



## *Black Orpheus, Barack Obama's Governmentality*

by Donald E. Pease

This essay constitutes a preliminary effort to explain the state fantasy with which Barack Obama hegemonized an alternative to the biopolitical settlement normalizing George W. Bush's Global War on Terror (Pease 2009). In what follows, I intend to argue that Obama has not utterly displaced Bush's Homeland State of Exception but that Obama's governmentality presupposes it as the structuring logic through which he transformed the US state's relationship with domestic and planetary peoples. I will be interested in particular in the role that Obama's complex negotiation with the congeries of racial fantasies that he found condensed in the figure and the film *Black Orpheus* played in Barack Obama's governmentality.

Named after *orphasias*, the dark one, Orpheus, is the historical figure credited with teaching Greeks their foundational myths and sacred rites. Orpheus's lyre is said to have permitted the Argonauts to elude the Sirens. In the most famous of the Greek myths associated with his name, Orpheus descended into the underworld after the death of his beloved Eurydice to plead with its rulers for her release. According to Ovid, Orpheus's eloquent entreaty on her behalf brought the underworld to a standstill.<sup>1</sup> The arcane rituals associated with Orpheus's name have entered contemporary political theory to explain the transformation of bare life (*zoe*) into

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<sup>1</sup> The speculative claim that the civic religion's of modern states derives from the transformational rituals sedimented within the Orphic movement was broached initially in what remains the best scholarly treatise on the Orphic mysteries, Guthrie 1935.



sovereign citizens of the body politic (*bios*).<sup>2</sup> *Black Orpheus* is also the name of a prize-winning 1959 film made in Brazil by French director Marcel Camus. Based on the play *Orfeu da Conceição* by Vinicius de Moraes, Camus's musical retelling of the Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice is set in a Rio de Janeiro favela during the Carnival. Barack Obama has recently invoked the film and the mythological figure of "Black Orpheus" to explain his transformation of national and international politics.

In the following passage in his 1998 autobiography, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Barack Obama recalled his mother's reaction to the film *Black Orpheus* to exemplify the racial fantasies he entered political life to supplant,

The storyline was simple: the myth of the ill-fated lovers Orpheus and Eurydice set in the favelas of Rio during carnival, in Technicolor splendour, set against scenic green hills, the black and brown Brazilians sang and danced and strummed guitars like carefree birds in colourful plumage. About halfway through the movie I decided I'd seen enough, and turned to my mother to see if she might be ready to go. But her face, lit by the blue glow of the screen, was set in a wistful gaze. At that moment I felt as if I were being given a window into her heart, the unreflective heart of her youth. I suddenly realised that the depiction of the childlike blacks I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse image of Conrad's dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white, middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different (Obama 2004: 123-124).

This revelation took place in 1982 when his mother, while visiting Obama during his student years at Columbia University, asked him to accompany her to a showing of the movie at a theater in Greenwich Village. Rather than sharing his mother's enchantment with *Black Orpheus*, her twenty year old son discerned in the film's depiction of blacks the racial fantasy underpinning his mother's over-idealizations of African-Americans. In his mother's eyes "Every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney Poitier; every black woman Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne. To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear" (*Ibid.*: 51). After isolating the image-repertoire that *Black Orpheus* projected in his mother's political unconscious, Obama tacitly

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<sup>2</sup> In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben (1998) derives *homo sacer* is a term of art from Roman law that can be translated as the "sacred" or the "accursed" man. In Roman law, *homo sacer* describes a person who is banned, may be killed by anybody, but may not be sacrificed in a religious ritual. The *homo sacer* was banned from society and denied all rights and all functions in civil religion. The genealogy of Agamben's *homo sacer* can be traced back to the Orphic mysteries whose ceremonies rested on a crucial distinction in Greek between "bare life" (*zoe*) and a qualified mode of life (*bios*).



designated his mother's elevation of black Americans into political messiahs and Camus's representations of them as child-like colonial savages as recto and verso images coined in the same foundational racial fantasy.

Obama described his mother, Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro – “a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism” – as a representative of the 1960s American Left (*Ibid.*: 50). In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama diagnosed the antithetical, let's call them orphic, racialized images populating his mother's gaze as having resulted from contrary but interdependent tendencies informing the political imaginaries of the majority of U.S. citizens. He thought that his mother's exalted images of African-American civil rights leaders presupposed opprobrious images of African Americans as an unacknowledged rationale. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama identified this recalcitrant complex of contradictory self-representations as responsible as well for the constraints that African-Americans imposed on their social and political ambitions.

Obama grounded this diagnosis on his belief that when African-American civil rights leaders internalized the American left's quasi-messianic images of their political movement, they indirectly legitimated demonizing representations of American Blacks. As exceptions to such degrading representations, such ennobling images of civil rights leaders only proved the rule of the oppressive imaginary. This structural racial antinomy animated a viciously circular social logic: African-Americans who felt oppressed by such humiliating images needed to idealize civil rights leaders as the emancipators from the social imaginary that these civil rights leaders also required as the justification for their rule.

Obama described the black messiah/black devil complex as the two sides of the racist antinomy that structured the history of race relations in the United States. This complex of antithetical representations also regulated what it was considered possible and impossible for African-American political leaders to desire. The only way that Obama could liberate himself from this black orphic imaginary entailed his representing and acting upon a political desire that the Black Orpheus in Camus' film and the political leaders in the United States never could have imagined possible.

The film *Black Orpheus* presupposed the imaginary that Barack Obama thought monopolized the field of racial representation. *Black Orpheus* also displayed the recalcitrant racial complex he wanted to change. To transform the orphic machinery that saturated the United States' social imaginary, Obama added a scenario to United States political drama through which he persuaded the majority of American voters to act upon a desire that should have been impossible for an African-American leader to realize.

Although many of his followers described him as a black messiah, Barack Obama did not aspire to become the civil rights leader of oppressed African-Americans. And, despite the fact that his political enemies assaulted him with racist stereotypes,



Obama never described himself as the victim of such efforts. Instead of repudiating this structuring antinomy Obama's presidential campaign presupposed the system of racialized images he found depicted in *Black Orpheus*. Unlike the protagonist of Marcel Camus's film, however, Obama ran as at once the effect and the limit to these structuring antitheses.

