clinton had to negotiate in her efforts to upend the most patriarchal of institutions.

As the preceding analysis has already demonstrated, however, the video's implicit criticisms of the society it references are more complex than they might initially appear. First of all, we cannot forget that the physiognomy of the apartment in the video is deceidedly un-Trumpian. Rather, the space and its objects more readily conjure the "McClintock" liberals among whom, it is often conveniently forgotten, Trump spent much of his life hobnobbing. Second, insofar as *BROKER* foregrounds the technocratic mindset, with its smug credentialism and devotion to supposedly "scientific" strategies for success, the video's commentary by no means limits itself to the world of commercial achievement. It may also be extended to professional political culture and perhaps particularly to the American lib-

eral establishment, with its unshakable faith in focus groups and poll testing and its seeming inability to navigate outside a set of predetermined gestures — to so much as entertain a realm of possibility beyond the bounds of its narrowly concessionary political imperatives. In this sense, the automaton-like protagonist in *BROKER,* whose hermetically interpellated existence is ruptured by the merest glimpse of alterity, anticipates the insight, now voiced even by standard-bearers within the Democratic Party, that Trump did not win the presidency so much as Democrats lost it. Faced with a series of unforeseen swerves necessitated not only by the rise of the alt-right, but by a newly energized left, the Democratic Party's well-greased political machine ran off its rails.

Such parallels may be compelling in their own right. In the end, however, *BROKER* is more than simply an effective allegory for the 2016 election. It is a searing indictment of neoliberal culture as a whole: its obsession with wealth and achievement and its production of a form of subjectivity reduced to near-total consumer identification. Berlant has given us the marvelously succinct phrase, "cruel optimism," to describe the self-defeating attachments to fantasies of "the good life" we continue to nurture in spite of ourselves under capitalism.[44] But in the superluxury imaginary — the phantasmagoric realm of *overexcess,* of *the excess of excess* — we encounter a voraciousness and an object of desire for which terms like "cruel optimism" and "good-life fantasy" seem all too kind. In one of the final images we see before the McCoys' video loops over again, the broker is shown lapping up a ring of moisture on the coffee table from which she has just lifted a glass of brand-name water, poured for her prospective client. It is as though by imbibing this tiny excess share of transactional exchange she might absorb within her the molecules of luxury itself. Here the catchword "thirsty" — as in "The 13 Thirstiest People of 2017," a *Fast Company* article that, unsurprisingly, featured Trump at the top of its list — seems the only

44 See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

appropriate term.[45] The culture of acquisitiveness envisioned in *BROKER* is one that is hell-bent on drinking the oceans dry.

What the McCoys' work nevertheless affirms, if it can be said to possess an affirmative dimension, is that ambivalence remains threaded throughout the damaged and costly psychology it spatializes with such scrutiny. The fantasy of immaculate plenitude is threatened by internal forces that grow stronger from the energy expended to keep them at bay. As in any aseptic environment, the prevailing order of productivity grows vulnerable by virtue of its own excessive decontamination. As much as *BROKER* models the persistent inculcation of a purely transactional mode of human conduct that is a threat to the human as such, it is also a work about the implausibility of totalization and the uncanny returns produced by capitalist domination. In this sense, the McCoys' video does more than allegorize the undoing of a Democratic Party whose faith in 1990s-era political wisdom blinded it to the seething disaffection of segments of the electorate that have failed to benefit under the prevailing political economy. The work also anticipates larger-scale disruptions in the global order that have already expressed themselves with particular force on the European continent and that are now rocking city streets from Beirut to Santiago. It remains to be seen whether these disruptions will result in genuinely new political alignments, or whether the crisis will pass, and the day will begin again, as it does in *BROKER,* with a lifeless smile.

45 Joe Berkowitz, "The 13 Thirstiest People of 2017," *Fast Company,* June 22, 2017, https://www.fastcompany.com/40496973/the-13-thirstiest-people-of-2017.

IV

A Symptomatic Affair

The final chapter of the Trump presidency began on November 7, 2020, four days after election day. That afternoon, Rudolph Giuliani took to a podium in Philadelphia to make a number of dubious allegations about supposed voting irregularities in Pennsylvania and across the country. Even before Giuliani and his motley crew of witnesses had assembled at the site, the internet was abuzz over the event. That morning, Trump had tweeted that a press conference was to be held at "Four Seasons, Philadelphia."[1] Soon after it was clarified that the site in question was not the five-star hotel downtown but Four Seasons Total Landscaping, a family-run business situated in a commercial zone near an Interstate-95 off ramp in the northeast corner of the city. It seemed certain that someone on the Trump team had blundered. At the venue, the podium backdrop of campaign signs affixed to a garage door looked makeshift at best. Giuliani, though he did not excrete dark fluid from his forehead as he would at a public appearance days later, appeared more haggard than usual.[2] As he spoke, he was upstaged by the sounds

1 The tweet was deleted soon after it was posted. @realDonaldTrump, "Lawyer's Press Conference," *Twitter,* November 7, 2020, https://media-cdn.factba.se/realdonaldtrump-twitter/1325084492076347396.jpg.

2 Jonah E. Bromwich, "Whatever It Is, It's Probably Not Hair Dye," *The New York Times,* November 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/

Fig. 4.1. A work by Jen Catron and Paul Outlaw exhibited at Spring Break Art Exhibition, New York, 2021. Photograph by the author.

of freeway noise, helicopters overhead, and someone blasting Guns n' Roses's "Sweet Child O' Mine." The event had barely begun when major news networks declared that Joe Biden had won the election.

By the next day, "Four Seasons Total Landscaping" had become the top trending topic on Twitter. Numerous articles in the mainstream press, and an inevitable Saturday Night Live sketch parodying the event, followed. "Lawn and Order" and "Make America Rake Again" t-shirts began selling out online. Before long, artists were creating works alluding to the iconography of the unsuspecting landscaping business (fig. 4.1). A Change.org petition to add Four Seasons Total Landscaping to the National Register of Historic Places stated: "We as a nation need to remember where the travesty of the Trump adminis-

style/rudy-giuliani-hair.html.

tration died with a whimper."[3] To Trump's amused detractors, the event was the sort of poetic justice for which they had long yearned. The seeming venue mix-up spoke to all the fraudulence, ineptitude, and abjection of the man's professional and political career. One commentator called it a real life "emperor-has-no-clothes moment."[4] The real-estate mogul known for the "gold-everywhereness" and fancy area codes of his towering development projects, would henceforth be associated with a one-story garage located, it was unfailingly noted, next to an adult novelty store called Fantasy Island.

It is fitting that the most talked about event from the day of Trump's 2020 election defeat was one immediately interpreted on the basis of its architectural significance. Of course, as fate would have it, Trump would eventually go out not with a whimper but a deafening bang. Rather than the rear parking lot of a landscaping company, the architectural image that would linger in the public's imagination from the final months of the Trump presidency would be the United States Capitol. Retrospectively, in terms of historical import, the insurrection at the People's House on January 6, 2021 altogether eclipses the scene that unfolded two months prior in northeast Philadelphia. Some consideration is due, however, to the curious case of the Four Seasons affair, which now figures as an ironic prelude to the final movement for which many mistook it. The blithe triumphalism with which the event was initially met and its rapid demotion into, effectively, a non-event calls for reflection on the role played by mainstream political commentary within contemporary culture. This chapter takes up this task while extending an

3 Mimi Montgomery, "There's a Petition to Add Four Seasons Total Landscaping to the National Register of Historic Places," *The Washingtonian,* November 18, 2020, https://www.washingtonian.com/2020/11/18/theres-a-petition-to-add-four-seasons-total-landscaping-to-the-national-register-of-historic-places/.

4 Katelyn Burns, "The Trump Legal Team's Failed Four Seasons Press Conference, Explained," *Vox,* November 8, 2020, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/11/8/21555022/four-seasons-landscaping-trump-giuliani-philadelphia-press-conference.

inquiry, pursued throughout this book, into the politicization of place and space in popular discourses and the structures of power that are thereby disavowed or inadvertently revealed. I am particularly concerned, in what follows, with how the Four Seasons affair highlights an attachment to forms of political enjoyment that frequently characterized performances of dissent during the Trump years but that hinder efforts to comprehend let alone counter the political formations he represents.

Enjoy!

Among the numerous commentaries published in the aftermath of Giuliani's press conference, the high watermark for interpretive exuberance belongs to architecture critic Justin Davidson. Writing in *Curbed,* Davidson places Four Seasons Total Landscaping alongside such apparent monuments to failure as Trump's incomplete border wall. He describes how architectural grandeur and the real estate mantra "location, location, location" had figured throughout Trump's political career, from his dramatic descent in the "golden escalator" at Trump Tower that formally inaugurated his presidential campaign, to his interviews before the Lincoln Memorial. Davidson notes that the Four Seasons at Philadelphia's Comcast Technology Center is not just "the city's newest, fanciest, highest hotel," but resides in a building designed by "an actual *Sir,* Lord Norman Foster." Instead of being "invested in the majesty of the law," as Giuliani might have been in such rarified surroundings, Trump's lawyer "managed to look diminished by a one-story taxpayer" (the term "taxpayer" is real estate lingo for an indistinct, barely solvent property). In Davidson's assessment, the images circulating in the wake of the event "had the tawdriness of America's worst cityscapes and the richness of an allegorical painting." The shades and bars on the building's windows were a reminder of ICE detention centers. The tangled cables leading to the podium emblematized Trump's "garbled message." The businesses surrounding the "derelict structure," which included not just Fantasy Island but a crematorium across the street and a Su-

noco station half a block north, invoked the "sordid sex, wishful thinking, and mass death," as well as the "addict[ion] to fossil fuels," that defined Trump's time in office.[5]

Undoubtedly, Four Seasons Total Landscaping provided a satisfying set piece in a drama that appears to have finally proven itself a modern day "morality tale."[6] As Olivia Nuzzi wrote in an article calling itself "The Full(est Possible) Story" of the Giuliani press conference, it is hard to construe the event as anything other than a "freak public-relations accident or hilarious fuckup." But Nuzzi also offered a more cynical assessment: "In terms of attention generated and relevance sustained, […] the thing was a clear success. Plus, it was the rare political joke that appealed to everyone."[7] One could go further and say that, in the end, the affair proved to be no more a reflection of Trump's heinous incompetence than of his uncanny ability to go with the flow, to turn every seeming mishap into a media spectacle, and to even revel in his own buffoonish thwarting of expectations. After his initial Twitter mishap on the morning of the event became apparent, Trump took to the social media platform once more: "Lawyer's Press Conference at Four Season's [*sic*] Landscaping Philadelphia," he wrote. "Enjoy!"[8] The tweet, possibly his last as a candidate still hoping to eke out a victory at the ballot box, was characteristic of a presidency defined by enjoyment in its most perverse and ambiguous forms. One suspects it

5 Justin Davidson, "An Architecture Critic Looks at Four Seasons Total Landscaping," *Curbed,* November 8, 2020, https://www.curbed.com./2020/11/four-seasons-total-landscaping-trump-giuliani-philadelphia-perfect.html.

6 Eric Levitz, "In Twist Ending, Trump Presidency Revealed to Be Morality Tale," *Intelligencer,* January 13, 2021, https://nymag.com./intelligencer/2021/01/trump-new-york-contracts-business-twitter-ban.html.

7 Olivia Nuzzi, "The Full(est Possible) Story of the Four Seasons Total Landscaping Press Conference," *Intelligencer,* December 21, 2020, https://nymag.com./intelligencer/2020/12/four-seasons-total-landscaping-the-full-est-possible-story.html.

8 Like earlier tweets from that morning, as noted above, this one was deleted after it was posted. @realDonaldTrump, "Lawyer's Press Conference."

was intended not only for his supporters but for the detractors whose gratification Trump must already have anticipated.

Of the fervid enjoyment so central to Trump supporters' political investments, Wendy Brown has offered a compelling account. In her book from the final years of the Trump presidency, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism,* Brown analyzes the far right's will-to-pleasure through the dual lenses of a Marcusean notion of late capitalist "repressive desublimation" on the one hand and a latter-day Nietzschean nihilism and racist *ressentiment* on the other. Her argument that the dissolution of conscience under the "necessity, authority, and truth" of market capitalism is interwoven with pleasurable pursuits ranging from the anti-social to the outright sadistic chimes with the account of neoliberal subjectivity that I have pursued throughout this book. And her observation that the Nietzschean "wreaking of will," which she associates with rightwing animus, often involves an element of "piling on" and "dancing at the bonfires of what one is burning down" ominously anticipates the January 6 events at the US Capitol.[9] But what of the so-called "progressive-neoliberal" counterpart to this pleasure?[10] What of the enjoyment of the liberal elite, at which Brown hints when, envisioning a scene ready made for sketch comedy, she describes how "Boarding Group 1 passengers, exuding cosmopolitanism along with the importance conferred by rank," push past the vengeful, "dethroned," white men in "Boarding Group 5" at the airport?[11]

As a glimpse at the flight logs from Jeffrey Epstein's private jet will remind us, those proverbial "Boarding Group 1" passengers are no less prone to the violent desublimation of their pleasures. The difference, if we follow the logic of Brown's neo-Nietzschean

9 Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 165, 169, 170, 171.

