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The Uncanny Return of American Exceptionalism: Barack Obama v. The Tea Party Movement

Paul Giles gave expression to sentiments shared by the vast majority of American Studies scholars when he listed the foundational tropes of the American exceptionalist paradigm – Puritanism, the frontier, Manifest Destiny – as examples of topics American Studies scholars should no longer take as their objects of study. Giles further admonished that only by renouncing these remnants of an ahistorical fantasy will “transnational” and “transhemispheric American studies” plant a “stake through the heart of the unquiet corpse of American exceptionalism.”¹ Giles’ lurid staging of the fantasy of dis severing ties to American exceptionalism indirectly reveals the obstacles he confronts in accomplishing this aim.

It was their embrace of globalization as an interpretive framework that made transnational American Studies scholars’ feel obliged to repudiate American exceptionalism. Ironically, however, in mobilizing the shared antagonism of American americanists and international americanists alike, American exceptionalism has served as the indispensable basis for the formation of transnational American Studies. As Bryce Traister has shrewdly remarked, the rhetoric through which transnational American Studies scholars articulated their collectively shared desire to sever ties to American exceptionalism was itself expressive of an American exceptionalist fantasy:

¹ Paul Giles, “Commentary: Hemispheric Partiality,” *American Literary History* 18, no. 3 (2006): 648.

Isn't there something uniquely American—indeed, exceptional, about a restless critical search for a failsafe method to do American Studies? Isn't the endless search for the new (the original), the pure (the innocent), and the just (the Right) the most abidingly American way to go about doing things? Isn't criticizing America for failing to make good on its promise, both insular and exceptionalist, as it implicitly makes the United States the bearer of universal values?²

Despite the reaction formation of transnational American Studies scholars, American exceptionalism remains one of the most, if not the most, compelling narratives that pervade contemporary American political culture. Indeed American Studies scholars demand for its expulsion from respectable scholarly discourse has coincided with a spectacular upturn in the usage of the term within the public domain. Print media references to American exceptionalism increased from two in 1980 to a stunning 2,580 in 2012.³ Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Rand Paul, and other Republican candidates for the presidency supplied one rationale for this disconnect when they characterized anti-exceptionalist, left-leaning academics and the democratic political candidates they supported as anti-American.

The term that had formerly been restricted in its usage to political scientists and American Studies scholars took over conceptual center stage when the Homeland Security Apparatus presented difficulties for distinguishing the United States as a nation from the activities of a global empire. American exceptionalism became the default category politicians and policy-makers took up to manage citizens' understanding of the contradictory relationship between U.S. nationalism and U.S. imperialism in a transnational epoch.

In *The New American Exceptionalism*, a book that I published in 2010, I invoked the work of Ann Laura Stoler to authorize the claim that American exceptionalism could not be understood apart from the

² Bryce Traister, "The Object of Study; or, Are We Being Transnational Yet?," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2.1, March 31 (2010): 3, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/864843hs#page-1>

³ Jerome Karabel, "'American Exceptionalism' and the Battle for the Presidency," *Huffington Post*, December 22, 2012, www.huffingtonpost.com/jerome-karabel/american-exceptionalism-obama-gingrich_b_1161800.html

exceptions the U.S. imperial state constructed to get the better of its European rivals. According to Stoler, all “imperial states operate as states of exception that vigilantly produce exceptions to their principles and exceptions to their laws.” “When viewed from this vantage point,” Stoler adds, the United States is a quintessential empire, “a consummate producer of excepted populations, excepted spaces, and its own exception from international and domestic laws.”⁴

In the 20th century, state historians fashioned their accounts of U.S. domestic policies out of the conviction that the United States was different from European imperial states in that it repudiated the acquisition of colonies. Disowning knowledge of the historical realities of imported slave labor, of overseas colonialism, of the economic exploitation of refugees entailed historians’ differentiating the U.S. government’s domestic policies from the realpolitik of the international arena. But in their distribution of ethnic and ‘racialist’ differences into hierarchical social rankings, U.S. immigration laws in particular have depended upon stereotypes developed out of a residual colonial discourse.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, law and war were the most effective instruments that the state had devised to align disparate populations with the transnational Imperial Republic. When Justice Marshall described native tribes as “domestic dependent nations” voided of the right to the lands that they neither colonized nor cultivated, he intended that their condition of dependency be understood as the consequence of their lands having formerly been targeted for expropriation by European empires.