Obama considered the black messiah/black demon complex a structural racist antinomy that could not be historically surpassed. As the horizon that embraced and held the new rules and norms that Obama produced from within its framework, this structuring antinomy constituted the non-progressive backdrop for the changes Obama aspired to introduce into the political order.

An event that took place during the Democratic primaries supplied then Senator Barack Obama with the occasion to show how he could turn the ineluctable tie binding African-American leaders to the Black Messiah/Black Terrorist complex into a "teachable moment." From January through March of 2008, Right-wing political commentators published selected passages from sermons delivered by Jeremiah Wright, Obama's pastor in Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, as proof that the man whose sermons had inspired Obama to write *The Audacity of Hope* was in fact an anti-American terrorist. Rather than defending Reverend Wright or castigating his opponents, Obama delivered a speech on March 18, 2008 at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, entitled "A More Perfect Union" (Obama 2008), that turned the controversy surrounding his pastor into an example of the recalcitrant contrariety that had haunted race relations in the United States since the nation's founding.

In his national address, Obama refused to represent his political campaign as an effort to get out of this racial divide. Had he done so, Obama would have turned himself into just another avatar of the black civil rights leader. Observing that he has never been "so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy" (*Ibid.*). Obama described the controversy as a "racial stalemate" that represented the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through – a part of our union that we have yet to perfect". Upon locating the basis for the nation's racial division in the United States constitution, Obama gave expression to the desire to achieve "a more perfect union" (*Ibid.*).

Rather than taking up a side for or against his African-American pastor, Obama recast the Wright case as indicative of this more encompassing disparity – between "our" shared constitutive ideals and the reality of their imperfect realization. Having resituated the racial antagonism within the context of the constitutive gap separating our founding ideals from lived political reality, Obama reasserted the "impossible" desire animating his presidential run as undergirded by the conviction that in "working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in



fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union” (*Ibid.*).

This speech permitted Barack Obama to construct a position within the social symbolic order – the rift in its perfectible union – that enabled him to represent his extraordinary desire as if it were a universal political responsibility. Instead of remaining subject to these antithetical images, President Obama suspended their rule by positioning himself within the breach in between these antagonistic representations and expressing his intention to achieve a “more perfect union” through them.

Obama initially positioned himself in the rift between antagonistic positions at the 2004 Democratic National Convention when he refused to identify as either a member of the Red States or the Blue States so as to represent himself as representative of the United States of America. Obama also ran his presidential campaign from this unprecedented political space. But in aspiring to make a more perfectible union out of resolutely antagonistic partisans, Obama could not wholly identify with either one of the parties in dispute.

He occupied the strange position of being simultaneously more than and less than the constituencies through whom he aspired to render the union more perfectible. He was more than one of the antagonists because he could not perform as one of the factions he aspired to unify and render their union *more* perfectible; less than one because that act had to be subtracted from the political order whose union he would render more *perfectible*.

During his first term as president, representations of Obama’s governance oscillated between utterly opposed representations of his leadership. During his first term, the incompatible representations that antagonistic political constituencies assigned President Obama oscillated between the opposite poles of the aforementioned racial antinomy. Following Obama’s election in 2008, the members of a Tea Party movement represented Obama as a figure who lacked the state-authorized long-form birth certificate required to certify his status as a legitimate United States citizen and re-imagined him as a Muslim terrorist intent on convoking “death panels” to endanger the American people’s bio-political welfare. Contrarily, “progressive” liberals represented Obama’s election as the birth of a post-racial nation that had decisively abandoned the juridico-political procedures through which the state reproduced the generalized civil death of racially minoritized populations. While each of these fantasies drew upon two of the primordial conditions of belonging--birthright citizenship and civil death – inherent to what I have called a neo-orphic political imaginary, each fantasy transposed these elements into utterly antithetical characterizations of Obama’s mode of national belonging.

At the one extreme Obama’s political supporters characterized him as the most inspired of the nation’s sovereign leaders; at the other extreme his political



antagonists cast him as one of mankind's accursed. In these antithetical formulations, the extimate belonging of President Obama as the sovereign head of state sat in uncanny proximity to the intimate non-belonging of President Obama as what Giorgio Agamben has called *homo sacer* (1998).<sup>3</sup>

Obama took up his position within the rift through which he would render union more perfectible by representing both the faction who extolled him as a post-racial sovereign as well as the people who had been cast in the role as *homini sacres*. As *homo sacer*, Obama belonged to the order by not belonging to it. But in order to exercise the power to render the union more perfect Obama took up a position within the order as the sovereign who exceeded existing ordinations. Neither the one nor the other, Obama's oscillation between the positions of the sovereign and the *homo sacer* enabled him to deploy both of the positions within the structuring racist antinomy – the venerated racial prophet/the demonized terrorist – to his political advantage. Obama reworked the seemingly endless oscillation between these antagonistic images into the energies animating the momentum of his political movement.<sup>4</sup>

Although Obama's historical project has been translated into Christological terms, it operates according to a temporal logic that does not affirm the *telos* of redemptive historiography.<sup>5</sup> Upon representing the desire for change in terms of his effort to achieve a "more perfect union," Obama ratified an understanding of history as a series of impasses. Barack Obama may have represented his presidential campaign as a truly "transformative moment," a change whose time had come, but he did not align his political aspirations with a belief in the progress of American history. Accomplishing the aim to achieve a "more perfect union," involved Obama in what Walter Benjamin has described as a vigilant readiness to recognize the "dialectical images" through which he could facilitate this objective.<sup>6</sup>

Obama has frequently described his election to the presidency as a "change" whose time had come. But he invariably situates the change that has indeed come

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<sup>3</sup> For a brilliant description of the role the proximity of the sublime and desecrated bodies of the sovereign played in fashioning the fiction of the "King's two bodies", see Eric Santer (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Bogues called my attention to the ways in which the oscillation between the positions of the sovereign and that of *homo sacer* could become the means of understanding the formation of a subaltern political movement. This dynamic underpins his analyses of the ethics of living together in his magisterial new book *Empire of Liberty* (Bogues 2010). For an analysis of the relationship between state fantasy and governmental rule, see Pease (2009).

