

Controversies in the Making: Race, Trump, and Time

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Introduction

It seems fitting to begin with a controversy.

Last July, HBO announced that D.B. Weiss and David Benioff would follow their hit series, *Game of Thrones* with a new drama titled *Confederate* will be set in an alternate timeline in which the southern states did not lose the Civil War, but rather seceded from the Union and formed a nation in which slavery remains legal and has evolved into a modern institution. The series, they claim, would chronicle the events leading up to the "Third American Civil War" and feature characters on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Demilitarized Zone, including slave hunters, freedom fighters, journalists, abolitionists, and the executives of a massive conglomerate. In short, the new series will ask, "What would the world look like ... if the South had won?"

Shocking nobody other than the white executives of HBO, had to put down the piles of money they were holding in order to defensively posture that we should all "reserve judgement

¹ Emily Yahr, "'Game of Thrones' creators announce new show set in a world where slavery still exists," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2017, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/artsandentertainment/wp/2017/07/19/game-of-thrones-creators-announce-new-show/> 10.00-4w.s 0 1r.9 (t)19.4 (a)3 (in)19.9 (m) <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/ar>

until there is something to see, the backlash was immediate. The Atlantic's resident McArthur genius, Ta-Nehisi Coates, wrote that we need not give HBO the benefit of the doubt; from Birth of a Nation to Gone with the Wind and beyond, "Hollywood has likely done more than any other American institution to obstruct a truthful apprehension of the Civil War." War opened in the New York Times. Purdue professor Roxane Gay wondered "why people are expending the energy to imagine that slavery continues to thrive when we are still dealing with the vestiges of slavery in very tangible ways."⁵ These vestiges, she continues, are "visible in incarceration rates for black people, a wildly segregated country, disparities in pay, mortality rates and the precarious nature of black life in a world where it can often seem as if police officers take 26keiof s (if)14 (s)-06 9mericett9 (up)10 E

one point or another, haven't we heard or thought my time is valuable? And, as Timothy Snyder has recently argued, the ways that political leaders and citizens orient themselves in time matters⁹

Let's explore two examples from two American presidents.

During his victory speech on November 4, 2008, Obama declared: "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all people (of all colors, creeds, and conditions) can attain the American dream, well, that's all right because in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, I say to you, that's the only country where everyone is still a new immigrant."

vision of America was, in a word, hopeful. We are better, we can do better, we can be better, because out of many we are one.

In the alternate reality of the 2016 election, Donald Trump announced his candidacy by promising to build a border wall and by saying that Mexican immigrants are criminals, rapists, and drug dealers, though some, he assumed, were good people. Replacing Obama's campaign slogans,

Living in the Past I: Make America Great Again

In the temporal imaginary that surrounds the call to “Make America Great Again,” nostalgia is a form of dog whistle politics.

indicated that he wants to revive the death penalty, and the Department of Justice has indicated that it will seek the death penalty in two federal cases, even though the last time a federal prisoner was put to death was back in 2003; (8) He concedes the demands of the NRA, in spite of the continuation of mass shootings throughout the country; and (9) he is remaking the United States court system by stocking the lower courts with disproportionately conservative white male nominees, filling the federal appellate courts with twelve new judges, and making plans to add more than 100 federal judgeships by 2020.

However, the basic truth of the matter is that a lot of people liked what they in the call to "Make America Great Again" and agreed with the image of America that Trump presented.

For example, before the election producers for NPR's Code Switch podcast interviewed Trump supporters in western Montana, who explained why they supported Trump. They were open about their views of the recent span and their fear for the future:

Think about how everything is racist now before Obama got elected, you really didn't hear much about race, racism or any of that stuff. He's brought this all to us...I think he's done this country more harm in that respect than anybody could.

[Muslim immigrants are] expecting us to conform to their culture, rather than they to Americanism. And they look at we need to build their mosque, but on the other hand we can't even say prayers in our own schools anymore. And yet we build mosques across the country.

refuse to assimilate. Even as they live in a town that's 96 percent white, they're still consumed by fear of a changing population what will happen to my children and grandchildren's opportunities? It is in this context defined by white fear and anxiety that Trump's magical nativism and promise of a world order and racial restoration was highly appealing

orderly, is actually helping the ~~but~~ters! He's telling you that these cheats ~~desp~~ special

Living in the Past II: Ghost Stories

But there are other Deep Stories to be told. We know that race played a role in the 2016 election. The research of those political scientists who, unlike me, actually study American elections indicate that it was fear of diversity, and not economic anxiety, that made people more likely to vote for Trump.³⁸ This is the central argument of Christopher Parker and Matt Barreto's 2013 book on the rise of the Tea Party, *Change They Can't Believe In*, as a forthcoming book by John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck, on the 2016 election. What a focus on race politics not just in the era of Trump, but any era of American history reveals is that past and the present are politically confounded. What race makes clear is how very much haunted by the past and just as time is a key element of the Deep Story that Trump supporters have created for themselves, time is fundamental to other imaginaries as well; this is what black political theorists call counter-stories.⁴¹ These, too, are Deep Stories—but rarely are they accompanied by calls for empathy and understanding of the plight of the white working class that chorused after the election.