10 I borrow this term from Nancy Fraser. See, for example, "The End of Progressive Neoliberalism," *Dissent,* January 2, 2017, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser.

11 Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism,* 177.

paradigm, is that their "wreaking of will" is enacted not out of reactive *ressentiment* but out of the rank-conferred entitlement of their "Master morality." The same could be said of the sadistic joy and no less festive "piling on" that has been crucial to this group's own identity formation vis-à-vis its resentful counterpart. I'm thinking here not only of the gleeful mockery with which the liberal mainstream greeted the Trump phenomenon from the outset but of the more disconcerting schadenfreude that some have expressed in the face of Covid-19-related deaths in red states or human-enabled catastrophes like the 2021 Texas blackout that left millions without power and hundreds of thousands short on water and food. Of course, even these darker manifestations of derision may seem benign when compared with the menace at which they are purportedly aimed. What remains troubling is the way in which the enjoyment implicit in this derision so often comes to substitute for and obstruct critical comprehension of the dangers at hand.

As Arundhati Roy remarked in 2018, "[p]eople spend so much time mocking Trump or waiting for him to be impeached. And the danger with that kind of obsession with a single person is that you don't see the system that produced him."[12] More recently, Jodi Dean has cautioned against the sort of symptom enjoyment that Trump is so masterful at encouraging.[13] Although I have tried in this book to position Trump and the spaces he haunts as case studies in the contradictions of late capitalism — as symptoms of underlying maladies that are my genuine object of study — I won't presume myself exempt from this derangement. I also realize too well how turning one's mockery in-

12 Arundhati Roy, "Arundhati Roy on Fiction in the Face of Rising Fascism," interview by Laura Flanders, *Truthout,* December 31, 2018, https://truthout.org/video/arundhati-roy-on-fiction-in-the-face-of-rising-fascism/.

13 In a public Facebook post addressing the "'morning after' Trump," Dean wrote of "weaning ourselves away from Trump and addressing the much more fundamental problems of which Trump was just a symptom." She continued, "we've got to stop 'enjoying the symptom,' end our captivation with the image, and deal with the structure." Jodi Dean, *Facebook,* January 23, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/597514276/posts/10158709549109277/.

stead upon the hypocrisy, grift, and magical thinking of many of Trump's professional detractors can become its own exercise in self-gratification. Nevertheless, understanding the tendency to treat Trump as an ultimate rather than proximate cause seems essential when it comes to actually opposing the things he represents.

The enjoyment that Roy describes in terms of obsession might also be understood as obsessional, in the psychoanalytic sense, given its self-sabotaging tendency toward ensuring the omnipresence, affirming the very irresistibility, of what it purports to "resist." This enjoyment took two pronounced forms over the course of the Trump presidency. First, a relishing of the man's tawdriness tinged with classist undercurrents and reflecting a largely superficial or aesthetic relationship to politics. Exemplary here is the Fran Lebowitz quip I referred to in my preface: "Trump is a poor person's idea of a rich person."[14] Second, a self-exulting dedication to rationality, facts, and science, which, were it halfway sincere, would necessitate far greater transformations of society than most in the liberal mainstream are willing to entertain, let alone work toward creating. In the case of the Four Seasons affair, the enjoyment was admittedly all but irresistible. In key respects, however, it was suggestive of the pitfalls that Roy and Dean caution against.

Davidson's *Curbed* article is worth reexamining in this regard. His observation that the Comcast Technology Center was designed by an "actual *Sir*" is surely intended to ridicule Trump's obsession with authority and glitz. But the joke is written for an audience that is itself enthralled with figures like Lord Foster and the "starchitecture" system he represents. When Davidson follows up his gloss on the authority-bestowing glamour of the Four Seasons and the Comcast Center by asking, "what better place to broadcast lies?" he is evidently unaware of how appropriate his question really is. Comcast, which was able to

14 Fran Lebowitz, quoted in Emily J. Fox, "Let Fran Lebowitz Soothe All Your Election-Related Worries," *Vanity Fair,* October 20, 2016, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2016/10/fran-lebowitz-trump-clinton-election.

rake in a billion dollars in federal subsidies while maintaining monopoly-like status in the contemporary media landscape, was involved in what has been called "the most prolific known instance" of political fraud in US history in its relentless bid to suppress net neutrality.[15] That Comcast was also a major donor to Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign should say as much about Trump's successor as it does about the company; in any case, it is left unremarked upon by Davidson. Briefly stated, the architecture critic's article, though highly evocative and gratifying, typifies a broader tendency toward expressing outrage at the sordid elements of Trump's politics while implicitly affirming our culture's captivation with wealth and status and leaving unquestioned prevailing systems of politico-mediatic power. In Davidson's jeering references to the neighborhood around Four Seasons Total Landscaping and his — it turns out, highly misleading — descriptions of the place of business as "derelict," there is also a whiff of the socio-economic disconnect that has coincided with Democrats' losses among the lower-income voters who once comprised a much larger share of the party's base.

This last observation might lead us to consider how Giuliani's press conference actually played with those already convinced that the Democratic Party is an elitist institution that has failed to operate in their best interests. Most commentators seemed to assume that the event was as cringeworthy for Trump's followers as it was hilarious for his critics. But this assumption suggests a disadvantageous refusal to reckon with the allure of the Trump phenomenon outside of narrow and increasingly outmoded political and aesthetic frameworks.

The Emperor's Clothes

It was easy enough for observers to liken Trump's Four Seasons bait-and-switch maneuver to his failure to deliver on more than

15 Jeremy Singer-Vine and Kevin Collier, "The Impersonators," *Buzzfeed News,* October 3, 2019, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jsvine/net-neutrality-fcc-fake-comments-impersonation.

a mere fifteen miles of his US–Mexico border wall. or to relish reports that the press conference had prompted the withdrawal of members of the president's legal team. But the border wall was always less about actually keeping immigrants out of the country than signaling to a constituency accustomed to placing "no trespassing" decals on their properties that they could feel at home again in a land in which they had begun to feel like strangers. And to imagine that efforts to overturn the election depended on the quality of Trump's legal council is likewise to miss the point. To give print space, as *Politico* did, to the likes of Barry Richard — who represented George W. Bush during the 2000 election fiasco — so that he could bemoan the way Trump "conducts himself" is something worse.[16] It suggests the sorts of machinations that might have been legitimated by media outlets were Trump more willing to obey established decorum.

It bears remembering that Trump's rebellion against decorum was among the things that earned him admirers in the first place, and on this front, the press conference was more on brand than it was made out to be. Its makeshift aesthetic fit perfectly well into a media landscape increasingly populated by alternative rightwing news forums, whose low budget sets and janky production quality possess their own homegrown aesthetic. The first person that Giuliani called to the podium on November 7th to testify to supposed election fraud was Daryl Brooks. A Black, formerly incarcerated, self-described activist from Trenton, New Jersey, Brooks is someone who, over the past decade, has gone from Green Party candidate to Tea Party loyalist to "far-right radio host in a tricorn hat, [with] a prop gun in each hand."[17] His trajectory is of a piece with what William Callison and Quinn Slobodian identify as a rising movement of "diagonalist hustlers and political entrepreneurs who self-fashion 'outside the

16 Alex Isenstadt, "Giuliani Wrecks Trump Campaign's Well-Laid Legal Plans," *Politico,* November 14, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/14/giuliani-trump-legal-plans-436475.

17 Olivia Nuzzi, "The Full(est Possible) Story."

mainstream.'"[18] It is not difficult to imagine that, to adherents of this right-leaning, but above all establishment-skeptic, movement, the Trump campaign's unconventional choice of the site from which they would begin undermining a national election may well have served an authenticating role.

In any case, despite the unseemly jumble of cables running from the PA system that day, one can't exactly say that it was a "garbled message" that was delivered from the podium. Certainly, it was a rambling exercise in conjecture and mistruth. But as Franco "Bifo" Berardi pointed out, in response to a widely circulated *New York Times Magazine* editorial by Timothy Snyder, the repeated observation that Trump operates within a "post-truth" paradigm fails to get us very far when it comes to comprehending his menace. Drawing on Paul Veyne's inquiry into the ideological underpinnings of mythological belief, Bifo observes that Trump's repeated lies are not "semiological mistake[s]" but part of "a strategy for identitarian self-assertion." Whether or not Trump's most ardent supporters actually believe his words to the letter is irrelevant, for what they are looking for is not "the factual truth" but "a sort of pragmatic coherence" that affirms their shared mythology.[19] Given these circumstances, those who imagined that Four Seasons Total Landscaping would be the stage upon which the emperor Trump was finally disrobed were as delusional as those who might have taken the scene that played out there as confirmation of the man's authenticity.

An American Allegory

One imagines, post-Capitol storming, that it will be some time before commentators again feel comfortable venturing

18 William Callison and Quinn Slobodian, "Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol," *The Boston Review,* January 12, 2021, https://bostonreview.net/politics/william-callison-quinn-slobodian-coronapolitics-reichstag-capitol.

19 Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Bifo on the US Capitol Riots," *e-flux,* January 13, 2021, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/371876/bifo-on-the-us-capitol-riots/.

the journalistic equivalent of a last laugh. In the days following the Giuliani press conference, however, even those observers who took a more cautious approach to the import of the event seemed content stifling misgivings in the name of fun. If Nuzzi's "Full(est Possible)" account of the "Four Seasons Total Landscaping circus" in actuality stops short just as she's begun to explore it in more complex terms than her fellow journalists — indeed, just as she's begun to view it as "an indictment of a certain kind of liberalism" — it is because she realizes that "picking the bones of any joke will make it unfunny after a while."[20] What Nuzzi nevertheless surmises is that if one wants to understand the "full" spatio-cultural significance of Four Seasons Total Landscaping, it is necessary not only to relinquish some forms of enjoyment but to look beyond the rear parking lot of the family-run business.

Perhaps the most striking thing that commentators ignored is that far from a mere "taxpayer," Four Seasons Total Landscaping was — long before the t-shirts, bumper stickers, Super Bowl commercial, and MSNBC-produced "Four Seasons Total Documentary" — already a successful business catering to golf courses, airports, and some of Philadelphia's premier downtown destinations. Its Louis Vuitton purse-carrying owner was likely among those well off enough to have been taxed meaningfully less under Trump. Her business may be a far cry from "the city's newest, fanciest, highest hotel," but, by a strange coincidence, it is one of the companies that has been responsible for maintaining the outdoor grounds at the Comcast Center. While its parking lot may look, well, like a parking lot (fig. 4.2), its street-facing frontage includes a strip of trimmed lawn with flowers and an ornamental tree: a little slice of suburbia on a somewhat dreary commercial corridor (fig. 4.3). Yet even the immediate surroundings are not as forlorn as most reports indicated. The crematorium across the street, as Nuzzi remarks, "would blend in fine in a more developed area."[21] Next door to it is an upscale

20 Olivia Nuzzi, "The Full(est Possible) Story."
21 Ibid.

Fig. 4.2. The rear parking lot at Four Seasons Total Landscaping. Google Maps screenshot.

Fig. 4.3. Four Seasons Total Landscaping. Google Maps screenshot.

Fig. 4.4. Businesses across the street from Four Seasons Total Landscaping. Google Maps screenshot.

event space called The State Room — presumably after the room dedicated to entertaining heads of state in aristocratic homes (fig. 4.4). On the same block there is a branch of an apostolic church and a baseball academy. If anything, the much-discussed adult novelty store seems out of place, the relic of a seedier era, though one that some urbanites would probably consider almost charming, with its retro yellow sign and awning that have now been granted minor iconicity.

According to the Trump campaign, the neighborhood of Tacony, where Four Seasons Total Landscaping is located, was chosen because it was one of the president's few strongholds in Philadelphia. Demographically, the neighborhood is 58.6 percent white, 18.5 percent Black, 17 percent Hispanic.[22] This makes it whiter than the city as a whole but more diverse than most Philadelphia neighborhoods and far more diverse than Logan Square where the Comcast Center is located.[23] In a city where

22 "Race and Ethnicity in Tacony, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," *Statistical Atlas,* n.d., https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/Pennsylvania/Philadelphia/Tacony/Race-and-Ethnicity.

23 "Race and Ethnicity in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," *Statistical Atlas,* n.d., https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Pennsylvania/Philadelphia/Race-and-

economic divergence is extreme, Tacony's median income falls smack in the middle.[24] In sum, it is the type of place where a fairly representative swath of the country works, prays, learns to play baseball, celebrates special occasions, mourns the dead, and, yes, purchases sex toys and pornography. It may be a "symbolically rich stage," as Davidson suggests, but what it symbolizes is as American as apple pie.