The trope of Manifest Destiny justified the state’s policies of Indian Removal by representing them as alternatives to European strategies of imperial colonization. Throughout the Cold War, American exceptionalism was assigned the role of distinguishing the U.S. state formation from Soviet Imperialism.

⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, “Imperial Formations and the Opacities of Rule.” In *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper, and Kevin W. Moore (New York: New Press, 2006), 57.

Despite American exceptionalism's standing as an invariant tenet of the national credo, disparate accounts of the discourse's content have changed with historical circumstances. As a classificatory scheme, American exceptionalism has been said to refer to clusters of absent – the absence of feudal hierarchies, class conflicts, socialist labor party, trade unionism, and divisive ideological passions – and present elements – the presence of a predominant middle class, tolerance for diversity, upward mobility, hospitality toward immigrants, a shared constitutional faith, and liberal individualism – that putatively set America apart from other national cultures. While descriptions of these particulars may have differed, the more or less agreed upon archive concerned with what made America exceptional would include the following phrases: America is a moral exception (the “City on the Hill”), America is a Nation with a “Manifest Destiny,” America is the “Nation of Nations,” America is an “Invincible Nation,” America is an “Immigrant Nation.”

These conceptual metaphors do not supply definitions of America; they give directions for finding meanings intended to corroborate the belief in American exceptionality. All of which leads to the conclusion that American exceptionalism operates less like a collection of discrete, potentially falsifiable descriptions of American society than as a belief structure through which U.S. citizens bring these contradictory political and cultural descriptions into correlation with one another through the desires that make them meaningful.⁵

American exceptionalism has been taken to mean that America is either ‘distinctive’ (meaning merely different), or that it is ‘unique’ (meaning anomalous), or ‘exemplary’ (meaning a model for other nations to follow), or that it is ‘exempt’ from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an ‘exception’ to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations). When one version of American exceptionalism no longer suited extant geopolitical demands, policy makers reconfigured its elements to address the change in geopolitical circumstances. Whereas the state's exceptions disarticulated the new policy from prevailing norms, the discourse of American exceptionalism

⁵ I elaborate on this genealogy in *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 7-12.

re-articulated the state's exceptions to a recognizable praxis by deciding upon which of the pre-existing tropes could normalize this new state policy. As it opened up spaces that were at once discursive and political, American exceptionalism infused a shared national vocabulary with political meanings that provided the state's exceptions with a magical efficacy that operationalized them into new protocols and significations.

Indeed American exceptionalism may have managed to survive precisely because the incompatible elements out of which it was composed lacked any fixed relationship to a binding state of affairs. The determination as to which of its phrases would be symbolically efficacious was a function of the historical events to which the fantasy was linked.

At moments of change *within* the Cold War epoch, American exceptionalism operated by way of the double function of selecting a specific set of themes and elevating one or another of them into the position of the metaconcept empowered to represent the entire cluster. It was the semantic indeterminacy of American exceptionalism that allowed this paradoxical linkage interconnecting descriptions which appeared to be empirical and even positivistic with the conceptual metaphors through which U.S. citizens made imaginative as well as practicable sense of them. While they might seem to have done the work of straightforward description, these multi-faceted frameworks and value-laden perspectives did not explain what American exceptionalism meant, they performed the overdetermining fantasy-work that regulated what it was supposed to mean, in what ways it should be analyzed, and how those meanings and modes of analysis were normalized.⁶

The relations between U.S. citizens' belief in U.S. Exceptionalism and the state's production of exceptions to its core tenets might be best described in psychosocial terms as structures of disavowal. For example, it was the United States' professed opposition to imperialism that constituted its exceptional standing throughout the Cold War. But it was the U.S. state's production of exceptions to these anti-imperialist norms that incited U.S. citizens' need to believe in U.S. exceptionalism.