<sup>5</sup> Hortense Spillers has recently spelled out the troubling political consequences of christological readings of Obama's campaign in a talk she delivered at Brown University in April 4, 2011. The transcript will be published in *Boundary 2*.

<sup>6</sup> In his commentary on the significance of Charles Baudelaire's understanding of modernity to new modes of industrial production, Walter Benjamin defined dialectical image as images or objects produced within industrial capitalism "in which the new is intermingled with the old" (Benjamin 2006: 148).



within the context of the never-ending effort to achieve a “more perfect union”. The rift from within which Obama repeatedly aspires to realize a more perfectible union, is quite literally a dialectical image, now to return to the Benjamin trope, that exposes progressive history as a ruse. Rather than achieving a perfected union within and through the progressive unfolding of a historical *telos*, the antinomy within which Obama rifts discloses the non-progressive traumatic impasses – what Benjamin calls dialectics at a standstill – that progressive history perforce disavows.

I have turned to Walter Benjamin to describe the significance of Obama’s historic project because Benjamin’s philosophy of history is especially attuned to the tendency to misrecognize historic impasses as signs of progress. The “dialectical image” names the figure of thought Walter Benjamin invented to channel an accumulation of historic impasses into a “now-time” that was filled to the “bursting point” with historic eventfulness,

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it as it really was. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image, history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous empty time, but time filled with the presence of now. Each now is the now of a particular recognizability. In it truth is filled to the bursting point with time...it is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past, rather image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation (Benjamin 1999: 463).

During the Democratic Primary, Obama seized hold of the structuring racist antinomy haunting the “moments of danger” – the Jeremiah Wright controversy, the waving of the Confederate flag in South Carolina, President Clinton’s comparison of his campaign with Jesse Jackson’s doomed Rainbow Coalition – that came up during his campaign. Each of these moments was imbued with the structural racist antinomy (what Benjamin called a dialectical image) undergirding American history. At each of these moments, Obama positioned himself in a rift (what Walter Benjamin described as a non-synchronous contemporaneity) in which his “now-time” became full through the transformation of memories that spontaneously surged up from the past. When Obama enunciated his aspiration to achieve a more perfect union through these momentous events, the dialectical images sedimented within them revealed the non-synchronous now-time that sustained the momentum of his campaign.

The transformative moment of Obama’s election and the structuring racist antinomy that should have rendered it impossible did not converge to form a post-racial American society. They instead collided into one another. But the strategies whereby Obama brought the “what has been” informed by an enduring racist logic together with the “now” of his election brought the vicious circle informing this racist



antinomy to a standstill. These strategies resulted in a truth event “filled to the bursting point with time”.

Every moment of Obama’s presidential movement also re-established the antagonism that re-imposed the racial divide. The past produced within the grasp of this complex, as he made clear in his 2008 address at the National Constitution Center, “isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past” (Obama 2008). In occupying this rift in between antagonistic positions and permanently striving for a more perfect union, Obama took up a site that envisioned American history as an accumulation of stalemates. And he characterized the project he undertook from within this location as making “a way out of no way” (*Ibid.*).

I have chosen the term “orphic” to describe the structuring antinomy underpinning the United States’ racial imaginary because Obama discerned this recalcitrant structure during a viewing of *Black Orpheus*. Barack Obama’s election to the presidency did not displace the structural antinomy that he found illuminated in *Black Orpheus* as a twenty year old. But twenty-eight years later Barack Obama decided to describe the changes he had effected in United States social imaginary within the context of *Black Orpheus*.

In the following passage from an address he delivered on March 20, 2011 in the Teatro Municipal where *Black Orpheus* was set, Obama represented himself as a figure who would have been unimaginable to his mother, and to the film’s director as well as its audience,

Now, one of my earliest impressions of Brazil was a movie I saw with my mother as a very young child, a movie called *Black Orpheus*, that is set in the favelas of Rio during Carnival. And my mother loved that movie, with its singing and dancing against the backdrop of the beautiful green hills. And it first premiered as a play right here in Teatro Municipal. That’s my understanding. And my mother is gone now, but she would have never imagined that her son’s first trip to Brazil would be as President of the United States. She would have never imagined that. And I never imagined that this country would be even more beautiful than it was in the movie (*Ibid.*).

This passage communicates a dizzying *mise en abime*. When he watched *Black Orpheus* in 1982, Barack Obama said that he feared that his mother had correlated him with the film’s images of the child-like, joyful Brazilians (the reverse side of Conrad’s colonial savages). But the figure now doing the remembering does not align with the person who first viewed the film. Whereas the film *Black Orpheus* displayed the racist imaginary that monopolized the field of representation in 1983, the speaker of these opening lines has become unimaginable to the repertoire of contradictory representations that *Black Orpheus* projected.





The reason he has become unimaginable is that in between the time he first viewed *Black Orpheus* and now, Barack Obama added a new persona – president of the United States – to the socio-political imaginary that he now personifies Black Orpheus to explain. During his presidential campaign, Barack Obama converted the idealized child/savage colonial orphic machine into the precondition for the emergence of this previously unimaginable figuration. By occupying the rift in between them, Barack Obama created a figuration of (and as) Black Orpheus that would have been unimaginable to the racial imaginary this antinomy regulated.

The power to liberate from an impasse constituted one of the mythic activities traditionally assigned to Orpheus. In this passage, Barack Obama has signified the effect of the actions through which he transformed the field of political possibilities by impersonating a new iteration of Black Orpheus. It was this unimaginable Black Orpheus whose eloquence suspended the orphic machinery reproductive of the film's social order. It is also this Black Orpheus Barack Obama now personifies to call Eurydice back from the underworld so that she might enjoy a Brazil that is even more brilliant when seen through his eyes.