This is not to deny the sinister intensities that Davidson and others detected in this landscape. On the contrary, one should recognize that the pestilence that Trump made visible to otherwise myopic observers permeates the most ordinary settings of American life. There are hints of both elitism and political naivete in the notion that Trump's brand might have been permanently tarnished by his association with a family-run landscaping business that he momentarily mistook for a luxury hotel. The same could be said of the awe-stricken way in which onlookers suddenly came to perceive a largely unremarkable urban setting as "an allegorical painting," something out of the mind of Hieronymus Bosch. But the real problem with the laughter and derision that tellingly reached their long-awaited climax in jokes about masturbation aids is once again the substitutive role they play for a more painful reckoning.

Ultimately, the image of "Four Seasons Total Landscaping" that has been seared into popular consciousness is dubious insofar as it is taken to represent an aberration within twenty-first-century American existence and not a paradigm: as omnitemporal and pervasive as the name implies. The hellscape of fraud, waste, death, and instant gratification that will be associated henceforth with an unassuming address in northeast Philadelphia might just as easily be conjured by any number of more distinguished settings throughout the country. There is nothing inoculating in this respect about the glass and steel of the

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Ethnicity.

24 "Household Income in Tacony, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania," *Statistical Atlas,* n.d., "https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/Pennsylvania/Philadelphia/Tacony/Household-Income.

Fig. 4.5. Comcast Tower in Philadelphia. Photograph by Smallbones, January 3, 2011. Wikimedia Commons.

Four Seasons Hotel Philadelphia at Comcast Center (fig. 4.5), where, for roughly the weekly salary of a minimum wage earner in Pennsylvania, wine not included, a couple can dine on a Jean-Georges designed tasting menu, just as they can at the chef's

longstanding Michelin-starred flagship restaurant at Trump International Hotel in New York.

It is the work of numerous popular American storytellers, from novelists like Brett Easton Ellis to filmmakers like David Lynch and Jordan Peele, to remind us of the horrors lurking behind the glass windows of luxury skyscrapers, the white picket fences of suburban homes, and the well-trimmed hedges of country estates. But we don't need to enter fictional worlds to shudder at the profound contradictions that define the American nightmare. We need only ponder the cognitive dissonance required to believe in the fundamental goodness of a country that per capita owns more guns, eats more meat, watches more television, does more drugs, consumes more gasoline, invests more in warfare, and puts more people in prison than any other country in the world. We need only consider how little has changed when it comes to the widespread, bipartisan commitment to the very social, economic, and political systems that produced Donald J. Trump.

One could argue that after four years of Trumpian torment, the enjoyment that surrounded the Four Seasons affair was well-earned, the expression of a long-withheld release. As was grimly affirmed, however, by the mid-pandemic, social-distance-flouting dance-offs that broke out not long after Giuliani took to the podium, much of the country was simply doubling down on what it had been doing all along: enjoying the symptom and ignoring the disease. For four years, the American Horror Story was brought to life before our eyes, and too often those who were most dismayed mistook the mirror moment that might have been for the thing it had been marketed to them as: a dark but highly entertaining spectacle, a thing occurring simultaneously right under their noses, and yet, always somewhere *over there*—in the swamplands of the south or the midwestern planes, or that neighborhood adjacent to the highway that one catches a glimpse of on the way from the airport to a five-star hotel downtown. The failure to squarely face the uncomfortable truths brought into focus by the Trump presidency will haunt us in the years ahead.

V

The People's House

That something hadn't quite registered on the afternoon of the press conference at Four Seasons Total Landscaping was made apparent on January 6, 2021 as Congress convened at the Capitol to formalize Joe Biden's presidential victory. By the end of the day, whatever shouts of glee still hung in the air from Biden's election victory two months prior would be drowned out by a more troubling swell of exultation. The storming of the US Capitol Building, which left five dead and commentators around the world stunned, ought to have been the clearest reminder to Americans not to look away from the deep, dark, truthful mirror held up to them by the Trump presidency. But the president-elect's solemn assertion that the events that unfolded "do not reflect a true America" and "[d]o not represent who we are" confirmed to many that a national self-reckoning was not on the table.[1]

Biden's response was characteristic of a broader tendency among Democrats to proffer optimistic half-truths and self-righteous indignation as a salve for systemic ills. It's not that the US isn't more than its most toxic elements suggest. Left-liberal

1 Fabiola Cineas, "The Convenience of American Amnesia," *Vox,* January 19, 2021, https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/22220177/capitol-insurrection-riot-trump-inauguration.

politics pervade the cultural sphere. Recent polling on positions like healthcare, taxation, and labor suggest an evolution in the views of the general public away from the reactionary entrenchment of preceding decades.[2] Perhaps there is even some reassurance in trends showing the US is diversifying into a majority non-white nation at an even faster rate than had been previously predicted.[3] But if one looks at the structures that persist within the country's neighborhoods, schools, places of work, and prisons, one finds a deeply inegalitarian society. And while liberals have sometimes envisioned the institutions of the state as bulwarks against the politics embodied by figures like Trump, in actuality these institutions continue to enable unfathomably deep-pocketed right-wing forces to wield a disproportionate share of political power.[4] While a majority of Americans may hold an unfavorable view of those who participated in the Capi-

2 Gallup, "Health Care System," n.d., https://news.gallup.com/poll/4708/healthcare-system.aspx; Megan Brenan, "At 65%, Approval of Labor Unions in U.S. Remains High," *Gallup,* September 3, 2020, https://news.gallup.com/poll/318980/approval-labor-unions-remains-high.aspx, and Howard Schneider and Chris Kahn, "Majority of Americans Favor Wealth Tax on Very Rich: Reuters/Ipsos Poll," *Reuters,* January 10, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-inequality-poll/majority-of-americans-favor-wealth-tax-on-very-rich-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBN1Z9141.

3 William H. Frey, "The Nation Is Diversifying Even Faster Than Predicted, According to New Census Data," *Brookings,* July 1, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/research/new-census-data-shows-the-nation-is-diversifying-even-faster-than-predicted/.

4 As Corey Robin has argued, regarding Trump's supposed authoritarianism, in order to exert its will, the right has increasingly relied less on "populism or mass politics" than "anti-democratic state institutions" such as "the Electoral College, the Senate, and the courts." David Klion, "Almost the Complete Opposite of Fascism," *Jewish Currents,* December 4, 2020, https://jewishcurrents.org/almost-the-complete-opposite-of-fascism. Although I agree with Robin's emphasis on the systemic nature of anti-democratic politics in the US, I take a different approach to the question of fascism within the Trump movement. Whereas Robin points to (1) the irony of a supposedly fascist leader being "completely dependent upon the constitutional order," and (2) Trump's weakness as a leader, not merely in relation to actually existing fascist leaders, but in relation to past presidents, such as Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, my own analysis

tol riots, the events of that day reflect deep-seated truths about the reign of state-abetted white vigilantism, the dark money-fueled paranoia that grips much of the country, and mounting threats to "proceduralist democracy" as we know it.[5]

For politicians like Biden, of course, it does not pay to scrutinize the very social, political, and economic systems that have positioned him to govern over a crumbling empire. The depravity exhibited by members of the far right makes it far easier to single out individual actors — those who, in his words, "are just not very good people."[6] He can thus project moral clarity while never fundamentally challenging the country's most baleful institutions, some of which, such as the carceral state, he had a hand in creating. Although Ibram X. Kendi has been critiqued for privileging personal morality over systemic analysis in his work on "anti-racism,"[7] his response to Biden's remarks provides a helpful summation of the politics of denial that is at issue here:

> If you can look at the carnage and respond *That's not us,* then you'll consider it to be an anomaly. […] Police violence — instead of being seen as the unnecessary killing of three Americans every single day — is dismissed as the product of bad

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is concerned more with the fascistic dimension of the Trump movement's formation as a social group.

5 Adolph Read, "The Whole Country Is the Reichstag," *Nonsite.org,* August 23, 2021, https://nonsite.org/the-whole-country-is-the-reichstag/. Read's tone — and treatment of historical parallels — is in marked contrast to that of Corey Robin (quoted in the footnote above), though he, too, sees the crisis as one largely enabled by state institutions.

6 Reid J. Epstein, "Biden Says About '10 to 15 Percent' of Americans Are 'Not Very Good People,'" *The New York Times,* June 4, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/us/politics/joe-biden-not-good-people.html.

7 Paul Prescod, for instance, has argued that, in lieu of promoting collective solidarity, Kendi's bestselling book, *How to Be an Antiracist,* provides "white people a road map for the long path of confession, atonement, and self-improvement." Paul Prescod, "To Fight Racism, Organize with Your Coworkers," *Jacobin,* August 15, 2021, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2021/08/anti-racism-race-unions-labor-united-packinghouse-workers-of-america-upwa-chicago-kansas-city-waterloo-midwest-multiracial-organizing.

> apples. […] Economic inequality and mass poverty — instead of being seen as the inevitable results of racial capitalism — are dismissed as glitches in the economy. […] Thus, the carnage continues.[8]

This concluding chapter examines the carnage wrought at the Capitol Building in light of the troubling contradictions that define US national identity at this tense historical juncture. I begin by reconsidering the extent to which the Capitol storming can, indeed, be said to reflect "a true America," before turning to some of the mediating conceptions of nationality and home that were brought to the fore by the Covid-19 pandemic in the lead-up to the 2020 election. Then I discuss the symbolically loaded image and architecture of the Capitol Building itself, as well as two key videos from the visual archive of the Capitol storming, each of which provides a spatio-political lens on the fantasies animating the Trump movement. Finally, drawing on writings by Nicholas Mirzoeff and, especially, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, I analyze the failed January 6 insurrection as a performance of national fantasy rooted in settler-colonial notions of place and home that have been integral to the identity of the US since its inception. In the face of mounting anti-democratic incursions, the Democratic Party and liberal media have tended to exhibit the preference for half-measures and complicity with "militarized life" that Harney and Moten disparagingly associate with "politics" as such. Nevertheless, I suggest, recent transformations on the left may be cause for reevaluating Harney and Moten's conception of politics. Even as new menaces appear on the horizon, developments within and beyond the electoral sphere help us to envision what a challenge to the reigning order might entail.

8 Ibram X. Kendi, "Denial Is the Heartbeat of America," *The Atlantic,* January 11, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/denial-heartbeat-america/617631/.

This Is America

Biden is so fond of the politics of denial that, in 2017, he introduced his "American Possibilities" PAC (ostensibly created to support Democrats during the midterms) with the slogan "we're better than this."[9] As a presidential candidate, he would later use the PAC to collect the sorts of contributions from the healthcare and oil industries that he had publicly vowed to reject.[10] A no less potent denialism was on display in the post-election boast that the Democratic challenger had received the most votes of any presidential candidate in history. The boast obscured the fact that Trump had received the second most votes ever (technically losing by an even narrower margin in the electoral college than his former opponent, Hillary Clinton, had in 2016).[11] As Mike Davis observed in an election postmortem titled "Trench Warfare," the truth is that four years of Trump "barely moved the needle" when it came to the split in vote totals. Moreover, liberals would have to work harder than ever to preserve their image of who or what reflects "a true America." Davis recounts how CNN and *The New York Times* had consistently presented a caricature of Trump supporters as "big, angry and ignorant white people in MAGA hats baying at the moon or beating up journalists […]. [R]ural and small-town America self-transformed into a Third Reich, with a declining white pro-

9 Julia Manchester, "Biden Launches PAC: 'We're better than this,'" *The Hill,* June 1, 2017, https://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/335910-biden-officially-launches-pac-were-better-than-this/.

10 Lee Fang and Andrew Perez, "Joe Biden's Presidential Campaign Pledged Not to Take Special Interest Money — But Not His PAC," *The Intercept,* May 6, 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/05/06/joe-biden-pac-coporate-special-interest-money-pledge/.

11 Although the initial electoral vote count in 2016 was the same as in 2020 (306–232), seven so-called faithless electors brought the total to 304 votes for Trump and 227 votes for Hillary Clinton. "2016 Presidential Election Results," *The New York Times,* August 9, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/elections/2016/results/president.

letariat in tow."[12] Yet exit polls showed that Black men, Asian Americans, and the upper-middle class all increased their support for Trump.

The mob that paraded through the Capitol shouting "our house" in open refutation of Democrats' denials might have seemed at first to more closely conform to media caricatures. But this picture, too, was soon complicated. For one, commentators quickly noted that the crowd that gathered that day included a greater number of upper-income Trump supporters than might have been expected. Many belonged to the category of "lumpen capitalists" that Davis highlights in his essay: business owners not dissimilar, perhaps, to the owner of Four Seasons Total Landscaping.[13] Quinn Slobodian describes an array of "class positioning and political intentions" behind the riots, but notes in particular how the "'fantasy putschism' of [the] QAnon-inflected protest" was influenced by "disinfotainment" appealing not only to lifelong Republicans but to a wider constituency possessing "anti-government, anti-lockdown, anti-mask, and anti-vax positions."[14] Without question, the mob also included a number of armed, organized militiamen and outright white nationalists. But as Cristina Beltrán observed, invoking the tortured logic of "multiracial [w]hiteness," even this group was more diverse than expected. And as Robert A. Pape and Keven Ruby noted in *The Atlantic,* organized extremists were actually underrepresented at the Capitol relative to acts of violence carried out over the preceding five years. Focusing specifically on the roughly 200 arrestees at the Capitol, Pape and Ruby identified "a new kind of violent mass movement" comprising what they somewhat abashedly term "more 'normal' Trump supporters — middle-class and, in many cases, middle-aged peo-

12 Mike Davis, "Trench Warfare," *New Left Review* 126 (November/December 2020): 5, 18, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii126/articles/mike-davis-trench-warfare.