⁶ For the conceptual turns of American exceptionalism and its relationship to state fantasy work, see Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, 12-17.

By the state's exceptions I refer to measures like the "Indian Removal Act" and the "Fugitive Slave Law" in the 19th century and "Operation Wetback," and the Vietnam War in the 20th century and the Iraq War and Drone strikes in the 21st that violated the anti-imperialist norms that were the bedrock of Cold War exceptionalism. In enabling U.S. citizens to disavow the state's exceptions that threatened their beliefs, exceptionalism regulated U.S. citizens' understanding of history.

U.S. dominance during the Cold War was sustained through the state's representation of the United States as an exception to the rules through which it regulated the rest of the global order. The Cold War fostered a cartographic imaginary that divided the planet into regions aligned with opposed ideological dispositions. After the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush inaugurated a State of Exception that did not just change the rules and norms informing the United States domestic and foreign policy, he also changed the interpretive framework through which those rules and norms could be understood.

George Bush used this contingent event to construct a legitimization of a politics of exceptional policies and practices. He sutured the problem of 'the exception' to a politics of exceptionalism that rested on the conflation of the *exceptional event* with both the exceptional sovereign *response* to that event as well as the sovereign *decision* to treat the event as exceptional in the first place. The nation's exceptional relationship to imperial power thereafter afforded the state with a historical past through which it re-entered the present after September 11, 2001 – as at once a particular nation-state and a global imperium.

But how was it possible that the Bush administration instituted an imperial state formation that did not require the structure of disavowal at work in the discourse of American exceptionalism? Bush's State of Exception did not require this structure of disavowal because it was its construction of itself as The Exception to the discursive norms of American exceptionalism that constituted the grounding authority of its power to rule.

President Bush disassociated the State of Exception from the normalizing powers of the discourse of American exceptionalism because he wanted to render the state exempt from answering to its

norms. In declaring the U.S. *The Exception* to the rules and treaties governing other nations, the Bush administration redefined sovereignty as predicated less upon national control over territorial borders than upon the state's exercising control over global networks.⁷

After 9/11, President Bush declared a global war on terror that established a transnational State of Exception that he named the Homeland Security State. In identifying U.S. exceptionalist status with the imperatives of the Homeland Security State, the new American exceptionalism dissociated the state from the territorially bound nation and aligned the provenance of the Global Homeland State with the interests of the deterritorialized network of military bases, financial institutions, security technologies and multinational corporations sprawled across the planet.

In the name of securing the neo-liberal global order, President Bush redefined sovereignty as predicated less upon national control over territorial borders than upon the state's exercising control over global networks.

The United States did not want territory, it wanted to exercise authoritative control over the global commons – the sea and the air – in the interests of guaranteeing the free movement of capital commodities and peoples. It was the putative threats that terrorism and rogue states posed to global interconnectivities that supplied the U.S. with the planetary enemy that it required to justify its positioning of itself as *The Exception* to the rules that it enforced across the planet. In justifying the U.S. monopoly over all the processes of global interconnectivity, the War on Terrorism enabled the Bush administration to arrogate to itself the right to traverse every national boundary in its effort to uproot international terrorist networks and to defend the “Homeland” against incursions of radical extremists.

Describing it as a justification of America's having taken up the task the role of policing the globe, President George W. Bush turned 9/11 into the opportunity to reshaped the configuration of global power

⁷ I elaborate on this dynamic in “From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: The Mythological Foundations of the Homeland Security State,” Chapter 5 of *The New American Exceptionalism*, 153-179.

relations. Bush associated the United States' monopoly on the legal use of global violence with the intervention in human time of a higher law (what he called his “higher father”). He thereby endowed the doctrine of American Exceptionalism with a metaphysical supplement that enjoined the belief that the pre-emptive violence through which the United States would defend the globe against the threat of Islamic terrorism was metaphysically superior to that of other nation-states. The apocalyptic register of Bush’s invocation of this higher law was not intended to re-establish America’s claim to historical uniqueness, however. This higher law had positioned the United States outside the world of nations as the Exception.⁸