Since Obama constructed his public addresses out of the contingencies of their historical occasion, it is likely that the spontaneous memories aroused by his trip to Brazil determined his selection of the figure of Black Orpheus to describe his production of an alternative political imaginary. I will examine the geo-political significance of the historic occasion for Obama's Brasilia address as well as the efficacy of Obama's orphic fantasy at the conclusion of this essay. But let me say at the outset of this exposition that I cannot conceive a better figure of thought than Black Orpheus to represent the dialectical imagination through which Barack Obama transformed the political imaginary.

According to Walter Benjamin, dialectical images function like the opening shots in a film montage in that that they solicit a constellation of related images, each one of which breaks from its fixed historical context to bear partial documentary witness to the entire image repertoire of an historical event that suddenly flashes up into visibility.<sup>7</sup> To keep track of the changes Barack Obama's dialectical images effected within the U.S. political imaginary I have organized "Black Orpheus: Obama's Governmentality" around a montage of events – the New Orleans Superdome in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Tea Party Movement's Town Hall meetings, the Memorial Service for the Americans gunned down in Tucson, the underside of Bush's Homeland Security State, The Teatro Carnaval – through which Obama's iteration of "Black Orpheus" accomplished this transformation. To draw out their relationship with

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<sup>7</sup> My choice of the film montage as the appropriate terrain for the materialization of the series of dialectical images Walter Benjamin has described as a constellation, I have drawn from Benjamin's several essays on film's transformative power, especially "The Work of Art in the Age Of Mechanical Reproduction" (Benjamin 1988: 217-253).



this mythological figure, I have entitled the disparate sections of this essay after events traditionally associated with Orpheus.

But the decisive act that Obama accomplished was more than an intervention into the domain of the Orpheus legend. It changed the very conditions of what counts as politically possible. In doing so it retroactively created the conditions of its own possibility. To render thinkable the aspects of Obama's "Black Orpheus" that would have been unimaginable to the Greek poets as well as their contemporary revisionists I have turned to Walter Benjamin as a tutelary guide. I make use of his "Theses of the Philosophy of History" to render imaginable what official history and Greek myth could not – a non-synchronous now-time that, like Obama's form of governmentality, is filled to the bursting point with transformative potential.<sup>8</sup>

#### HURRICANE KATRINA: AWAKENING BLACK ORPHEUS

According to Walter Benjamin, there's no such thing as a fully isolated present or past. There is only a non-synchronous now-time. Dialectical images might be described as opening up the rifts in between the torn halves of a now-time that the fantasy of historical progress cannot unite. As what cannot be included within progressive history without bringing it to its limits, dialectical images do not merely reveal the profound social antagonisms that historical progress structurally disavows, they also open up sites in which alternative social orderings might emerge.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom has written movingly about the ways in which the specters of the slave trade engender what Baucom, following Benjamin, describes as "a non-synchronous contemporaneity" that can fill our now-being to the breaking point with the truth of the past (Baucom 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this discussion, I have oscillated in between describing the figure of Black Orpheus as the agent and as the instrument of spontaneous memories. Slavoj Žižek has relied upon a comparable ambiguation of voluntary and involuntary memories in his recent exposition of the dialectical images released by Katrina: "For a few days New Orleans apparently regressed to a wild preserve of looting, killing and rape. It became a city of the dead and dying – a post-apocalyptic zone where those the philosopher Agamben calls *homini sacres* – people excluded from the civil order wandered – a fear entered that this disintegration of the social fabric can come at any time". The fear entailed the suspicion that the very fragility of the social bond evidenced after Katrina was in itself a symptom, "a social symptom when we expected a surge of solidarity in the face of disaster there is a fear that a state of anterior violence will emerge...What took place was the "after the event – the social effect, the disintegration of the social order came a kind of deferred action as if natural catastrophe were repeating itself as a social catastrophe – that was the underside of New York after 9/11" (Žižek 2008: 25-28).



Barack Obama located the origins of his movement in the sudden revelation of a non-synchronizable now-time. This moment took place during a Memorial Service President George Herbert Walker Bush led to commemorate the life of the great civil rights leader Rosa Parks. While listening to President George W. Bush's father celebrate her memory, Barack Obama recalled the abandoned and homeless people of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as the memory that this Memorial Service had foreclosed from recognition,

As I sat and listened to the former President, my mind kept wandering back to the scenes of devastation when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and New Orleans was submerged...I recalled images of teenage mothers weeping or cursing in front of the New Orleans Superdome, their listless infants hosted to their hips. And old women in wheelchairs, heads rolled back, the withered legs exposed under soiled dresses....Listening to their stories it was clear that many of Katrina's survivors had been abandoned before the hurricane struck. They were the faces of any inner-city neighborhood in any American city, the faces of black poverty—the jobless and almost jobless, the sick and soon to be sick, the frail, and the elderly...The sense that the nation had reached a transformative moment – that it had had its conscience stirred out of a long slumber; this could not die away (Obama 2006: 295).

President Bush's idealization of this great civil rights leader from the past coincided with the state's abandonment of the African-Americans who had been forced to take up residence in the New Orleans superdome. Their abject impoverishment and homelessness had not received the state's notice before Hurricane Katrina, and their hopeless economic condition did not receive representation in the remarks with which President Bush commemorated Rosa Parks. Rather than remaining fully absorbed within President Bush's commemoration of the historic accomplishments of the great civil rights leader Rosa Parks, Obama recalled images of the African-Americans in New Orleans whose basic rights to life and shelter had been ignored by the administrators Homeland Security State. Barack Obama honored Rosa Parks' gains in the struggle to obtain African-Americans' civil rights. But in paying his respects to her memory, he could not forget the African-Americans the state left to die after Hurricane Katrina devastated their homeland.

The figures Obama recalled during the Memorial Service performed the dialectical work of inciting a constellation of images – of slaves beaten by their masters, of migrant laborers forced into transfer centers, of Indians slaughtered by the thousands, of Vietnamese families dragged from their huts and shot and burned – that overtook Obama's recollections at Rosa Parks' Memorial Service. Obama's now-time



did not come after these moments, it insisted in a non-synchronous and long-duration correspondence with them.