13 Ibid., 18.

14 Quinn Slobodian, "Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol," *Boston Review,* January 5, 2021, https://bostonreview.net/articles/quinn-slobodian-toxic-politics-coronakspeticism/.

ple without obvious ties to the far right." These people not only "work as CEOs, shop owners, doctors, lawyers, IT specialists, and accountants," but hail from parts of the country that are not Trump strongholds. More than half came from either big metropolitan areas or the suburbs. On the whole, Pape and Ruby revealed, they live in counties that are "typical of all American counties."[15]

In a follow up piece, Pape would connect the Capitol storming with white replacement anxiety, noting that many participants came from places "where non-White [*sic*] populations are growing fastest."[16] This additional insight connects in compelling ways to the image of the surrounded colonial settlement that I will turn to as a model of contemporary power relations in the final sections of this chapter. It is not clear to what extent Pape sees his insight as vitiating previous takeaways concerning the "typical" makeup of the crowd that participated in the insurrection. But it should hardly reassure us of the goodness of the republic and its institutions. The observation that a syndicate of racist, paranoid, anti-social, violently anti-democratic reactionaries walks among a supposedly "ordinary" American population is as self-evident as it is incomplete. Once again, the harder pill to swallow is that the most ordinary social, political, and economic structures of American life condition and enable the sort of violence that found its expression on January 6, 2021.

For many observers, the events at the Capitol once again dispelled the, indeed, simplistic notion that economic hardship has been singularly responsible for driving anti-establishment discontent. It cannot be forgotten, however, that capitalism works its violence insidiously, at the social as much as at the economic

15 Robert A. Pape and Keven Ruby, "The Capitol Rioters Aren't Like Other Extremists," *The Atlantic,* February 2, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/02/the-capitol-rioters-arent-like-other-extremists/617895/.

16 Robert A. Pape, "Opinion: What an Analysis of 377 Americans Arrested or Charged in the Capitol Insurrection Tells Us," *The Washington Post,* April 6, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/06/capitol-insurrection-arrests-cpost-analysis/.

level. Nor can the increasing precarity of middle- and even upper-income earners be altogether ignored when it comes to assessing this moment. Although the diagonalist paradigm may seem more cultural than political-economic in nature, Slobodian notes the crucial fact that, globally, those drawn into the diagonalist fray have tended to be "small business owners and the self-employed, who conventionally lack the social ties of trade union membership and have less job security than civil servants or employees of larger businesses permitted to work from home in 'white-collar quarantine.'"[17] As *The Washington Post* noted, the majority of those arrested at the Capitol "showed signs of prior money troubles" such as bankruptcy, debt, or the failure to pay taxes.[18] In Davis's estimate, roughly fifty-five million of Trump's eye-popping seventy-three million votes may be considered "hardcore" loyalists. But Davis also cites Pew statistics indicating that the "top issue" among voters in the lead-up to the election was the economy. He speculates that "jobs and income were the major factor" among what he terms "the 'soft Trump' vote"[19]: a constituency which, like the 10 to 15 percent of 2012 Obama voters who swung the election to the right in 2016, may be harder to square with media stereotypes.[20] This is important because, as Davis notes, Trump's messaging during the campaign frequently centered on the "liberation of the economy," whereas Biden struggled to present a compelling argument for why working people should quietly abide by state quarantine measures while scraping to get by on minimal governmental support. Davis points us to the woeful fact that when

17 Quinn Slobodian, "Coronapolitics from the Reichstag to the Capitol."

18 Todd C. Frankel, "A Majority of the People Arrested for Capitol Riot Had a History of Financial Trouble," *The Washington Post,* February 10, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/02/10/capitol-insurrectionists-jenna-ryan-financial-problems/.

19 Davis, "Trench Warfare," 25.

20 Geoffrey Skelley, "Just How Many Obama 2012-Trump 2016 Voters Were There?," *Center for Politics,* June 1, 2017, https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/just-how-many-obama-2012-trump-2016-voters-were-there/.

thousands of healthcare and Amazon workers opted to strike against their unsafe working conditions, the future president stayed "silent in his basement in Delaware."[21] He did, however, take to the internet on several occasions to reassure voters that while the coronavirus was ravaging its way through poor and non-white communities across the country, he was safe at home and still among the living.

Stay at Home

Early in the pandemic, Paul B. Preciado's theorizations of the relationship between spatiality and subjectivity took on renewed relevance. As he observed in the May/June 2020 issue of *Artforum,* "the private residence has now become the center of the economy of tele-consumption and tele-production," as well as "the surveillance pod." The pioneer of this lifestyle model was once again Hugh Hefner, who was able to spend "nearly forty years lounging around at home, dressed in pajamas, a bathrobe, and slippers, drinking Pepsis and eating Butterfingers" because he understood that the technologies at his disposal allowed his bedroom to function as "a genuine multimedia production platform."[22] Here, a new parallel presents itself between Hefner and Trump. During his White House tenure, the forty-fifth president was easily imagined lounging in his pajamas, tweeting with one hand and reaching for junk food with the other. Yet one of the unexpected effects of the pandemic on the 2020 presidential campaign was that it transformed former Vice President Biden — the consummate globetrotter and handshaker of foreign dignitaries — into the new paradigmatic "indoor man," even if it was immediately clear that he possessed none of the media savvy of his opponent.

The image that defined the Biden campaign from the start of the pandemic onward was that of a frail figure, awkwardly

21 Davis, "Trench Warfare," 25.

22 Paul B. Preciado, "Learning from the Virus," *Artforum,* May/June 2020, https://www.artforum.com/print/202005/paul-b-preciado-82823.

Fig. 5.1. Joe Biden broadcasting from his home rec room. Photograph by the author.

posed before a bookshelf, struggling to read the anodyne sentiments fed to him via teleprompter (fig. 5.1). In an apparent effort at positive spin, *The Washington Post* likened the broadcasts to Warren G. Harding's decision to run his campaign from his porch. "If you want to be elected," Harding famously said of his 1920 bid for president, "stay at home during the campaign."[23] Effectively, the pandemic gave Democrats an excuse to literalize the strategy that they had already opted for in advance: to keep Biden healthy and out of the public eye as much as possible, in hopes that Trump's lack of bipartisan appeal, and the increasingly severe cataclysms enfolding the nation, would be enough to send the man packing.

23 Ronald G. Shafer, "Biden Campaigns from His Basement. Harding Ran for President from His Porch," *The Washington Post,* May 3, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/05/03/harding-porch-biden-basement/.

Fashioning Biden as the stay-at-home candidate had the added virtue of playing to the "white collar quarantine" electorate: those busy perfecting their sourdough recipes and buying up shares of Zoom and Peloton either in the big houses in the suburbs they already owned and inhabited or in the big houses in the exurban areas to which they fled once city life under quarantine suddenly became less charming. As Preciado observed, "the biopolitical measures for contagion management imposed during the Covid-19 crisis […] turned horizontal workers — more or less playboyesque, their labor cognitive or immaterial — into the most likely survivors of this pandemic."[24] For the less fortunate, the term "front line" took on its properly military connotation, as hospital workers, caregivers, delivery persons, meat processors, and grocery cashiers fell by the thousands, or become agents of their elderly or high-risk family members' demise when they brought the virus back to their own cramped living quarters. Urban areas were hit especially hard. Between March and mid-May of 2020, New York City witnessed more than 20,000 presumed Covid-19-related deaths, disproportionately in outer borough, non-white neighborhoods.[25]

None of this prevented thousands of protestors from taking to the streets in unprecedented numbers in the summer of 2020, following the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. By and large these gatherings were peaceful, masked, and socially distanced. Often, the most dangerous health risks were presented by police kettling, beating, and arresting protestors, or driving their cruisers through crowds with reckless abandon. The protests demonstrated that carefully planned, mass public actions could take place without contributing to a surge in

24 Preciado, "Learning from the Virus."

25 "Latest Coronavirus Updates in New York: Friday, May 15, 2020," *pix11.com,* May 15, 2020, https://pix11.com/news/coronavirus/latest-coronavirus-updates-in-new-york-friday-may-15-2020/, and Michael Schwirtz and Lindsey Rogers Cook, "These N.Y.C. Neighborhoods Have the Highest Rates of Virus Deaths," *The New York Times,* July 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/18/nyregion/coronavirus-deaths-nyc.html.

Covid-19 cases.[26] But although Democratic messaging consistently billed the 2020 election as the most important election in history, the party hesitated to mobilize. Davis notes that "the thousands of union members" who generally door-knock for Democrats "were on the whole stood down."[27] The lack of effort to connect with Latin American voters, who had shown enthusiasm for the economic populist messaging of Bernie Sanders in the primary, was summed up by one commentator as "political malpractice."[28] Though more showed up than ever before to vote, exit polls revealed a rightward lurch. In the end, Biden managed to win back the traditionally Democratic-leaning states — Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania — that Clinton lost in 2016. Antipathy toward Trump among suburbanites in Arizona, and the voter turnout efforts of Black-led grassroots organizing groups in Georgia, further aided in sparing the nation from a second Trump presidency.[29] But overall, Biden's stay-at-home campaign produced nowhere near the resounding victory that tenured political science professors were still anticipating on the

26 Tommy Beer, "Research Determines Protests Did Not Cause Spike in Coronavirus Cases," *Forbes,* July 1, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/07/01/research-determines-protests-did-not-cause-spike-in-coronavirus-cases/?sh=5882c0ee7dac.

27 Davis, "Trench Warfare," 6.

28 Sean Sullivan, "Hispanic Voters Are Growing in Power. Why Are Democratic Presidential Candidates Ignoring Them?" *The Washington Post,* December 26, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hispanic-voters-are-growing-in-power-why-are-democratic-presidential-candidates-ignoring-them/2019/12/26/dbf21396-1ff9-11ea-a153-dce4b94e4249_story.html. As 2020 election results rolled in, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted, "we've been sounding the alarm about Dem vulnerabilities w/ Latinos for a long, long time. There is a strategy and a path, but the necessary effort simply hasn't been put in." @AOC, *Twitter,* November 3, 2020, 11:29 pm, https://twitter.com/aoc/status/1323844716010549252.

29 Garrett Archer, "How President Joe Biden Pulled Off a Win in Arizona," *abc15.com,* January 20, 2021, https://www.abc15.com/news/election-2020/how-president-joe-biden-pulled-off-a-win-in-arizona, and Anna North, "6 Black Women Organizers on What Happened in Georgia — and What Comes Next," *Vox,* November 11, 2020, https://www.vox.com/21556742/georgia-votes-election-organizers-stacey-abrams.

Fig. 5.2. George Floyd protestors confront riot control in front of the White House. Photograph by Rosa Pineda, May 30, 2021. Wikimedia Commons.

eve of the election. One can only wonder how many winnable state and congressional seats were sacrificed. As Davis wrote, "the down ticket results were disastrous for those expecting a landslide."[30]

As for Trump, whose term in office had been spent, according to some critics, "lazing in the White House residence and live-tweeting his reactions to Fox News," so intent did he become on flouting the stay-at-home guidelines that he and a few dozen of his staff eventually came down with the virus.[31] While he was out speaking unmasked before large crowds, his campaign sent volunteers to knock on doors throughout the country. In the process, he was able to advance the absurd notion that he was a man of the people.

Yet for all the time Trump recklessly spent in public, there was one memorable image of home produced by his adminis-

30 Davis, "Trench Warfare," 8.

31 David Smith, "'Executive Time': How, Exactly, Does Trump Spend 60% of His Day?" *The Guardian,* February 7, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/feb/07/executive-time-donald-trump-white-house.

Fig. 5.3. Patricia McCloskey and her husband Mark McCloskey draw their firearms on protesters as they enter their neighbourhood during a protest against St. Louis Mayor Lyda Krewson, in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S. June 28, 2020. REUTERS/Lawrence Bryant/Alamy Stock Photo.

tration in the lead-up to the election: the White House with its lights off while Black Lives Matter protestors rallied outside on Pennsylvania Avenue (fig. 5.2). No doubt, the seemingly defensive gesture of killing the lights played to Trump supporters' exaggerated fears of Antifa violence. At the same time, the legions of cops outside the gates, ready to ensure that "*lawn* and order" were persevered, offered a model to homeowners like the St. Louis couple that appeared in front of their property later that summer with an assault rifle and handgun aimed at protestors (fig. 5.3). In a divided country, this "no trespassing" posture figured the premonitory obverse of the image of the Capitol property overrun by Trump supporters in January.