Barack Obama was unlike George W. Bush in that he aspired to change America through a radical transformation of the structures of exceptionalism – the American dream, the perfectible Union, the land of promise – organizing the ‘positionality’ of the nation’s citizens. But Obama identified with the figures who were excepted from the fantasy rather than the state doing the excepting. The tidal shift in the national self-regard that Barack Obama’s fantasy enabled was not the result of the restriction of his identification to the homeless people’s of New Orleans. His ‘movement’ was grounded in a much more pervasive fantasy of dispossession – of citizens stripped of their constitutional rights by the Patriot Act, of parents separated from their children by war, of families forced from their homes by the subprime mortgage crisis – that was already inscribed and awaiting enactment in the script responsible for the production of the Bush Homeland Security State.

Obama stood in the place of all of the figures who, in having been removed from their mandated position within the social order, now lack a place. As the placeholder for all who could not be constitutively included within the social order, Obama became the object cause for those disparate desires, and the object cause as well of the missing America through which those desires became imaginable. Desire takes off when its object cause embodies or gives positive existence to the void

⁸ See Donald E. Pease, “Exceptionalism,” in *Key Words for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 109.

which animates desire. The odd man in, Obama embodied the excess of confusion and need introduced by desire into objective reality.⁹

Trans-generational haunting might also be the appropriate term to describe the strand of fantasy coursing through the inner landscapes of Obama's presidential campaign in that it hovered in the space in between social and psychic history. A history not of their own choosing unfolded in the deepest recesses of their supporters' minds. After the airing of an advertisement that represented a white woman rushing into the bedroom of her sleeping daughter after 3 a.m. emergency call, Hillary Clinton was accused of retrieving a racist representation of Black men – as terrorizing night intruders – that had historically resulted in lynching. When Bill Clinton stated that the Obama campaign was “nothing but a fairy tale,” he was faulted for having deprived the country of the empty space of fantasy where U.S. citizens could project their desires and enter into the consciousness of their dreams. Jesse Jackson was rebuked for failing to recognize the difference between Obama's movement and the civil Rights movements of the 1960 and 1970's. McCain recalled the images of MIA's even as he was said to have discovered that he experienced his handlers' imposition of his “message” – when he was made to speak other than straight talk – during his campaign as comparable to his treatment during his imprisonment in North Vietnam.

Obama settled the transhistorical ghosts haunting the relations between generations by giving historical substance to American dreams and nightmares. He became the subject of the fear that he might be assassinated – as had Kennedy and Lincoln and Martin and Malcolm – even as he was also made to personify historical figures – Osama bin Laden and William Ayers – who did the assassinating. Gary Wills compared Obama's relationship with his black separatist minister Jeremiah Wright to Lincoln's with the violent white abolitionist John Brown.¹⁰

⁹ Donald E. Pease, “Barack Obama's Orphic Mysteries.” In *The Imaginary and Its Worlds: American Studies After the Transnational Turn*, ed. Laura Bieger, Ramon Saldivar and Johannes Voelz (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 222.

¹⁰ These remarks are drawn from “Antigone's Kin: From Abu Ghraib to Barack Obama”, Chapter 6 of *The New American Exceptionalism*, esp. 211-214.

The mirrors that Obama added to the U.S. political culture did not merely reconfigure the existing field. They also took the grounds out from under the already positioned field, and they brought an entirely different field into view. The acceptance speech that Obama delivered at the Democratic National Convention on August 29, 2008, the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, he associated his presidential campaign with the audacious hope for this alternative future. In his victory address at Grant Park, he associated that hope with the nonsynchronous aspirations from 1968.