President Bush correlated Rosa Parks' leadership and the nation's historical progress in the area of civil rights. But the undead images that flooded into Obama's consciousness could not find their proper places in the vicious circle through which the state's commemoration of civil rights leaders from the historical past sustained the hopeless socio-economic conditions of African-Americans in the present. The stalemate that Obama had discerned undergirding the nation's disunity had revealed this truly "transformative moment" by disclosing the torn halves of a now-time that could not be synchronized into a unity at Rosa Parks' Memorial Service – and that stirred the national "conscience out of a long slumber".

During President Bush eulogy to the memory of Rosa Park, Obama's memories of the living dead returning from New Orleans disrupted the state's commemorative ritual. It was in this eventful moment Barack Obama resolved to transform the desire for a different America into the object cause of a presidential campaign rather than a contemporary civil rights movement.

In remembering everything inside the psyche that American history wills its subjects not to know, this dialectical image opened up a space in between the dismantling of one form of historical life and the emergence of another. Obama seized the revolutionary moment that surged up in this space when he linked the image of Katrina with the aforementioned montage of associated images to produce the constituent moment that inaugurated his movement. At the level of the law, Obama personified the sheer anomic or constituent power – neither constituted not constituting state power – of what Benjamin referred to as pure or revolutionary violence.<sup>10</sup> This power animated the movement that supplied the warrant for undermining Bush's state of exception.

Obama 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.

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<sup>10</sup> I draw a correlation between Benjamin's notion of "pure revolution" and what Antonio Negri (2000: 21) called constituent power, in following passage: "Negri invented the concept of constituent power to allow us "to think political freedom in terms of its separation from the social and in terms of its rejection of synthesis with the political for, the power to constitute or to begin anew *ex nihilo* a new state of affairs is grasped in its non-synthetic character – this new cannot be acquired by its social basis, but comes about through a cutting off from that basis, a loss of ground which bespeaks the fact that political freedom is also an abyss. While at the same time this constituent power does not stand in a synthetic relation to what is constituted by or through it: political freedom is the ungrounded ground of every constituted power" (Pease 2009: 207).



The Americans who had lost their homes and land in New Orleans quite literally had no part in President George W. Bush's Homeland Security State. But 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 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.

Desire takes off when its object cause embodies or gives positive existence to the void which animates desire. Obama stood in the place of all of the figures who, in having been removed from their mandated position within the social order, now lacked a place. The odd man in, Obama embodied the excess of confusion and need introduced by the desire for an alternative into objective reality. 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 (Pease 2009: 198-213).

Dialectical images proliferated throughout Barack Obama's presidential campaign. Trans-generational haunting might be the appropriate term to describe the strands of fantasy these images effected. As they coursed through the inner landscapes of Obama's presidential campaign these images awakened memories that unfolded in the deepest recesses of the nation's social and psychic history. After the airing of an advertisement that represented a white woman rushing into the bedroom of her sleeping daughter after 3 AM emergency call, Hilary 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 US 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 MIAs during his campaign when he described his handlers' demand that he speak other than "straight talk" as comparable to his treatment during his imprisonment in North Vietnam (Pease 2009: 209-213).

Obama settled the trans-historical 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.

The mirrors that Obama added to the US 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, 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 '68 and he invested both hopes and his disparate constituencies in the encompassing aspiration to achieve a more perfect union.

#### THE TEA PARTY CAPTIVITY

Obama's standing as a transformational object, his capacity to produce what could be called a surplus effect of potential change 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.

Despite the apocalyptic pitch surrounding Barack Obama's run against John McCain, McCain was gathering strength every week until an event took place that changed everything. 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 trans-generational 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 and 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.



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 new, as yet unimaginable America, 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.

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. Whereas President Obama governed through the propagation of the desire to achieve a "more perfect union," The Tea party members construed themselves as having seceded from Obama's union and forged an alternative.

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.

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, Wanda Bachmann, Rick Perry – surfaced. 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 truth of the factual state of affairs. But racism proliferates through its exponents’ contempt for factual accuracy.

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 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.

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<sup>11</sup> I elaborate on the central claims in this portion of my argument in Pease 2010: 89-105. Throughout this analysis Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian reading of state fantasy (Žižek 2009: 43-56) has supplied the interpretive context for my understanding of the role state fantasy plays in the Tea Party movement.





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 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.

In the wake of Obama administration’s dismantling of Bush’s state fantasy, the paramilitary movements and the Christian Fundamentalists that President Bush had aligned with 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. Antagonism to Obama operated as a trigger, which made the disintegration of the nation and the inevitability of national recovery imaginable. 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 produced a retroactive relation between the changes that Obama was asking for in the health care policies, in the health care campaign, that 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.<sup>12</sup>

The deep psychic hold – the haptic uptake – of the 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 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, this fantasy has it, 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 have become their reality.

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 lacked the complete rights and liberties of normal U.S. citizenship was now in charge of the allocating the social contract.<sup>13</sup>

A fantasy does not merely represent social reality. It also tries to shape it practically, so as to control the changes that cannot be incorporated within it. But

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<sup>12</sup> 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".

<sup>13</sup> In *The Racial Contract* (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 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" (*Ibid.*: 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" (*Ibid.*: 45).



every fantasy has its Real. At the core of the Tea Party movement is a fantasy in which only the narrative of the white supervision of the black male can contain the trauma of its Real – the spectacle of a black man being in charge of himself and of the nation.

The election of Obama designated that part of their practical reality that the members of the Tea Party could not incorporate. They could not acknowledge the reality of Obama's presidency without undermining the viability of their prior construction of themselves. Obama's election meant that America no longer needed white Americans to reproduce its structures of power. Those operating within the Tea Party could not accept this matter-of-fact truth any more than they could acknowledge the reality of the non- white president to which it referred.

Tea Party goers interpreted his election as a breach of the racial contract. They would repair the breach of the racial construct through a series of mystified scenarios. The fear of the reversibility of white supremacy sustained the deep logic of each of these fantasies. The fantasies of death camps and other imagined indignities turned whites into the imaginary victims of real technologies of Euro-American racism. The terrifying prospect of the reversal of the colonial past made immigration seem akin to war and invasion.