Sancta Sanctorum

An array of incitements led to the January 6 insurrection, but in the vein of architectural signification, one event deserves spe-

cial mention. In December of 2020, a month prior to the events at the Capitol, Trump signed an executive order "promoting beautiful federal civic architecture" and decrying governmental buildings that are appreciated by "the architectural elite, but not the American people who [*sic*] the buildings are meant to serve."[32] One day later, Trump would voice support for $2000 stimulus checks, a measure which might have delivered him the election had he supported it earlier.[33] Not that Trump's belatedness mattered to his most faithful followers, who, in lieu of any actual improvement in their material circumstances, continued to content themselves with symbolic gestures. As the Architecture Lobby (T-A-L) — a group advocating democracy within the field of architecture — noted of an earlier leaked draft of Trump's executive order, the language deployed by the administration glorified the same "imperialist, colonialist, and white supremacist past" that had always hovered fantasmatically around the project of Making America Great Again. This observation would soon be validated by the image of one insurrectionist marching through the halls of the Capitol with an enormous confederate flag over one shoulder. T-A-L further argued that "the need to limit architectural style is motivated by a fear of the people and populist expression."[34] On this point, however, the organization betrayed its overly optimistic conception of the role played by architecture under hypercapitalist modernity. Refreshing as it may be to see populism invoked outside the context of false

32 "Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture (Executive Order 13967)," *Federal Register,* December 23, 2020, https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/12/23/2020-28605/promoting-beautiful-federal-civic-architecture.

33 Daniel Luban suggests that "Trump's failure to press for relief in the run-up to the election might go down as the final fatal blunder of his presidency." Daniel Luban, "The Not-So-Strange Death of Right Populism," *Dissent,* Winter 2021, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-not-so-strange-death-of-right-populism.

34 The Architecture Lobby, "T-A-L Statement on Trump's Executive Order Affecting Federal Architecture," *The Architecture Lobby,* n.d., http://architecture-lobby.org/project/t-a-l-statement-on-trumps-executive-order-affecting-federal-architecture/.

equivalences between its left and right currents, it is more accurate to say that Trump's order was itself a form of "populist expression" motivated less by "fear of the people" than by a keen grasp of his constituency's anxieties and desires.

Democrats' second impeachment of Trump, in the wake of the Capitol storming, may have been doomed from the start, if not simply because of partisan divides in the Senate then because of the narrow scope of the incitement offenses upon which it was premised. But the events of January 6 unmistakably bear the stamp of Trump's dark arts, which is to say: his uncanny abilities as a real estate huckster. What Trump sold his hardcore supporters, at the cost of multiple lives and all manner of destruction, was the inhabitable emblem of their political entitlement. The repeated cry "this is our house!" echoing through the Capitol's corridors confirmed the power of a conceit emblematized forty years earlier by the original Trump Tower's advertising copy: "It seems a fantasy. And you are home."

On January 6, Trump supporters' literal inhabitation of fantasy unfolded through a strange intermingling of the sacred and the profane. The rioters who breached the Capitol that day immediately took to stealing property, urinating on the floors, and smearing feces throughout the building. This was described by horrified Democrats as a form of "desecration," an "effort to degrade" the space, though it was just as much an act of territorial marking and repossession.[35] In any case, even as these acts of profanation were unfolding, many of those who had entered the building seemed to be undergoing a quasi-religious experience. This was most emphatically expressed in relation to the building's two *sancta sanctorum*: the large rotunda at the center of the Capitol and the Senate chamber at its northern flank.

The massive dome above the rotunda borrows heavily from iconic religious architecture such as St. Paul's Cathedral in Lon-

35 Carl Campanile and Yaron Steinbech, "Rioters Left Feces, Urine in Hallways and Offices during Mobbing of US Capitol," *New York Post,* January 8, 2021, https://nypost.com/2021/01/08/rioters-left-feces-urine-in-hallways-and-offices-during-mobbing-of-us-capitol/.

Fig. 5.4. The Capitol Dome as glimpsed in a video by Jayden X. Screenshot.

don and St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Its awe-inspiring height imbues the story of the nation's founding, told through a series of John Turnbull paintings that hang beneath it on the rotunda walls, with a vivid sense of sacrality. Judging from the reactions of those who passed through the space on January 6, its combined aesthetic effects have not diminished in the age of virtual spectacle. Nowhere was this more evident than in a video captured by John Sullivan, aka Jayden X, who, as film critic J. Hoberman helped bring to light, produced what is perhaps the single most astonishing record of the Capitol storming.[36] Though Sullivan is more than enthusiastic throughout the first half of his thirty-nine-minute handheld video recording, his excitement reaches a climax upon entering the rotunda (figs. 5.4, 5.5). "Holy shit! What is this?" he exclaims. "What is life? What is life right now?"[37]

In a piece for the *Intercept,* Robert Mackey points out that Sullivan's work, which includes videos taken at a variety of protests organized by both the left and the right, spotlights "the ever-thinner line between journalism and activism." It also reflects the increasingly collapsed boundary between "real life" and life

36 J. Hoberman, "Capitol Records," *Artforum,* January 15, 2021, https://www.artforum.com/film/j-hoberman-on-jayden-x-s-shooting-and-storming-of-the-us-capitol-in-washington-dc-84911.

37 Jayden X, "The Insurrection of The United States Capitol and Shooting of Ashli Babbitt," *YouTube,* January 7, 2021. Video no longer available.

Fig. 5.5. Trump supporters making their way through the Capitol rotunda in a video by Jayden X. Screenshot.

on the internet. Commentators have struggled to pinpoint Sullivan's political affinities. Mackey notes that the videographer is "a former elite speed skater, Uber driver and cybersecurity salesman who reinvented himself as a self-described Black liberation activist in 2020" but was distrusted by many within the BLM movement. After the January 6 events, Sullivan claimed that he was at the Capitol not as a Trump supporter but to observe the events and collect "counter-intel."[38] Nevertheless, his enthusiasm for the sheer magnitude of what he captured is palpable. It brings to mind the awe-struck cries ("what does this mean?") of the so-called "Double Rainbow Guy," whose 2010 viral YouTube video of a double rainbow arcing across the mountains of Yosemite National Park has had over 50 million views since it was posted.[39] Sullivan's running commentary exemplifies a relatively new kind of ritual wherein the expression of wonder is as much related to the event itself as to the awareness that it will almost instantaneously be seen and felt by viewers around the world. Regardless of the politics of its maker, his video testifies

38 Robert Mackey, "John Sullivan, Who Filmed Shooting of Ashli Babbitt in Capitol, Detained on Federal Charges," *The Intercept,* January 14, 2021, https://theintercept.com/2021/01/14/capitol-riot-john-sullivan-ashli-babbitt/.

39 Yosemitebear62, "Yosemitebear Mountain Double Rainbow 1-8-10," *YouTube,* January 8, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQSNhk5ICTI.

to the enchantment that Trump — the first truly online president — brought not only to hardened white supremacists but to millions of spectacle-junkies and grifters whose lives and livelihood revolve around the internet.

That the world re-enchanted in the age of online infotainment also benumbs one to less virtual realities is made apparent, in Sullivan's video, following the graphically documented fatal shooting of January 6 rioter, Ashli Babbit. As Babbit lies bleeding on the floor, Sullivan is approached by a man claiming to be from *InfoWars* and requesting a copy of the footage. Sullivan's immediate response is, "Dude, this shit's gonna go viral." Then, as though needing to remind himself of what he has just witnessed, he adds, "I can't believe I saw somebody die. I. Saw. Someone. Die."[40]

Sullivan and the group in which he embedded himself never made it to the Senate floor. But writer Luke Mogelson, of *The New Yorker,* did. In his more widely circulated video of the events, a Capitol police officer describes the Senate Chamber as "like, the sacredest place," as he meekly attempts to discourage insurrectionists from desecrating the room. Soon after, the now quasi-famous Viking hat-wearing Q-Anon influencer Jake Angeli (a.k.a. Q Shaman) leads a prayer for a motley congregation of men gathered around Vice President Mike Pence's desk. Through a megaphone, Angeli thanks "our heavenly father" for giving "the inspiration needed to these police officers to allow us into this building, to allow us to exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists, and the globalists that this is our nation not theirs." After invoking "our Lord Christ," the prayer concludes with a resounding "amen." Some of the men standing there seem possessed by an overwhelming joy and gratitude — the same that seems to be expressed by the long cry that Angeli can be observed bellowing forth upon his initial entry into the chamber. Others stand there awkwardly, trying to be a part of the moment, aware all the

40 Jayden X, "The Insurrection of The United States Capitol and Shooting of Ashli Babbitt."

while of the cameras fixed on them. Although Angeli is more at ease in his role than the others, they are all self-conscious performers in a ritual that is no more a political act than it is a fulfillment of desire in itself. In this moment, just to be there, to bear witness — and maybe end up on the internet — seems reason for gratitude.[41]

The F Word

One could hardly ask for a stranger case study than the above when it comes to addressing a question that lingered in the wake of the attacks: can we finally, definitively, call Trumpism a form of fascism? Certainly, at the level of fantasy, our object of inquiry throughout this study, Trumpism would seem to diverge in essential ways from the nazism to which it has frequently been likened. Consider, for example, Klaus Theweleit's seminal investigations in *Male Fantasies*, which describe fascism as rooted in "anti-eros," its propaganda amounting to "a battle against everything that constitutes enjoyment and pleasure." By contrast, Trump's mantra, as we observed last chapter, has always been "enjoy!" It seems undeniable that in the teeming hordes that Trump incited to storm the Capitol one finds something much closer to "the Mass" — reviled, in Theweleit's account, by the fascist mind — than to the contrasting "volk": the people "shaped into proper form" by a disciplined nationalism.[42] Fascist tendencies, however, find different formations in different epochs. As Ajay Chaudhary argues, the Trump movement needs to be understood in the context not only of its historical precedents, but its contemporary parallels in the right-wing nationalisms that have gripped India, Brazil, Hungary, Turkey, and the Philippines. Chaudhary describes Trumpism as a response to what

41 The New Yorker, "A Reporter's Footage from Inside the Capitol Siege," *YouTube,* 00:12:32, January 17, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=270F8s5TEKY.

42 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Vol. 2: Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror,* trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 7, 84.

Antonio Gramsci called "an 'organic crisis' in capitalism," noting that for all Trump's "bluster and incoherence" he told "a deeply compelling story" about how white workers had "been screwed" by the global elite. He further reminds us that — like today's Q-Anon cultists — the Nazis subscribed to some "downright silly, occult, and conspiratorial ideas."[43]

The assemblage of characters glimpsed in Mogelson's video includes self-appointed henchmen of the Republican party rifling through documents looking for "something we can use" against the Democrats, nationalists invoking Christ in the name of American capitalist supremacy, a few wide-eyed, fratty dudes looking for the right lead to follow, a self-serious army vet in combat gear warning that the space needs to be respected if not for its sacredness than because there is an "IO" — information operations — "war" going on. Presiding over it all in his Viking hat is Angeli, an organic food fanatic and conspiracist seizing an opportunity to boost his online notoriety. One could speculate about what percentage of the group that entered the Capitol is or was deeply committed to a coherent political agenda, but the question is beside the point. From the start, one of the gravest dangers of Trumpism has been its ability to sweep into its periphery the disaffected, the supposedly apolitical, the bored and simply out for a new thrill, or the desperate in search of a new arena in which to practice the brazen hucksterism for which Trump has been richly rewarded over the past half-century.

Daniel Luban writes that Trumpism is "less a fleshed-out ideological movement than a personality cult built around sharp friend-enemy divides."[44] But as Robert O. Paxton has observed, historical fascism was itself less dependent upon strict adherence to ideological principles than is often supposed. Twentieth-century fascism in Germany and Italy drew unmoored followers into its ranks by "posing as an 'anti-politics,'" a movement first and foremost opposed — as Trumpism ostensibly is or was — to

43 David Klion, "Neofascism after Trump," *Jewish Currents,* January 22, 2021, https://jewishcurrents.org/neofascism-after-trump.

44 Luban, "The Not-So-Strange Death of Right Populism."

a corrupt and ineffectual political establishment.[45] The point is that there probably always was good reason to describe Trumpism as a form of fascism; but also that fascism itself must be understood not simply on the basis of the avowed beliefs of its hardcore adherents but as a complex political formation opportunistically sprung from underlying social and political crises. If not exactly *Blut und Boden* or *Lebensraum,* what Trump promised, and in many ways delivered, to his followers was a cozy safe space in the public realm where violently fearful xenophobes, amoral opportunists, internet junkies, inveterate conformists, and various other denizens of the American abyss could kick back in comfort. Both the limits and the dreadful potentialities of the movement can be inferred from the manner in which this inhabitation of space was literalized on January 6.