You see, or stories are ghost stories.

The acknowledgement, of what Du Bois called the “present past” and what Toni Morrison calls “rememories” means that we must take shadows, traumas, ghosts, and specters seriously.⁴³ That which is uninvited, but not unconscious, is something haunting, maddening presence. This is challenging for political scientists, because it means that we must delve into the world of what we can't quite see and probably measure. In his book on black politics and popular culture, Richard Iton points to the tension between the disciplined, quantifiable, bounded realm of formal politics and popular culture's “willingness to embrace disturbance, to engage the apparently mad and maddening, to sustain often slippery frameworks of intention that act subliminally, if not explicitly, on distinct and overlapping cognitive registers, and to acknowledge

³⁸ An excellent summary of the political science research on the topic is in Adam Serwer, “The Nationalist's Delusion,” *The Atlantic*, November 20, 2017, available at:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/11/the-nationalists-delusion/546356/>

³⁹ Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto,

meaning in those spaces where speechlessness is the common ⁴⁵unpopular culture
omissionis method and silences carry meaning.

aforetime quailed at that white master's command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife, -at his behest had laid herself low to his lust, and borne a tawny child to the world, only to see her dark boy's limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after 'cursed Niggers.' These were the saddest sights of that woeful day; and no man clasped the hands of these two passing figures of the present; but, hating, they went to their long home, and, hating, their children's children lived on.⁵⁰

As Lawrie Balfour notes, the brilliance of this scene is how it sketches something important about the relations of power and powerlessness in this shared history, not a simplistic narrative of victims and villains. He captures, beautifully, the power of historical injuries that are compounded over generations, and of their capacity to close democratic futures.⁵²

Even now, the specter of the past is ever present.

5,000 people between 1882 and 1968. White southerners did everything possible to prevent the Great Migration. Because underpaid black labor was still at the heart of the Southern economy, white southern elites banned black newspapers, stopped trains, and used vagrancy laws to arrest people trying to leave the state.⁵⁶

In the 1930s, the New Deal – the series of federal reforms enacted in the 1930s to ease the hardships of the Great Depression – was purposefully designed to exclude African Americans from the social safety net. At the time, most blacks in the labor force were employed in agriculture or as domestic workers. As Ira Katznelson shows, members of Congress from the South demanded that those occupations be excluded from minimum wage laws, social security, unemployment insurance, and workmen's compensation.⁵⁶ Similarly, the GI Bill, largely responsible for the emergence of the white middle class, excluded black veterans. They were denied housing and business loans, were not granted admission to white colleges and universities, and were excluded from job training programs. Of the 67,000 mortgages insured by the GI Bill to support home purchases by veterans, fewer than 100 were for Black homeowners.⁵⁷

In the postwar era, white Americans resisted

Much has been said about how the invention of Nixon's "Southern Strategy" in the 1960s was a strategy to channel white anger over civil rights into support for the Republican Party. The "law and order" rhetoric of Reagan's administration was institutionalized in the War on Drugs, a disastrous policy that expanded a system of mass incarceration that disproportionately targeted and imprisoned African Americans.⁶² Equally important is the system of mass criminalization that has enabled the explosion of prison populations.⁶³ For example, the Department of Justice's report on the police department in Ferguson, Missouri, revealed that the city's practices were driven by revenue generation. Officers would disproportionately issue tickets to black residents, and then when residents failed to pay arrest warrants were used almost exclusively for the purpose of compelling payment by threatening incarceration.⁶⁴ For example, a black resident of Ferguson parked her car illegally in 2007 and was issued two citations and a \$151 ticket. She was then charged with seven failure to appear offenses for missing fine deadlines; with each failure to appear, the court issued another arrest warrant and additional fines. When she tried to make payments in \$50 increments, the court returned them, refusing to accept anything other than payment in full. In December 2014 she had paid \$550 for her original \$151 citation, still owed an additional \$541. In a city with a population of 21,000, approximately 16,000 of the residents had arrest warrants in their name.⁶⁵

In the 1990s, Bill Clinton's welfare reform strategy capitalized on the stereotype of the Black Welfare Queen. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act consolidated a new mode of poverty governance that, as Joseph S. B. Fording, and Sanford Schram argue, is simultaneously neoliberal and grounded in market principles and paternalist, that is, focused on telling the poor what is best for them in communities defined by their racial and class positions of

with us.⁷⁴ It is the racism and white supremacy that is embedded not just in the Trump presidency, but in every aspect of American social life. It is embedded in the location of highways and the funding of schools, the determination of voting districts, in which forms of labor are underpaid, in rental and housing markets, in the surveillance of certain neighborhoods and the militarization of the police. It's the racism that shows up in unexpected places, like teaching evaluations and it's systemic.