Obama's standing as a transformational object, his capacity to produce what could be called a surplus effect of potential change is what constituted the genius of his presidential campaign. It also organized the profound sense of loss that emerged once the movement for change was supplanted by specific presidential policies. Obama's policies necessarily alienated particular constituencies even as they gratified the desires of others. His election brought audacious hope into intimate relationship with radical despair.¹¹

The turning point in Obama's campaign took place when he exploited the subprime mortgage crisis to persuade the majority of Americans to divest their credibility in Bush's Global War on Terror and reinvest it in the ambition to make a transgenerational dream come true. Obama's bailout of financial institutions and his proposed changes in the healthcare contract quite literally affected Americans' most intimate sense of secure belonging – jobs, health, and home. After the financial meltdown, Obama became the beneficiary of a whole series of desperate needs, even demands for the realization of a foundational change.

The 9/11 of the economic order also incited the emergence of a populist movement that embroiled Barack Obama's presidency. One month after his inauguration powerful Republican lobbies and Fox News promoted the Tea Party movement. The movement included financiers and cynical politicians as well as members who had suffered real economic and emotional losses in the wake of 9/11 and the financial meltdown.

¹¹ See Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism*, esp. 214.

Obama organized his presidential campaign as a populist grassroots movement that cohered around two aims: to bring an end to President George W. Bush's unconstitutional state policies – abridgment of civil rights, preemptive strikes, renditions, internment of detainees at Guantánamo Bay – and to oppose the war in Iraq. Drawing together disparate constituencies that traversed traditional party lines, Obama's 'movement' successfully realized what had previously seemed an endlessly deferrable American Dream.

The Tea Party movement produced a mirror image of Obama's grass roots, populist movement that had as one of its purposes the mimetic re-description of what Obama's campaign had called audacious hope as the achievement of a terrifying reality. In the contest of fantasies that ensued in the wake of Obama's election, the architects of the Tea Party appropriated the organizing components of Obama's successful grassroots campaign – its anti-war initiative and its status as a constitutional movement – as models and targets. The leaders of the Tea Party movement characterized these measures as the continuation by economic means of the terrorist attack on the homeland on 9/11/2001.

Just as Obama overwhelmed opposition to his presidential campaign by building on the fantasy of a return to America's virtuous idealism with respect to human rights for all in all circumstances, even those of national "enemies," so too the Tea Party goers built their own fantasy. Whereas their belief in the "audacity of Hope" enabled participants in Obama's movement to bombard Bush's homeland security state with demands that he end state policies that violated the United States Constitution – preemptive strikes, the opening of the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, unauthorized domestic surveillance – the Tea Party goers forged a Contract from America through which they reaffirmed their primary loyalty to the security legislation spelled out in Bush's Homeland Security Act.

Their mirroring and mimicking of Obama's movement constituted an effort to transpose his election into a mere illusion. After eradicating the line separating information from entertainment, the Tea Party movement demonstrated how their spectacles possessed the capacity to undermine the significance of facts. Proclaiming that populist energies migrated to their movement, Tea Party goers have turned

the representatives of the Obama movement into cynical pragmatists more interested in fact-checking than in envisioning alternative futures. Their image-making machines stripped the attribute of “audacity” away from Obama’s party of hope to exercise a monopoly over the public imaginary.

This parasitic mirroring of the Obama movement produced a matrix of cultural despair out of which a whole series of new populist identities – Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin’s *Going Rogue* – emerged. The participants in the Tea Party movement identified their opposition to Obama’s changes in financial and healthcare policies with the Boston patriots’ iconic revolutionary act of dumping crates of tea overboard to protest the British tyrant George III’s unfair taxation. But Tea Partisans redeployed figures instituted to conduct George W. Bush’s Global War on Terror – illegal aliens, detainees, U.S. Intelligence interrogators, terrorists – as the underpinning for lurid fantasies that supplied imaginary explanations for real economic and emotional distress.