#### ORPHEUS DESCENDING: TUCSON, JANUARY 11, 2011

Fear-inspired rage took hold of the predominantly white Tea Party movement when Barack Obama, a figure who belonged to the racially marked group that the United States race contract represented as innately lacking the rights and liberties of normal U.S. citizens, became the sovereign state executive responsible for distributing the health and welfare provisions of the social contract. The breach that the Tea Party imagined Obama's election as having produced in the racial contract provoked "Birther" and "Deather" fantasies that brought 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 reimagined him as an illegal immigrant. The Deathers' conjuring of scenarios in which President Obama convoked death panels to decide on their continued viability identified U.S. citizens as equivalent to the detainees targeted for coercive interrogation in the War on Terror. These conjoined fantasies tacitly constructed President Obama as himself a "terrorist," an enemy of the state, whose healthcare policy threatened the biopolitical security of the homeland. 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.



By dissociating their project from Obama's "Now," the Tea Party undermined Obama's strategic use of the collective desire to form a more perfect union as the basis for "change." Obama could not answer the explicit racism that was built into the Tea Party movement's imagined secession without identifying himself as the leader of a civil rights faction. It took an event that re-awakened a series of past events from within what I earlier described as the United States' trans-generational trauma to undermine the Tea Party movement's stalemate.

On January 8, 2011, a lone gunman shot Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and eighteen of her constituents in a political rally in Tucson, Arizona, fatally wounding six of them. This traumatizing moment recalled a series of haunting memories of the assassinations of presidents and presidential candidates and great civil rights leaders: Jack and Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. When I first heard that a political figure had been critically wounded in a political rally in Arizona, a stronghold of the Tea Party movement, I immediately feared that the president had been shot.

President Obama's Memorial Service in Tucson recalled the "transformative moment" of his campaign when memories of the helpless figures huddled in the New Orleans Superdome overtook his consciousness during Rosa Parks' Memorial Service. But when President Barack Obama traveled to Tucson on January 12, 2011, he did not do so as a representative of the Civil Rights movement or to commemorate the achievements of a dead black leader. This time a scene of catastrophic political violence became the occasion for an African-American president to serve as the nation's designated mourner for the victims.

Tucson provided Obama with an actually-existing space in which he could materialize the position on which he ran. The persons who had been shot in Tucson were neither presidents nor civil rights leaders. They were mostly white Americans performing everyday political activities. Obama's Tucson address produced an answer within the real world to the Tea Party's fantasies about death panels and Obama's un-Americanness.

The town hall meetings that members of the Tea Party members had turned into shouting matches over Obama's health care policies supplied the scene with its bio-political unconscious. The lone gunman's rage, his violent hatred, his taking the law into his own hands, all of this recalled the *modus operandi* of the Tea Party movement. President Obama could not directly assign the movement responsibility for the shootings without reducing himself into one of their political antagonists, but his commemorative remarks conjured Tea Party demonstrations as their fantasmatic context.

In Tucson, Barack Obama turned the Tea Party into the spectral accomplices within a scenario in which he executed two significant acts of dissociation: of his movement from the Tea Party, of his bio-politics from an armed terrorist's thanatopolitics. The Memorial Service enabled Obama to use the images with which the Tea



Party movement had demonized him to recover the position in between irreconcilable antagonists. Holding the space of the rift in between the Tea Party and their victims, Obama characterized the Tucson shootings as a symptomatic of the need for a “more perfect union”,

That process of reflection, of making sure we align our values with our actions – that, I believe, is what a tragedy like this requires. For those who were harmed, those who were killed – they are part of our family, an American family 300 million strong. We may not have known them personally, but we surely see ourselves in them. In George and Dot, in Dorwan and Mavy, we sense the abiding love we have for our own husbands, our own wives, our own life partners. Phyllis - she's our mom or grandma; Gabe our brother or son. In Judge Roll, we recognize not only a man who prized his family and doing his job well, but also a man who embodied America's fidelity to the law. In Gabby, we see a reflection of our public spiritedness, that desire to participate in that sometimes frustrating, sometimes contentious, but always necessary and never-ending process to form a more perfect union (Obama 2011).

These phrases from his memorial address quite literally displayed Obama's care. They removed each of the persons Obama commemorated from the oblivion of a mass shooting, celebrated each as part of a national family, as a representative of the nation's shared need for political forms of life, and as deserving of our collective memory.

The pathos in the address Obama delivered at the Memorial Service deployed all the unspent anger that he refused to direct at the Tea Party. As the representative of what it means to be alive within a vital body politic, Obama fashioned his address to rejoin the order of facts with the order of feelings in a now restored political order. In attending to Americans who had been attacked while participating in a collective form of political life, President Obama renewed the state's relationship to the health and welfare of the national body politic. Each time he restored a wounded form of civic life he separated it from the Tea Party's violence,

On Saturday morning, Gabby, her staff, many of her constituents gathered outside of a supermarket to exercise their right to peaceful assembly and free speech, they were fulfilling a central tenet of the democracy envisioned by our Founders. Representatives of the people answering to their constituents so as to carry their concerns to our nation's capital. Gabby called it “Congress on your Corner” – just an updated version of government of, and by, and for the people. That is the quintessentially American scene that was shattered by a gunman's bullets, and the six people who lost their lives on Saturday, they too represented what is best in America (*Ibid.*)



By turning this “quintessential American scene” into the dialectical image that brought back to memory all those other scenes of political violence, Obama also disclosed the non-synchronous temporalities that haunted our contemporary moment.

#### THE REAL STATE OF EXCEPTION: ORPHIC MYSTERIES IN BUSH’S UNDERWORLD

Governmentality describes what happens when the movements of life and the processes of governance converge. Governmentality always involves bio-politics because it resides in the well-being of the population. President Obama’s governmentality truly began with the bio-historical event that took place in Tucson. The care Obama showed for the wounded in Tucson gave Obama access to the U. S. body politic at the most intimate levels of bio-political life – where the *zoe* of ontologically vulnerable individuals was conjoined with the *bios* of the body politic.