Perhaps the single most emblematic image from that day is of an Arkansas man in Nancy Pelosi's office, leaning back in a chair with one boot up on a desk. Still more illustrative, however, of the sense of proprietary rights instilled in the crowd is the video of rioters ascending a stairway as a solitary, Black police officer attempts to redirect their course away from the Senate chambers. The recorded incident was immediately seized upon by the liberal press as an act of heroism, though the very fact that the officer in question was faced with having to singlehandedly undertake such an act pointed to a disturbing truth about the relationship of the Capitol police to the population confronting it on that day. It is not simply that the force demonstrated by officers toward the angry crowd differed wildly, as many commentators observed, from that with which BLM protestors were met the previous summer. It is that — individual acts of heroism notwithstanding — the institution of policing in the United States was always, already complicit with fascist life. This was made alarmingly apparent during the Summer of 2020 BLM protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin when footage emerged of police working alongside heavily armed militiamen, among them

45 Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2004), 58.

then-seventeen-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, who shot three protestors with an assault weapon, killing two of them. It was made clear again when images inside the Capitol emerged of officers posing for selfies and exchanging pleasantries with rioters. The message conveyed by these actions was the same voiced by one headstrong rioter captured in Sullivan's video, who is shown unhooking a cordon at the end of a long corridor and proudly exclaiming to the line of people behind him: "welcome home."

Performing Dominion

One thing that police officers' failure to keep putschists out of the Capitol Building — or, in Angeli's words, their decision "to allow" them in — implicitly affirmed was the redundancy of the rallying cry, "our house!" While wokeness (or its rhetoric) may have infiltrated (or been appropriated by) the US culture industry, within the halls of power, reactionary forces have long set the agenda in nearly every policy sphere, from the economy to health care, foreign relations, criminal justice, and the environment. What social policy gains have been made in recent decades are perpetually under threat, and progress at the cultural level is invariably met with backlash in the everyday and political arenas. Consider how broader mainstream representation of the trans community has coincided with both an uptick in violence against trans individuals and a legislative assault on trans rights.[46] Or how a resurgence of BLM activism and support has been met with the frenzied effort to suppress "critical race theory" in schools and to undermine legislation that protects the political enfranchisement of voters of color. Given the vise grip that Republican-appointed judges now have on the Supreme Court, it is certain that without a dramatic overhaul of

46 Jo Yurcaba, "As Anti-trans Violence Surges, Advocates Demand Policy Reform," *NBC News,* March 11, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/anti-trans-violence-surges-advocates-demand-policy-reform-n1260485, and "Legislation Affecting LGBTQ Rights across the Country," *ACLU,* n.d., https://www.aclu.org/legislation-affecting-lgbt-rights-across-country.

the judiciary, corporate interests and conservative social panic will determine the shape of the country's most powerful institutions for the foreseeable future.

At the same time, though it is something less than cold comfort, the storming of the Capitol is a visceral reminder that the deeply inegalitarian structures of American life can increasingly only be maintained through flagrantly undemocratic measures. This goes beyond the voter suppression, gerrymandering, and grievance politics that have combined with inherently undemocratic systems like the Electoral College to produce what Adam Jentleson calls the "minority-rule doom loop."[47] The fact that six Republican senators and over a hundred Republican congresspersons formally objected to the certification of President Biden's victory, even after the Capitol storming led some members to reconsider their objections, is indication that the American right has arrived at a crisis moment. The thwarting of democracy can no longer be carried out "respectably." Holding onto America the Great — the reactionary fantasyland that Trump did not invent but was able to distill into its essence like no politician in modern history — now demands all the vigilance of an occupying army.

Relevant, in this regard, are Nicholas Mirzoeff's remarks on the January 6 insurrection, which situate the event within the context of settler colonialism. For the colony, Mirzoeff observes, constituent power is attained first by "the claiming of dominion by adverse possession" and then by its "formaliz[ation] in a constitution, granting constituted power." The Capitol Building memorializes the American Revolutionary War and the subsequent formalization of power in the US Constitution. At the same time, it provides a dramatic stage for the "ongoing practice" of these actions. Mirzoeff describes the insurgency as a failed effort to "create a new form of constituted power." Yet by placing the event in the context of the "defense of Confeder-

47 Adam Jentleson, "How to Stop the Minority-Rule Doom Loop," *The Atlantic,* April 12, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com./ideas/archive/2021/04/how-stop-minority-rule-doom-loop/618536/.

ate statues" in Charlottesville in 2017, and as a reaction to the more recent toppling of white supremacist monuments during the George Floyd protests, he implies that it was, in essence, part of a larger "counterinsurgency."[48] Not so much a unique claiming of dominion, then, as an effort to preserve an existing conception of the US, which, like a colonial settlement, now finds itself beset by mounting rebellions. We will return to this image, which is also essential to Harney and Moten's theorization of political power, momentarily.

In his article, Mirzoeff highlights the theatrical dimension of the January 6 events. "The livestreamed 'people,'" he writes, "depicted themselves to themselves and their audience as the newly and properly constituted form of 'we, the people.'" Observing that the Capitol is a monument as much as a building, he describes the insurrection as a "monumental act." While a number of commentators noted that there was an element of Live Action Role Play to the way events unfolded, Mirzoeff situates the theatrics specifically in Civil War reenactment, an arena in which insurgents have "long practiced the overturning of history."[49]

We can isolate at least three dimensions of performance within this account. First, there is the seditious endeavor that aspires, however clumsily, to the performative dimension of the speech act — the gesture that would enshrine or reaffirm its participants' "constituted power." Second, there is the production of a living monument and repertoire of images that will compensate for the erstwhile monuments to white supremacy toppled by protestors in the preceding months and years. Third, there is what might be thought of, in the classic Freudian sense, as repetition in the place of remembering, a neurotic acting out that reenacts what ought to have been long ago relegated to the past.[50]

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48 Nicholas Mirzoeff, "The Capitol Insurgency and the Monument," *Monument Lab,* February 15, 2021, https://monumentlab.com/bulletin/the-capitol-insurgency-and-the-monument.

49 Ibid.

50 See Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II),"

This theater of anxiety, *ressentiment,* and — let us not forget — of enjoyment is marked by temporal ambiguity. Trumpism was always a project based in the resurrection of a fictional but no less nostalgically yearned-for past. During the liminal period between the election and the inauguration, however, Trump turned toward protecting his purportedly great monument from the encroaching future. At the fateful January 6 speech he delivered prior to the storming of the Capitol, the president drew characteristically on hyperbole and the imagery of architecture and enclosure:

> We are the greatest country on Earth and we are headed — and were headed — in the right direction. You know, the wall is built. We're doing record numbers at the wall. Now, they want to take down the wall. Let's let everyone flow in. Let's let everybody flow in. We did a great job in [*sic*] the wall. Remember, the wall, they said it could never be done. One of the largest infrastructure projects we've ever had in this country, and it's had a tremendous impact. That we got rid of catch and release. We got rid of all of this stuff that we had to live with. But now, the caravans — I think Biden's getting in — the caravans are forming again. They want to come in again and rip off our country. Can't let it happen.[51]

Conflating a breach of the nation's border wall with the impending transfer of power to the incoming administration, Trump's words directly invoke the aforementioned imagery of the besieged settlement. The speech both anticipates and rehearses the multiple theatrical dimensions of the event that it precedes.

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in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 12: The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works (1911–1913),* trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 145–57.

51 Brian Naylor, "Read Trump's Jan. 6 Speech, A Key Part of Impeachment Trial," *NPR,* February 10, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial.

In the slippage between "are headed" and "were headed" — between an image of greatness that is coming into being and one that has already been tragically lost — we can observe the obsessive logic of nostalgic repetition at play. Trump's breathless remarks about the wall are a reminder that his most famously "monumental act" as president is also one that needs to be perpetually reinforced on the political stage. Finally, in the unambiguous "can't let it happen," there is the directive to move from mere rehearsal to the real deal, the declaration of dominion.

Perceived through the events that transpired in their aftermath, Trump's words also perform one more task: they preemptively muddle the distinction between onslaught and self-defense. This is a time-tested sleight of hand, as we are reminded at the start of Harney and Moten's brief but dense theorization of the contemporary political landscape in the essay, "Politics Surrounded." Harney and Moten open their essay by recalling Michael Parenti's "classic anti-imperial analysis" of "the 'upside down' way that the 'make-believe media' portrays the colonial settlement." As they write, "in films like *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) or *Shaka Zulu* (1987), the settler is portrayed as surrounded by 'natives,'" an inversion by which "colonialism is made to look like self-defense."[52] Acknowledging the lengthy, inculcating history of this representational strategy may help us to better comprehend the hypnotic power of Trump's deployment of ethnonational pride and grievance, as well as the specific power that the image of the border wall carried, right up until the morning of January 6.[53] Unpacking some of the key insights from Harney and Moten's essay will also enable us, finally, to

52 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Politics Surrounded," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 17.

53 For an in-depth examination of not only Trump's wall but the role that borders and frontiers have more generally played throughout American history, see Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).

begin to consider the potential for emancipation from the oppressive spatial paradigms of the cultural and political present.

The Fort and the Surround

First, although Harney and Moten accept Parenti's basic insight concerning the reversal of "aggression and self-defense," they critically note that "the image of a surrounded fort is not false." Rather, they insist, "the false image is what emerges when a critique of militarised life is predicated on the forgetting of the life that surrounds it." At stake here is the seemingly foreclosed place of revolutionary action within the power struggles of the state and its subjects. For Harney and Moten, the "self-defense of the surround" against the "acquisitive violence" of the settler colonial "laager" (a stand-in for "militarised life" in general), can only take place *outside* of representational, purportedly democratic politics.[54] In their invocation of the radical ferment that they seek to affirm and enact, they call forth a series of terms that resonate throughout their broader writings: "the general and generative antagonism" of "the common" (or *undercommons*), "study," "planning," the mindful deployment of "critique," and, above all, the participation in "sociality," the "preservation," and "celebration" of a "sociopoetic force" and "common wealth" that is irreducible to accumulation and opposed to all systems of geographic and political economic "enclosure."[55]

Harney and Moten are aware that their conception of anti-political perseverance as the only means of defending "the surround" is "romantic" — even, perhaps, *irresponsible*. But, as they note, it finds historical precedent in the revolutionary theories and praxis of the Black Panthers, who envisioned and undertook a "revolution without politics": a militant refusal of "militarised life" grounded in "ongoing planning," a perpetually self-generating anti-imperial framework at once constitutive of and

54 Harney and Moten, "Politics Surrounded," 17.
55 Ibid., 17–19.

committed to preserving "Black social life."[56] The vitality and ongoing necessity of what Harney and Moten term "general antagonism" is made more apparent when one considers the supposedly "responsible" politics to which it is opposed.

Politics, as Harney and Moten describe it, is the "recourse to self-possession" that the poor, the Black, the oppressed, have in the face of imperial power's violence and dispossession. Yet it is at the same time an "attack on the common — the general and generative antagonism — from within the surround" itself. This is because what politics aims at is the representation of the surround by way of existing institutions of power, which are both threatened by and opposed to the "sociopoetic force" of the common. If the standard liberal position holds out the possibility of reforming institutions from within, Harney and Moten emphasize the way in which entering an institution's ranks inevitably means subjecting *oneself* to reform. "All institutions are political," they write, "and all politics is correctional, so it seems we need correctional institutions in the common, settling it, correcting us." As an alternative to dispossession, politics proposes an alluring tradeoff wherein one accepts complicity with power structures in the name of "self-possession" or possessive individualism: the proverbial claiming of one's "place in the sun," be it socially, professionally, economically, etc. We have seen repeatedly that where possessive individualism is at stake, the fantasy of home, in all its violently acquisitive antisociality, is usually close at hand. This fantasy is one that Harney and Moten refuse: "We say, rightly, if our critical eyes are sharp enough, that it's evil and uncool to have a place in the sun in the dirty thinness of this atmosphere; that house the sheriff was building is in the heart of a fallout zone."[57] To be at home in a world built on ruination is not only, necessarily, to consent to power but to expose oneself to a toxic atmosphere that sooner or later will make its corrosive effects known.

56 Ibid., 20, 18.
57 Ibid., 17, 20, 18.

In the final assertion of the essay, "we can't be represented," and in its passing reference to "the election that was won [that] turns out to have been lost," one can read a veiled disillusionment with the Obama presidency, against which political backdrop the essay was published. But Harney and Moten's steadfast refutation of a question that is central to the essay — whether the tools of the master can dismantle the master's house[58] — is generalizable to democratic politics; and their spatio-political theorizations map onto the current political landscape in ways that are elucidating. To sum up the picture presented to us: we have a circle of power (the laager), encroaching outward but ever antagonized by the surround, which lies beyond its fortifications. The surround, however, is itself riven, seething with revolutionary impulses ("the general and generative antagonism," "outlaw planning," "sociality," etc.) and at the same time perpetually subject not only to the direct violence of militarized life but also to a politics of containment, which, for Harney and Moten, constitutes politics proper. In soliciting the surround with what they call the "illusory right" to individual sovereignty, politics immobilizes or settles the social world on behalf of which it purports to operate.[59] Under this model, even the best intentioned political strategies ultimately lead us back to the imperial fortress.