In calling the Tea Party a state fantasy, I do not mean that we need only to expose its fantasmatic myth about the cause of the financial collapse to reveal the underlying truth. Following Žižek, I would argue that instead of offering an escape from reality, fantasies actively construct social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic dimension. Fantasy does not merely stage the fulfillment of the already constituted subject’s wishes; fantasy constructs the frame enabling us to desire something. It is through fantasy that the objects of desire are given, and it is through fantasy that we learn how to desire. The fantasy frame is constructed so that we experience our world as a wholly consistent and transparently meaningful order.¹²

Fantasies produce a figure, the subject who is supposed to believe in them, as the precondition of their credibility. Political commentators who believe they can dismantle the power of the fantasy by exposing its factual inaccuracies believe that credibility rises and falls with the

¹² Jacqueline Rose’s *States of Fantasy* has broken ground in explaining the significance of state fantasies to the political culture of the modern nation-state: “It is the central argument of her book that there is no way of understanding political identities and destinies without letting fantasies into the frame.” Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 4.

truth of the factual state of affairs. But racism proliferates through its exponents' contempt for factual accuracy. While the fetishist ignores or mistrusts argumentation, the cynic accepts the truth of argumentation by ignoring the symbolic efficacy of the fetishist.¹³

The fetishism that lies at the heart of the Tea Party's fantasy is grounded on the active disavowal of knowledge. Fetishists are interested in the facts as the occasion to display how their fantasies can reorganize the facts. Tea Party goers rephrase the fetishist's conventional formulation of "I know this is not true but I believe it nonetheless" into the statement "I know this fantasy isn't true. But since I cannot otherwise make any sense of this crisis, I need to believe it just the same."¹⁴

Because state fantasies construct a perfect order, they are always accompanied by symptom figures onto whom all the imperfections of the existing order must be projected. There would be no system without the symptom as the element that stitches up the inconsistencies of an ideological system and gives consistency to being. But the symptom figure does not exist in the social symbolic order. As the embodiment of elements that cannot be integrated within that order, it demarcates that order's limits of tolerance and coherence. After the symptom is constructed as the cause of the disorder, a coherent account can be given to the unified order and the seemingly endless series of failures, incompletions, and contradictions that constantly interrupt it.

As the principle of organization for the subject's enjoyment, the symptom gives satisfaction. Even after the symptom is interpreted, the

¹³ I elaborate on the central claims in this portion of my argument in "States of Fantasy: Barack Obama and the Tea Party Movement." *Boundary 2* 37, no.2 (2010): 89-105. Throughout this analysis Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian reading of state fantasy has supplied the interpretive context for my understanding of the role state fantasy plays in the Tea Party movement. See Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (New York: Verso, 2009), esp. 43-56.

¹⁴ The fantasy work that the Tea Party performed was evidenced on October 30, 2009, when Representative Virginia Foxx, a Republican member of the House of Representatives from North Carolina, articulated her opposition to "Obamacare" by explicitly linking healthcare legislation to the War on Terror: "I believe we have more to fear from the potential of that bill than we do from any terrorist right now in any country."

subject may cling to it. The interpretation may not disrupt the subject's attachment to it. After 9/11, the terrorist was a symptom figure who facilitated the stitching up of inconsistencies of the entire ideological system. The 'terrorist' summed up, gave coherence to, and offered a solution to a range of popular concerns.

When President Obama re-described the Global War on Terror as "overseas contingency operations," he dismantled the most powerful consolidating framework invented since the Cold War. After Barack Obama removed the figure of the symptomal element – the universal terrorist – that had brought into coherence a whole range of internal political forces, the state abrogated the fantasmatic power to project insuperable political contradictions onto a universal enemy – the terrorist.

When Obama removed the universal enemy, the whole system of managed fear that this symptomal element had organized began to come apart. In the wake of the financial disaster in 2008, the Tea Party movement put Obama into the place of the symptom figure he removed. For Tea Party goers, Obama was the most visible symptom of the loss of the American way of life. Obama was thereafter made to occupy the position of the figure that he had eradicated.

The primary context for the Tea Party's interpretation of the economic collapse was the Global War on Terror. Its effectiveness as a political bloc depended on two basic factors: the extent to which the weakening of the Global War on Terror's conventional articulations led social elements to enter a 'crisis' state of unfixity, and the extent to which the Tea Party's new articulations borrowed from and reworked traditional frameworks.