Obama’s commemorative remarks drew a tacit parallel between the U.S. citizens who lost their lives in New York and Washington D.C. on September 11, 1001 and the citizens who were subjected to a comparably senseless violence in Tucson. But comprehending the significance of this moment to Obama’s governmentality requires drawing a distinction from the bio-historic events upon which his predecessor had founded his governmentality.

When he inaugurated the emergency measures of the Homeland Security State, Bush cited the traumatic power of the events that took place on 9/11 as justification. The Homeland Security legislation turned the state of exception into a juridical political apparatus that inscribed the body of the people within a quasi-permanent bio-political settlement. This bio-political arrangement first subtracted the population from the forms of civic life through which they recognized themselves as a free and equal citizenry and then positioned these life forms – the people, their constitutional rights and liberties – non-synchronous zones of protection.<sup>14</sup>

President Bush’s emergency measures set the citizens whose rights and liberties the Homeland State protected in an antithetical relationship with the detainees and illegal combatants that it reduced to the condition of sheer naked biological life (*homo sacer*). Stripped of the rights of citizens *and* prisoners of war, these persons were reduced to the status of unprotected flesh (*zoe*) whose lives the state could terminate according to decisions that were outside juridical regulation. In order to protect the entirety of the law against attack, the state subordinated its own laws to

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<sup>14</sup> I elaborate on this account of Bush’s bipolar Settlement in mythopoetical construction in “The Mythological Foundations of the Homeland Security State” (Pease 2009: 162-179).



this urgent eschatological mission. The vacuum opened up by the vanishing of objective reality into this singularity was filled in by the mythologized reality in which the emergency state erected its eschatological version of realpolitik.

The citizens who had been shot and killed in Tucson held a bio-political status equivalent to the figures whose radical dislocation had been normalized by President Bush's state of exception. They had suffered the loss of the social textures of the bio-political lifeworlds into which they were born. Outside the protection of all particular laws, their bodies were abandoned to a field of violence. At the most intimate level of their being, they had been given over to a terrorizing power that conditioned them absolutely. But the rites of commemoration that Barack Obama performed in this space of catastrophic devastation also enabled him to undo the hold of the bio-political settlement President Bush's Homeland Security legislation had imposed.

The distinction between Barack Obama's governmentality and George Bush's turned on their different relationship to the state of exception. In *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin asserted that when the state of exception becomes the rule, "we must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this fact. Then we will have the production of a real state of exception before us as a task" (Benjamin 1988: 257). During his presidential campaign, Obama connected his perception that under the Bush administration the state of exception had indeed become the rule with the imperative to undertake the production of an alternative.

Obama's presidential campaign correlated the real state of exception with the revolutionary potential of his movement. At the level of the law, Obama's movement personified the sheer anomic or constituent power – the constituted not constituting state power – of what Benjamin referred to as pure or revolutionary violence (Pease 2009: 207). The revolutionary violence animating Obama's movement supplied its members with warrant for undermining Bush's state of exception in the name of an alternative order of legality that President Obama's election would bring into existence after.

But after his election, Barack Obama did not abolish the state of exception that George Bush had normalized. The activities President Obama performed within this mythological terrain differed from President Bush's, in that Barack Obama did not invoke the state's sovereign emergency powers as warrant for the imposition of his bio-political regime. He instead used the Bush state of exception as the backdrop for his restoration of the normal constitutional democracy. In so doing, President Obama restricted his production of the "real" state of exception with the restoration of the constitutional rights and liberties from which President Bush's Homeland Security legislation had dissociated United States citizens.

Earlier I described the usage to which Obama put the nation's structural racist antinomy in generating the momentum of his political movement. During his term as president, Obama turned this racist antinomy into the dynamic jointure through



which he reconnected the body politic with their constitutive rights and liberties. Rather than supplanting this racist structure, Obama positioned himself in a rift between its antagonistic representations so as to represent two dialectically opposed iterations of the people – its sovereign citizens as well as its *hominī sacres*. In his Tucson address, Obama turned the torsion produced by his oscillation between the two poles – sovereign leader, *homo sacer* – of this racist antinomy into the dynamic jointure through which he reconnected the body politic with their constitutive rights and liberties. This structural antinomy became the vital portal through which Barack Obama's rules and norms inhabited the U.S. body politic.

In Tucson, Obama entered a site of generalized violence in which the exception had become the rule. But the Real state of exception he inaugurated at this site entailed his re-performing the constitutive rites upon which the United States was founded. At this Real state of exception in between the nation and the state, Obama reaffirmed the foundational premises of the United States social contract at the very site upon which a terrorist had forcibly removed U.S. citizens from the condition of national belonging. In reinstating the state's power as the guarantor of their rights, Obama first reinstated the wounded within the condition of common humanity, then he brought them out of the realm of civic death and reconnected them with their constitutional rights and liberties.

In an effort to elucidate the role Obama's fantasy played in inaugurating his mode of governmentality, permit me to recast the symbolically efficacious action President Obama performed in Tucson as the prototypical mystery that Black Orpheus enacted within Bush's underworld. When Barack Obama traveled to this devastated place he acted upon the attributes of the figure Barack mythologized as Black Orpheus. Standing in between the state and persons whom a terrorizing assassin had reduced to precariously vulnerable biological life, Obama's Black Orpheus, as the plenipotentiary of the US body politic's vital political energies, performed the state's foundational Orphic mystery. In the rift between these vulnerable mortalized biological life forms (what Giorgio Agamben calls *zoe*) and the immortal citizen-bios, Orpheus acted on the charismatic dimension of the state, the extra-legality (*lex animata*) animating the law's effectivity. Oscillating between speaking as the sovereign and as representative of the *hominī sacres* threatened by a gunman's terrorizing violence, Black Orpheus, personified the jointure between natural life and the law through which they became once again entwined with the constitution. No longer bare life, the wounded recovered their participant capacities at the jointure of life and law through the intercession of Black Orpheus.