Returning to the events of January 6 with Harney and Moten's diagram of anti-political praxis in mind, we are confronted once again with the seemingly ambiguous position of the insurrectionists vis-à-vis the architectural emblem of power they were at once attempting to attack and "defend" (fig. 5.6). The violent storming of the Capitol spatially inverts the image of the besieged fort that Trump had deployed in his speech just hours prior to the failed insurrection. In an ironic twist befitting the contortions of reactionary fantasy, the colonialists find

58 See Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–13.

59 Ibid., 20, 18.

Fig. 5.6. The storming of the United States Capitol. Photo by Tyler Merbler, January 6, 2021, Wikimedia Commons.

themselves in the position of the native inhabitants of the land, scaling the barricades of the settlement to root out the invaders. Witnessed live on screens across the country, the events of January 6 are the perfectly "upside down," "make-believe" cinematic reinforcement for a movement made up of so-called "strangers in their own land."[60] Granted, some among the group may harbor legitimate grievances concerning their neglect by ruling elites, howsoever their judgment has been otherwise clouded. But we should be clear about what position the insurrectionists occupy relative to the figures of the fort and the surround in Harney and Moten's essay. A predominantly white but by no means strictly working-class population that self-identifies as the "real America" but has felt a portion of its unearned privilege slip from its grasp bears no comparison to a disproportionately non-white population that has been altogether locked outside of — and locked up in astounding numbers by — state power.

60 See Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

Whatever range of contradictory characters Trump's movement brought together, these internal differences, like those of previous fascist formations, are ultimately obscured in the phalanx, rendered insignificant by the magnitude of the collective action. Although the insurrection was spurred onward by a sense of grievance and involved breaking through police barricades to access a secured, fort-like structure, the Capitol storming was not a rebellion against but an effort to reassert the dominion of militarized life.

As Joshua Clover has remarked, in reference to the "dissonance" of Thin Blue Line flag bearing insurgents clashing with Capitol police officers: "The insurrectionists […] exemplify, despite the spectacle of disorder, the party of order." From the perspective of those who stormed the Capitol, the problem with the officers who stood in their way "was not that they were police, but that they were not police *enough*."[61] That is, they were not willing to sacrifice their immediate professional obligation to help maintain the reigning patriarchal, white-supremacist, private property-worshipping system of power that it has historically been the duty of the police to protect but which suddenly appeared threatened both by the incoming administration and by those clamoring outside the great wall invoked in Trump's speech.

Central to the insurrectionists' mentality, Clover tells us, is a form of vigilantism, of "order freed from law," that "is at the heart of 10,000 comic books." As in the universe of Batman and Punisher, it is viewed as necessary to "exist beyond order" so as "to impose the proper ordering of society."[62] This is another psychopathic fantasy, to be sure. It is a mistake, however, to imagine that this fantasy is not intimately bound up with the institution of policing itself; that where and when the fantasy rears its head, it is only because some small percentage of those involved are "just not very good people," to recall the words of

61 Joshua Clover, "The Insurrectionists' Reward," *Jewish Currents,* June 23, 2021, https://jewishcurrents.org/the-insurrectionists-reward.

62 Ibid.

President Biden. The contrary — that what we are dealing with is a deeply systemic pathology — is attested not only by the fact that many officers at the Capitol were, in fact, "police *enough*" but by police departments' historical rootedness in violent racial and economic oppression, and by their ongoing collaboration with vigilante-style paramilitary operations like the aforementioned one carried out by Rittenhouse.[63] Widening our view of criminal justice in this country, a systemic commitment to vigilantism is attested by lawmakers in dozens of states, who, in the wake of the 2020 BLM actions, brought forth a wave of "anti-protest legislation" that would give the police-adjacent bearer of an AR-15 or vehicular weapon even greater latitude than they already have when it comes to carrying out acts of violence in the name of order.[64]

All of this is necessary to clarify, since, in the wake of the Capitol storming, the picture described above has been clouded by the very voices most anxious to declare of the Trump movement, "that's not America." If the right's conviction that corporate media outlets like CNN or MSNBC disseminate "fake news" is absurd, it is not because these outlets are free of political bias. It is because the right assumes convolutedly that their bias operates not only on behalf of a privileged liberal elite, which it does, but on behalf of more radicalized segments of the population that such media outlets in fact serve to confound and contain: those who dream of abolition, redistribution, a common within the surround. Nothing better epitomizes the "false image" that emerges "when a critique of militarised life is predicated on the forgetting of the life that surrounds it" than liberal media com-

63 "The earliest origins of policing," Alex Vitale writes, "were tied to three basic social arrangements of inequality in the eighteenth century: slavery, colonialism, and the control of a new industrial working class." Just as popular entertainment inculcates a reverence for vigilante cops, "standard police training," Vitale notes, "instills a warrior mentality" — an aggressive approach to potential threats that contradicts research-based "best practices." Alex S. Vitale, *The End of Policing* (New York: Verso, 2021), 34, 82.

64 Clover, "The Insurrectionists' Reward."

mentary in the age of Trump. It is a pitiful irony that the insurrectionists, through the flagrancy of their documented actions at the Capitol, have furnished the most compelling alibi to date for this act of forgetting. Clover remarks how, well into the summer of 2021, the January 6 events were "still supply[ing] the lead story every night on CNN and MSNBC, providing special after special, news anchors spluttering with ratings-minded fury over the perfidy of the mob." Over the same period, Capitol police were repeatedly invited onto primetime programming so that hosts could "linger over every insult verbal and physical suffered by the officers, righteously calling for redress."[65] It is no surprise that as media coverage of police brutality was replaced by endless segments on the travails of men and women in blue, popular support for Black Lives Matter waned, along with pressure on lawmakers to enact reform, to say nothing of questioning the role of policing as such.[66]

This turn of events runs parallel to the political messaging of a Democratic Party that, from the Clinton administration onward, has eagerly positioned itself in symbiotic quasi-opposition to its rightwing counterpart. Throughout the Trump era, Democrats deployed a lengthy, tactical playbook of half-measured resistance, having been not so much forced as enabled by Republicans' delirious fearmongering to distinguish their brand of politics proper from the more radically anti-establishment left with which the right is all too happy to conflate it. In the interests not of the common but of the already self-possessing and overrepresented, the Democratic Party has perpetually sought to preserve the institutions of militarized life by defending them against and "rescuing" them from the clutches of those institutions' most avid adherents. If it has been able to do so effectively it is largely by virtue of a "make-believe media" apparatus that instills a sense of limited recourse — of having only the lesser

65 Ibid.

66 Claretta Bellamy, "Support for Black Lives Matter Movement is Declining, According to New Poll," *NBC News,* November 16, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/support-black-lives-matter-movement-declining-according-new-poll-rcna5746.

evil to turn to — in those who might otherwise be radicalized into alternate forms of social organization.

This is one way to think about what Harney and Moten mean when they refer to the "false image of enclosure," which "convinces us that we are surrounded, that we must […] remain in the emergency," fixated so thoroughly on the danger before us that we're immobilized, incapable of the more thoroughgoing subversion of the reigning order that "study," "critique," or "outlaw planning" implies, rendered vulnerable to the sway of "illusory administrators" who "whisper of our need for institutions."[67] Capturing the imagination of a surround that has been taught to forget revolution, politics confronts the language of the common with its own language of containment. In the mouths of center-left politicians, health care, housing, and education *for all* are made over as issues of affordability and access; ending capitalist exploitation becomes a matter of increasing entrepreneurial competition; and calls to defund the police are met with promises to invest in reform.

Following the January 6 attacks, the incoming administration's first order of business, before even taking office, was to develop a domestic terrorism strategy that the ACLU has said "would only expand authorities that target Black and Brown communities and people engaged in dissent for unjustified surveillance, investigation, and prosecution."[68] During Biden's first six months in office, the number of immigrants jailed by ICE in private and local detention centers grew by nearly 70 percent, while abuses within the system remained rampant.[69]

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67 Harney and Moten, "Politics Surrounded," 18, 20.

68 Hina Shamsi and Hugh Handeyside, "Biden's Domestic Terrorism Strategy Entrenches Bias and Harmful Law Enforcement Power," *ACLU,* July 9, 2021, https://www.aclu.org/news/national-security/bidens-domestic-terrorism-strategy-entrenches-bias-and-harmful-law-enforcement-power/.

69 Silky Shah, "Number of Immigrants Detained by ICE Has Increased 70 Percent Under Biden," *Truthout,* September 22, 2021, https://truthout.org/articles/number-of-immigrants-detained-by-ice-has-increased-70-percent-under-biden/, and Eunice Cho and Joanna Naples-Mitchell, "Cruelty and Coercion: How ICE Abuses Hunger Strikers," *ACLU,* June 29, 2021,

Despite calls to reign in the US war machine, the new administration's first defense budget of $715 billion dollars — to which the Democrat-controlled congress sought to add another $24 billion — was larger than Trump's the previous year.[70] In July of 2021, close to fifty activist groups signed a letter to the president denouncing the "growing Cold War mentality driving the United States' approach to China" and warning that it would undermine the desperate work of counteracting climate change.[71] In April 2021, Biden signed a bill extending Trump-era mandatory minimum sentences for low-level drug offenses.[72] As one criminal justice advocate put it, when it comes to tackling mass incarceration, the man who helped write and later bragged about the infamous 1994 crime bill has showed scant willingness to "tear down the house that he built."[73]

At the start of Biden's presidency, it was possible to believe that at the economic level the tides had begun to turn. In the wake of the government's $1.9 trillion stimulus package there were claims, by turns mildly convincing and foolishly optimistic, that we were witnessing at long last the end of neoliberal orthodoxy — that 2021 would be, as Cédric Durand called it, "1979

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https://www.aclu.org/news/immigrants-rights/cruelty-and-coercion-how-ice-abuses-hunger-strikers/.

70 Catie Edmondson, "Congress Moves to Increase Pentagon Budget, Defying Biden and Liberals," *The New York Times,* September 2, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/02/us/politics/congress-pentagon-budget-biden.html.

71 Kenny Stancil, "45+ Groups Say 'Future of Our Planet Depends on Ending New Cold War' between US and China," *Common Dreams,* July 8, 2021, https://www.commondreams.org/news/2021/07/08/45-groups-say-future-our-planet-depends-ending-new-cold-war-between-us-and-china.

72 Beth Schwartzapfel, "Biden Could have Taken the War on Drugs Down a Notch. He Didn't," *The Marshall Project,* June 16, 2021, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2021/06/16/biden-could-have-taken-the-war-on-drugs-down-a-notch-he-didn-t.

73 Carrie Johnson, "Activists Wait for Biden to Take Bold Action on Criminal Justice Reform," *NPR,* April 28, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/04/28/991503878/activists-wait-for-biden-to-take-bold-action-on-criminal-justice-reform.

in Reverse."[74] There were flickers of light in a spending package passed by the House of Representatives, which aimed to address the crises of homelessness, childhood poverty, and healthcare inequity in the US. But after the stonewalling of Biden's signature spending proposals by conservative Democratic senators Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, and the predictable rush, on the part of the liberal media, to portray the party in disarray and to pin the blame on progressives, it soon became prudent to manage expectations.[75] In the summer of 2021, dark clouds began to form on the horizon for the millions of households behind on rent payments, after a moratorium on evictions put into effect at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic was allowed to expire.[76] This at a time when the housing market, especially at the luxury end, was soaring to record highs.

In any case, as thinkers like Wendy Brown remind us, neoliberalism has never been simply about economic policy but about the dismantling of "society" as such, the production of aggressively individualist forms of subjectivity, and the perpetuation of a state of affairs in which "selling one's soul" is "quotidian, rather than scandalous."[77] On this front, little has changed or is likely to soon. The minimal relief provided to the millions devastated by the greatest global health crisis in a century has done nothing to diminish acquisitive violence and the plague of possessive individualism. Loud as ever, the surround is beckoned by the interpellative call to *settle* down, to embrace the security, and

74 Cédric Durand, "1979 in Reverse," *Sidecar,* June 1, 2021, https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/1979-in-reverse.

75 "Democrats Deny Political Reality at Their Own Peril," *The New York Times,* November 4, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/04/opinion/democrats-election-results.html, and Maureen Dowd, "Wokeness Derails the Democrats," *The New York Times,* November 6, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/06/opinion/sunday/democrats-elections.html.

76 Sema K. Sgaier and Aaron Dibner-Dunlap, "How Many People are at Risk of Losing Their Homes in Your Neighborhood?" *The New York Times,* July 28, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/opinion/covid-eviction-moratorium.html.

77 Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 163.

added property value, bestowed by the police state, to claim a place in the sun, a "home sweet home" on the range that is often unceded Indigenous territory and always historically tied to the plantation system on which the nation's uncommon wealth was founded.[78] If anything, with the exit of Trump from the White House, a sense of shame has lifted. The gaudy lettering that adorned the facade of Hotel America has been removed. That house the sheriff was building in the heart of a fallout zone is under new management. The adults are in charge now. Why tear it all down when — in the buoyant language of Biden's doomed legislative framework — we can Build Back Better?