After the trauma of the financial collapse, the Tea Party constructed the fantasy of an autonomous political sphere – re-imagined within the representational matrix of the post-Reconstruction South – whose members were organized around a Contract from America. The Tea Party movement politics reactivated the politics of fear that the Bush administration had turned into its principle of governance to negotiate the economic and political dissatisfactions that the Obama administration was unable to address. Their allegiance to military, economic, as well as cultural American exceptionalism was prompted by the loss of the

fantasy of American omnipotence and enabled them to interpret the economic setbacks and cultural change from the standpoint of the loss of Real America.

The architects of the “Contract from America” capitalized on the generalized domestic insecurity that emerged after the subprime crisis and have directed it onto the belief that President Obama was involved in a worldwide conspiracy designed first to destroy the U.S. Constitution and subsequently to exploit and imprison ‘mainstream’ U.S. citizens. Reduced to the political demand underwriting it, this fantasy can be restated as a collective desire to secede from President Obama’s polity.

Whether or not such a fantasy is factually true is of little importance, since their fantasies are structured at the site of the impossible demand that the Tea Party scenarios act out. Political fantasies are always factually untrue, even as they reveal the truth of the participants’ very real fears. What matters to the Tea Party movement is the way their demands are organized in response to the enframing anxiety over the Obama administration’s imagined threat to their survival. Rather than becoming signatories to Obama’s proposed changes in the social contract, Tea Party members resituate the “subject who is supposed to believe” within the provenance of the Contract from America.

In the wake of Obama administration’s dismantling of Bush’s state fantasy, the paramilitary movements and the Christian Fundamentalists that President Bush had subjected to the imperatives of the homeland security state have reemerged with collective fantasies of their own. The Tea Party goers who disrupt town hall meetings, demand that Obama give proof of his U.S. citizenship, propagate rumors of death panels, plot the ‘teabagging’ of Obama, demand state secession, declare Obama the Antichrist, issue ultimatums, refuse to permit their children to listen to the president’s schoolroom address, and bring their guns to anti-Obama rallies have refused to give up their psychic attachments to the Global War on Terror.

Overall, the Tea Party’s fantasmatic construction of the post-9/11 U.S. nation displaced the cause of all disorder onto an external source. The movement explicitly linked economic policies to homeland security in constructing the core issues in the new consensus. They produced an imaginary inclusion through the construction of an outside

figure who personified some of the greatest threats to the national order. Antagonism to Obama operated as a trigger, which made the disintegration of the nation and the inevitability of national recovery unimaginable. The renormalization of the financial system thereafter coexisted with populist efforts to condemn President Obama for failing to provide the security needed to protect the system and to portray him as a representative of a liberal elite who poses a threat to 'our' fundamental way of life.

The Tea Party movement constructed fantasies associated with birth and death at a moment in which the social contract, partially as a result of the financial meltdown, was undergoing a complete redescription, the fear produces a retroactive relation between the changes that Obama was asking for in the health care policies, in the health care campaign, which were turned into the causes of the financial crisis, rather than its remediation. Exercising a retroactive causality, they represented Obama's health care legislation as the definitive cause of the financial catastrophe.

President Obama's efforts to produce a new social contract with U.S. citizens, worked at the most intimate levels of the of the bio-political body – where the zoe of the ontologically vulnerable individual was conjoined with the bios of the body politic. He wanted to change health care policies at a moment in which the US body politic had undergone a frightening depletion of its vital energies, he was working with home at a moment the middle class was undergoing foreclosure of its forms of life.

The Tea Party movement invented the birthers' and deathers' fantasy in order to bring a whole set of otherwise unrelated fears into correlation with one another. The Birthers' propagation of the belief that Obama lacks a valid birth certificate reimagines him as an illegal immigrant. The Deathers' conjuring of death panels to decide on their continued viability has identified U.S. citizens as equivalent to the detainees targeted for coercive interrogation in the War on Terror. These fantasies have also tacitly constructed President Obama as himself a 'terrorist,' an enemy of the state whose healthcare policy threatens the biopolitical security of the homeland.