### LOSING EURYDICE: THE GAZE OF ORPHEUS

In “Black Orpheus: Barack Obama’s Governmentality,” I have tried to elucidate the state fantasy Barack Obama instituted to replace George Bush’s Homeland Security State. The “Black Orpheus” fantasy has enabled me to explain how Obama dissociated his bio-political initiatives from the Tea Party’s and differentiated his governmentality from the Homeland Security State. But in representing President Obama’s governmentality primarily in terms of the Black Orpheus fantasy responsible for hegemonizing it, I have risked a dual mystification – of the particulars of President Obama’s mode of governmentality as well as an analysis of its workings. Obama may have wanted us to envision his administration through the visage of Black Orpheus. I cannot conclude this discussion of Barack Obama’s state fantasy without asking what this fantasy mystifies.

I can begin to answer this question by returning to the Teatro Carnaval that was the point of departure for this excursus and reading the opening phrases in President Obama’s address from a slightly different perspective,

Now, one of my earliest impressions of Brazil was a movie I saw with my mother as a very young child, a movie called *Black Orpheus*, that is set in the favelas of Rio during Carnival. And my mother loved that movie, with its singing and dancing against the backdrop of the beautiful green hills. And it first premiered as a play right here in Teatro Municipal. That’s my understanding. And my mother is gone now, but she would have never imagined that her son’s first trip to Brazil would be as President of the United States. She would have never imagined that. And I never imagined that this country would be even more beautiful than it was in the movie. (citazione?)

At the outset of these remarks, I described Barack Obama as having become unimaginable to *Black Orpheus’s* repertoire of racist representations, and I interpreted Obama’s recollection of his dead mother as a reprise of Orpheus’s efforts to call Eurydice back from the underworld. But if these lines do indeed refer to the Black Orpheus Obama personified in achieving the presidency, the Eurydice to which they now allude cannot be restricted to Obama’s mother. “Eurydice” would necessarily include the members of the grassroots political movement that Black Orpheus’s eloquence persuaded to elect Barack Obama. In the ancient myth, Orpheus disclosed his hubris when he disobeyed Hades’ order not to look back as his song released Eurydice from the underworld. When he looks back at the political movement Black Orpheus promised to lead out of President Bush’s underworld, it is President Barack Obama who has now become unimaginable to Eurydice. The chief reason he has become unimaginable to Eurydice now has less to do with Black Orpheus’s breach of the racial imaginary than with President Barack Obama’s failure to realize the transformative change he promised.



During the presidential campaign, participants in Obama's movement bombarded President Bush 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 – that would undermine the legislation spelled out in Bush's Homeland Security Act. Rather than moving the nation out of Bush's underworld, President Obama has renewed the surveillance provisions of the USA Patriot Act, ordered his Attorney General to initiate juridical proceedings against persons illegally detained at Guantánamo Bay and increased the usage of the preemptive strikes.

President Obama had signed an executive order authorizing the bombing of military bases in Libya on the exact day, March 19th, that George W. Bush initiated his campaign against Saddam Hussein. He enunciated the rationale for the bombing in the same March 20 speech in which he recalled his initial viewing of *Black Orpheus*. In his address in Teatro Carnival, President Obama placed the mask of Black Orpheus over foreign policies that the members of his political movement would never have imagined him undertaking.

In the body of his address President Obama's constructed a series of dubious rhetorical analogies – they correlated the "universal" human aspirations for freedom, and socioeconomic justice informing the "Arab Spring" with his own grassroots movement, with his "humanitarian" intervention in Libya, as well as with his neo-liberal trade agreements with Brazil – that would have been comparably unimaginable. President Obama's efforts to transpose the truly revolutionary movement taking place in the Middle East into a mirror image of his disbanded grassroots political movement rivalled the cynicism evidenced in the Tea Party's appropriative maneuvers. President Obama has named his military campaign in Libya "Odyssey Dawn" so as to draw it into the imaginary orbit of the "Arab Spring," and he has deployed technologies – Drone missiles and Special Ops units – to remove those who are killed or disfigured from the field of visibility. But after the visage of Orpheus is removed, Eurydice discovers that she still remains in Bush's underworld.

During his campaign, Barack Obama took pride in his ability to take up positions in between hostile factions so as to negotiate the desire of each for a "more perfect Union". But as I am writing, President Obama's rifts have solidified the recalcitrant antagonisms undergirding the Civil War in Libya and the stalemate over the debt ceiling in the United States. These and other deadlocks the president has fostered have torn now-time apart at its roots.



I concluded *The New American Exceptionalism* with the observation that I did not know whether the audacity of hope Barack Obama had aroused was a sign of political renewal or a symptom of radical despair.<sup>15</sup> It may be that we have entered a now-time in which radical hope and audacious despair have achieved a more perfect union.

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<sup>15</sup> "Whether that state of fantasy is a sign of the audacity of hope or a symptom of cultural despair is a question that remains to be answered" (Pease 2009: 213).



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**Donald E. Pease**, professor of English, The Ted and Helen Geisel Third Century Professor in the Humanities, Chair of the Dartmouth Liberal Studies Program and winner of the 1981 Distinguished Teaching Award at Dartmouth, is an authority on nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature and literary theory. In the summer of 1986 he brought the School of Criticism and Theory to Dartmouth. In 1996 he founded the Dartmouth Institute in American Studies.

The author of over one hundred articles on figures in American and British literature, Pease is the co-editor of *American Renaissance Rediscovered* and the editor of seven other volumes including *The Cultures of United States Imperialism* (1992), *The Futures of American Studies* (2002), and *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009).

Professor Pease serves on the Board of Governors of the Clinton Institute in American Studies, and he received the Faculty Award for Service to Alumni Continuing Education in 1999, awarded by Dartmouth's Alumni Council. In 2000 he was the Drue Heinz Visiting Professor at Oxford University. Over the last five years, Pease has been Distinguished Visiting Professor at the JFK Institute in American Studies at the Freie Universitaett, Berlin; the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the University of Rome at Tor Vergata.

[amonline@unimi.it](mailto:amonline@unimi.it)