Politics Unsettled

It may be too soon to assert, after Harney and Moten, that "the election that was won turns out to have been lost." What is certain is that militarized life prevails. The laager and its institutions prevail. The brutality inflicted on the common prevails. Self-possession of the few by dispossession of the many prevails. This is America. Or, in the vocabulary developed over the course of this chapter, this is the divided state you get when the politics of denial, which convinces you that it's merely bad apples and not the institution that's rotten, meets the politico-mediatics of forgetting, which amplifies a narrow vision of the crisis at the expense of those it threatens most. All that is possible is contained within the system. Dreaming of anything beyond it is a foolish waste of time. The besieged settlement, raising a different flag above its fortifications, calls the wayward home. What would it mean to refuse this call?

It might mean, first of all, forgoing the politics of denial and recognizing the US as the exploitative, hypermilitarized, capitalist-imperialist state that it is. Such recognition has been

78 Affirming their anti-politics of "upheaval," Harney and Moten write: "We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home." Harney and Moten, "Politics Surrounded," 20.

exceedingly rare within the political mainstream, but recently there have been inklings of change. After unseating a sixteen-term incumbent congressman whose commitments to imperialist exploits, militarized life, and settler-colonial violence are well documented, Rep. Jamaal Bowman offered an unflinching assessment of the empire he nominally serves:

> We've moved from physical chattel enslavement and physical racial segregation to a plantation economic system. […] The pandemic has revealed it. With almost 300,000 dead from the pandemic, disproportionately Black and brown, and Jeff Bezos is the first $200 billionaire. […] That's slavery by another name. It's a system that's not working, so we need a new system."[79]

Like much of what has been said by an expanding roster of socialist or at least staunchly progressive candidates who have entered the US political arena over the past five years, Bowman's words reflect a paradigm shift in terms of what elected officials are able to discuss when it comes to the US and its institutions. Unfortunately, it hasn't taken long for the congressman and others to dramatically throw into question whether this paradigm shift extends to what is actually possible when it comes to bringing the unsettling force of the common into the halls of power.[80] But the renewal of a more radical discourse within the broadly defined ranks of the Democratic mainstream might, neverthe-

79 Jamaal Bowen, quoted in Terrell Jermaine Starr, "Jamaal Bowman Wants to Reimagine the Democratic Party," *The Root,* December 21, 2020, https://www.theroot.com/jamaal-bowman-wants-to-reimagine-the-democratic-party-1845926398.

80 Bowman provoked disappointment among his supporters following his "yes" vote on funding Israel's Iron Dome missile system, and a subsequent visit to Israel in which he met with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, in defiance of the pro-Palestinian Boycott Divestment and Sanctions movement. Further, whereas "squad" members Cori Bush, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley, and Rashida Tlaib voted "no" on the missile defense system, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez took considerable heat for her "present" vote on the bill.

less, be cause for reexamining Harney and Moten's account of politics.

Harney and Moten's essay not only partakes of the broad disillusionment with electoral politics that surged after the 2007–8 financial crash; it also reflects the "romantic" spirit of the Occupy movement (2011–12) when it comes to the generative possibilities of radical pedagogy and decentralized, communal agitation. In the latter respect, the essay is still deeply relevant in the wake of the Black-led community gatherings and marches that overtook the nation's streets and parks during the summer of 2020. At the properly political level, however, it may be too pessimistic to reduce recent leftward currents to that same old "hope," which, in Harney and Moten's characterization, has been "deployed against us in ever more perverted and reduced form by the Clinton-Obama axis for much of the last twenty years."[81]

In the US, at least, in the wake of the perceived failures of the Occupy movement to defend the surround against the ruthless plunder of the one percent, many of its adherents shifted their ambitions away from anti-political planning or study and toward the project of making direct demands upon and, indeed, seizing control of the state. No small part of this energy eventually found mainstream expression in the 2016 Sanders presidential campaign under the banner of "political revolution." The expression is a contradiction in terms if we stay content with the definition of politics advanced by Harney and Moten. But perhaps the version of politics at issue here can be said to have moved in the direction of their discourse, having adopted its own strategy of "surrounding democracy's false image in order to unsettle it," and of "open[ing] the enclosure" of the militarized state, in the name not of any individual figurehead ("we can't be represented") but of a movement, a collective social enterprise, a felt togetherness, a preservation of the common.[82] That, at least,

81 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "Planning and Policy," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 76.

82 Harney and Moten, "Politics Surrounded," 19, 20.

seemed to have been the intention expressed by the slogan of the (once again) ill-fated 2020 Sanders campaign: "Not Me, Us."

In the end, the political revolution that Sanders envisioned was stymied by precisely the forces Harney and Moten warn against.[83] Yet the ferment that found symptomatic expression in consecutive presidential cycles, where it was embraced by a startling majority of young voters of every race, gender identification, and sexual orientation has yet to be extinguished. Candidates running on defiantly anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist platforms — many with the endorsement of the Democratic Socialists of America — now occupy office at the federal, state, or local level in more than half the states in the country. Some of the most prominent campaign successes have come from those who had never previously run for office: nurses, tenant organizers, and one very famous former bartender. Relying heavily on individual small donations, these inexperienced candidates have faced off against a well-funded, hostile party machine, and in a surprising number of cases they have torn open what remains an obsessively gatekept political enclosure. At the local level, these successes have often been achieved on the basis of a simple, retroactively affirmed truth that party stalwarts would prefer remain forgotten: "the fort really was surrounded." In districts nominally represented by no-show officials rewarded for their party loyalty and venality, the most straightforward pavement-pounding, door-knocking mobilization has been enough to unsettle established power structures.

New York mayor Eric Adams — whose electoral victory against more progressive candidates was seized upon by centrists and cynics as an opportunity to discredit BLM activists and the left — announced in the summer of 2021 that he's no longer simply jousting with other politicians but contending with a nationwide "movement" opposed to his fear-mongering, pro-

83 In a move that would seem to confirm Harney and Moten's suspicions about the way of all political institutions, Our Revolution, the organization spawned by the Sanders campaign, announced in 2021 that it would be rebranding its approach as "pragmatic progressivism."

cop, pro-development, welfare recipient-shaming agenda.[84] No doubt the wing of the Democratic party that Adams represents continues to exemplify politics conceived of as an "attack on the common […] from within the surround." And the latter characterization was widely applicable during the Obama years, when a grassroots movement catapulted its charismatic leader to the presidency only to find itself either institutionally "corrected" or languishing outside the gates of power. But from the standpoint of the present, it would seem necessary to make room for a new category of *political unsettling,* understood as an attack on established politics in the name of the common.

A Change of Hope

Or maybe this is cruel optimism speaking. It's deeply encouraging to see a politics of the common at work in districts where, previously, politicians had rarely shown their faces unless it was to greenlight luxury development. There is also an empowering sense of sociality that comes from knowing elected officials are prepared to march alongside their constituents in defiance of government-imposed, police-enforced ordinances, like some representatives did following the curfews issued in multiple cities during the summer of 2020 protests. But it's easy to mistake the incipient emergence of real hope for genuine change, the more so given the degradation to which the terms of political aspiration in the US have been submitted under the "Clinton-Obama axis."

Creating a United States that looks anything like the land of the free that young people have begun to envision en masse for the first time in two generations will require more than the modest bravery of college-educated idealists organizing in semi-gentrified neighborhoods. As many young idealists are realisti-

84 Carl Campanile and Bruce Golding, "'Running against a Movement': Eric Adams Declares War on AOC's Socialists," *New York Post,* July 27, 2021, https://nypost.com/2021/07/27/eric-adams-declares-war-on-aocs-socialists/.

cally aware, it will require further diversifying the racial, economic, and generational makeup of what remains a burgeoning movement; building ties with and aiding in the rebuilding of decimated labor organizations; forging alliances between and navigating infighting among adjacent activists both nationally and internationally; and, perhaps most relevant to our immediate concerns, avoiding being reduced to mere sheepdogs of the institutions that presently obstruct justice. On this last point, Harney and Moten's steadfast defiance returns to remind us that every politics, "even the politics of the commons, of the resistance to enclosure," is in danger of becoming institutionalized and "corrected."[85] Call it "dual power," an "inside/outside" strategy, or "non-reformist reforms," the political unsettling that has made itself known in recent years will only succeed if it remains accountable to the "general and generative antagonism" of the common — the para-political, extra-political, and, indeed, anti-political force within the broader surround. This means making room for the ruthless criticism that Harney and Moten invoke with the term "critique," even or especially when well-meaning allies — out of the fear of fractiousness, a strategy of appeasement, or a sense of gratitude ("we needed a win") — try to silence it. It means refusing incentives to singularly focus energy and resources on electoralism. It means perpetually renewing the sociality and "outlaw planning" that might make it possible to seize the opportunity for a more radical transformation of the reigning order should the instigating crisis arise. Political revolution, in this sense, is a contradiction in terms working toward its own eventual dissolution.

What of Trump in all this — have we forgotten him already?

There is gratification and relief in seeing the Big Man deposed from the White House, all but run out of New York City, pursued by legal troubles, and banned from social media, which, in the end, is perhaps the locus of Trumpspace whose absence has been most acutely felt. As for the tin-pot dictatorialism and "poor man's rich man" schtick, they may well end up

85 Harney and Moten, "Politics Surrounded," 18.

Fig. 5.7. Cori Bush on the steps of the People's House. Screenshot.

seeming quaint before we know it, a last-ditch appeal to fading nostalgia that was already half-overtaken by no less insidious forces before the era he has come to define has ended. The desperate desire to drink the oceans dry has only increased since the original Trump Tower marketed itself as the ultimate fantasy forty years ago. At the start of the new decade, the limits of acquisitive possibility that superluxury living once represented have been superseded by a new frontier: not Trumpspace but outer space. Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk blasting off in private rocket ships furnish the visual metaphor for

the escape velocity with which billions evade taxation each year. Another chapter begins in what Donna Haraway has called "the great prick story" of "fossil-making man," whose "burning ambitions," if they are not brought down to earth, will be the end of us all.[86] How might the earthbound intervene in this world-destroying pursuit of cold and desolate horizons? How might we learn to listen with different ears to the world's (at the time) wealthiest individual, Bezos, addressing customers and workers upon his return from the thermosphere: "you guys paid for all this"?[87]

How might more among us hear the call heard by first term congresswoman Cori Bush and the small group of activists who showed up at the People's House on August 1, 2021 to protest the expiration of the moratorium on evictions put into effect during the height of the pandemic? In a video posted to Instagram, Bush stands on the steps of the political enclosure she — a formerly unhoused activist and nurse — has helped to force open by another hairsbreadth.[88] The Capitol dome rises above her (fig. 5.7). She moves and, at intervals, hums along to the hymn sung by a man seated a few steps away from her: "there is housing in that land / there is housing, in that land / there is housing in that land / where I'm bound, where I'm bound / there is freedom in that land / so much freedom in that land / there is freedom in that land / where I'm bound…." The rain falling from the sky mixes with the tears on her cheeks. She will spend the night on the steps of the Capitol, as she has the previous one, outdoors, but with a key to her office inside the building. Sustaining and embodying, through her actions, a relation

86 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 46.

87 Anne D'Innocenzio, "Jeff Bezos Thanked Every Amazon Employee and Customer 'Because You Guys Paid for All of This,' Prompting Criticism," *The Boston Globe,* July 21, 2021, https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/07/21/business/jeff-bezos-thanked-every-amazon-employee-customer-because-you-guys-paid-all-this-prompting-criticism/.

88 Cori Bush, "Sunday Morning," *Instagram,* August 1, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CSCVsXOFIKF/.

to the life that surrounds the emblem of power before which she stands, and dances, and prays. A few young people, some ways off, clap along. They number less than a dozen. They will number no more than a few dozen before the protest has concluded. As for Bush's colleagues, most have already left for vacation. Only a handful of usual suspects will show up to lend her support.

In its solemnity, its simplicity, and in the achievement of its albeit modest demands (the moratorium's reinstatement), this moment of refusal stands in striking contrast to the scene that unfolded on these steps six months earlier. As an act of imagining, it is antithetical to the fantasies of acquisition and possession that consume the country, and that the great majority of representatives from both major political parties have dedicated their lives to nurturing. In that land, there is no "home sweet home" but housing for all, no "place in the sun" but a sense of the common, of being there together. Even in much smaller numbers than one would have hoped for. Even in the falling rain. Which is also to recall, after Moten, that "freedom is not a place," despite the desperate need for housing today, but "a practice" that must be constantly renewed, and that the destination that is sought in this moment is also generated in and through the seeking.[89] What sustains such practices is neither the politics of denial nor sensible compromises with the arc of the moral universe but a different kind of hope. One founded in clear-sightedness, a dedication to the struggle, and — in the words of an aphorism posted to social media by the poet and essayist Anne Boyer one week prior to the events just described — "the realism of knowing you can't know what happens next."[90]

89 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 228.

90 Anne Boyer, "hope is the realism of knowing you can't know what happens next," *Instagram,* July 24, 2021.

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