The deep psychic hold – the haptic uptake – of those birther/deather fantasies derives from their working at the most intimate level of both

the body and the psyche of those who are taken up by them. Both fantasies are underpinned by a logic of its psychic reversal for which revenge supplies the rationale. If Barack Obama's election constituted reparation for the wrongs performed against minoritized populations in the historical past, then he's going to do to normal United States citizens what had been done to the historically oppressed. These beliefs cannot be answered by fact because they have inscribed persons within an order made in the image of fears that took the place of reality.

The construction of Barack Obama, as a figure who lacked a birth certificate, was actually serving a whole set of condensed purposes. This fantasy appealed to a psychic aspect that organized the collective fantasy of the Tea Party movement. Members of the Tea Party movement needed to believe that Barack Obama was pretending to be a United States citizen, because only Muslim terrorists in disguise could have brought about the terrible financial disaster that ushered him into office. Barack Obama could not have been born in the United States because, instead of representing their most cherished national ideals, he represented a transnational world order that aspired to supplant the institutions, purposes, and aims of the United States citizens with global imperatives.

To put this into a slightly different register, the Tea Party movement Birther/Deather fantasies represented Barack Obama as a figure who breached the real of what the Charles Mills called the racial contract. Charles Mills proposed that the social contract in the United States was actually a two-tiered contract. Race regulated the social contract by dividing the contractees into two asymmetrical incompatible groups: the persons who were the full contractual parties to whom the social contract assigned its rights and liberties were white, unmarked citizens, the subpersons who lacked complete contractual identification with the rights and liberties of normal U.S. citizens were racially marked. The election of Barack Obama meant that a subperson who had been denied the rights and liberties of normal U.S. citizenship was now in charge of the allocating the social contract.¹⁵

¹⁵ In *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), Charles W. Mills defines the racial contract as that "set of formal or informal or meta-agreements (higher level contracts about contracts, which set the limits of the contract's validity) between one subset of humans henceforth designated as

The fear and the terror that a race man had penetrated the most intimate levels of social belonging and bound normal U.S. citizens to the terms of the racial contract animated the fantasies organizing the Tea Party movement's attitude towards Obama's efforts to change Americans' health care policies. Obamacare was described a conspiracy to produce the financial ruin of the United States by a Muslim terrorist who pretended to be the most powerful American citizen in the world. That fantasy began to have uptake when the town hall meetings in which Obamacare was discussed became sites for the acting out of the fear and the rage.

Obama, like all heads of state, exercises his sovereign power through decisions made within the biopolitical sphere over whom the state would "make live" or "let die." The Birthers and Deathers within the Tea Party movement have created a fantasy in which they would wrest this decision-making power away from the president.

The Tea Party's Contract from America turned President Obama's aspiration to change the provisions of the social contract related to the biopolitical sphere into an occasion to repair the breach of the racial contract. The Birthers and Deathers and other signatories to the Tea Party's Contract from America would accomplish this reparation by imagining themselves encountering Obama at the nation's border, where, after demanding Obama's papers and subjecting him to interrogation, they would restore the terms of the foundational racial contract.

white and coextensive with the class of full persons, and that categorizes the remaining subset of humans as non white and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons." Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 11. The "full persons" referenced in this definition are contrapuntal ensembles that require their differentiation from subpersons to achieve self-identity. In other words, no matter how universal the applicability of this category, the figure of the person necessarily requires its distinction from the necessary and related category of the subperson. Although the racial contract that underwrites the modern social contract is constantly being rewritten, it invariably establishes epistemological norms of cognition along racial lines. It prescribes for its signatories an epistemology of ignorance, a resilient combination of disavowal and nonknowledge that guarantees that whites "will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made." Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 45.

Since Birthers and Deathers believe that the empowerment of black males is almost entirely dependent on white Americans' supervisory control, they do not believe that Obama, a nonwhite national, could possibly have attained power without subordinating his will to that of white nationals. Their fantasies have produced all too real scenarios through which such subordination gets accomplished. They will not surrender supervisory control over the biopolis to a race man. The Obama administration did successfully respond to this Real fantasy until it re-appropriated the terrain usurped by the Tea Party movement.¹⁶

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¹⁶ For a discerning analysis of white supremacist fantasies, see Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1998), 45.

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