

Trump and Trumpism: The Wall, Semantic Desubstantiation, and Authoritarian Discourse

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I will build a great wall — and nobody builds walls better than me, believe me —and I'll build them very inexpensively. I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall. Mark my words.

- Donald Trump (“Full text: Donald Trump announces a presidential bid”)

Abstract:

Trump and Trumpism: The Wall, Semantic Desubstantiation, and Authoritarian Discourse In Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, Berzilius Windrip captures the presidency by appealing to antisemitism and xenophobia. This “paranoid style in American politics” survived as resentment among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who believed themselves victims of conspiratorial forces. Donald Trump hearkens back to recessive political traits in 20th century American history: racist tropes, fear of immigrants, suspicion of government (the “deep state”), the instigation of violence, and praise for armed militias. This article discusses Trump's appropriation of authoritarian discourse by using semiotic analysis of the “Wall,” an ideogeme that has no discreet meaning but rather embodies the entirety of Trumpism. The Wall is not a physical barrier at the US border but rather a “master fiction,” much like the Junta's ideology in the Argentine “dirty war,” that divides the American body politic. The article concludes that Trump understands the Wall as a symbol for the vilification of the “Other” to be met with brutality and violence.

Keywords:

Trump, Wall, immigration, authoritarian personality, xenophobia

Introduction

In Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, Berzilius "Buzz" Windrip, a populist politician, captures the presidency in the midst of a crippling depression by appealing to anti-semitic, anti-socialist, and xenophobic sentiments in the country. He consolidates his power through a clampdown on a free press and the use of armed militias, who terrorize the population and throw his political opponents in concentration camps. He declares that the President has absolute authority, Congress serves only an advisory role, and the Supreme Court has no power to negate any Presidential act (Lewis, 1964 [1935]).

Lewis's nightmarish vision echoed the concurrent experience of European fascism. Democracy is destroyed, and in the struggle for power which follows, a second civil war ensues. The book reflects a deep-seated anxiety that Nazism might take root in American society. Lewis's fears were not without reason. On February 20, 1939, the Nazi Party affiliate in the United States, the German-American Bund, held a "Pro-America" rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City, attended by over 20,000 National Socialist sympathizers, giving the Nazi salute in front of a three-story high portrait of George Washington (American Nazi Organization Rally at Madison Square Garden, 1939). American participation in World War II proved to be a death blow to this nativist fascist movement, and after the war, the results of the *Authoritarian Personality* study, commissioned by the U.S. government to assess the susceptibility of the U.S. populace to fascist propaganda, showed that Nazi ideology had little appeal to the great mass of Americans other than small sub-groups like San Quentin prisoners (Adorno et al., 1950).

Nazism survived in the United States in the 1960s as a fringe movement in the guise of the American Nazi Party, aka, the National Socialist White People's Party, led by George Lincoln Rockwell; however, his assassination by a disgruntled ex-party member in 1969 resulted in its demise. Right-wing fanaticism continued to exist, most notably in the form of the John Birch Society, and various militia movements, like the Minutemen, but their size and influence were small (Broyles, 1964; Atkins, 2011). At best, they represented the extremist element that attempted to appropriate nativist and racist sentiments, which had plagued American politics since the "Know-Nothing" (American) Party of the 1850s and 1860s and the American Protective Association of the 1880s and 1890s (McBride 2018). Nevertheless, what Richard Hofstadter dubbed "the paranoid style in American politics," rooted in anti-Masonic and anti-Catholic attitudes, survived as a form of *ressentiment* of

largely white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who believed themselves victims of institutional American forces, e.g., the federal government and political elites.

America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion. The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialistic and communistic schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners as of old but major statesmen who are at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors had discovered conspiracies; the modern radical right finds conspiracy to be betrayal from on high (Hofstadter, 1964).

Although politicians like Joseph McCarthy employed the “paranoid style” for their own advancement, this element in the body politic seemed to be an outlier. That does not mean that such fears no longer resided in the recesses of the collective American psyche. Philip Roth’s work *The Plot Against America* is a case in point. In the novel, Charles A. Lindbergh, the American aviator and the country’s first true celebrity, defeats Roosevelt in 1940 for the Presidency and pursues both friendship with Hitler and anti-semitic policies, establishing concentration camps on American soil. Roth specifically references Hofstadter’s “paranoid style of American politics” in the postscript to the book, but some regarded this text as “paranoid” itself, an expression of the anxiety of an American Jewish writer about the problem of anti-semitism that ostensibly America had left behind. Like Sinclair Lewis, Roth had reason to be afraid.

It is in this context that Donald J. Trump embodies the return of the repressed. Here is a man who hearkens back to many of the recessive political traits in 20th century American history: the use of racist tropes, the depiction of the press as an “enemy of the state,” the fear of immigrants, the suspicion of political elites and the “deep state,” the instigation of violence and praise for armed militias. His words echo those of Berzilius Windrip that Art. II of the U.S. Constitution sets no limits on his power.

This article discusses Trump’s appropriation of authoritarian discourse by using the framework of semiotic analysis, particularly as applied to the issue of immigration. From the moment Trump took his ride down the escalator in Trump Tower on June 16, 2015 to announce his candidacy, he has used immigrants as a focal point for his rhetoric, symbolized by his invocation of the “Wall” as an emblematic signature for his campaign,

and later, his administration.ⁱ As this article will make clear, the Wall cannot be discussed rationally because it has no denotative meaning nor is it subject to linguistic reciprocity. Yet, it seems to hold power over his followers.

Despite his ignorance of history, Trump had stumbled onto the key to authoritarian power. The Wall is an exemplar of authoritarian discourse (Goldschläger) (or what is elsewhere called authoritative discourse (Bahktin)). As a term, the Wall is subject to “semantic desubstantiation” (Goldschläger 15), standing as an empty signifier. Facts are irrelevant; the term Wall is “autoreferential and egocentric” (Goldschläger 12). Understanding the “meaning” of the Wall is contingent upon how close one is to the arbiter of meaning: Donald Trump. The Wall is whatever he says it is. As a *tekmerion* (Goldschläger 13), the Wall cannot be disputed. One either accepts it or not. A product of kenotic semiotics, the Wall is easily transformed into a slogan, a motto, or even a chant. It takes on the grammatical form of the imperative: “Build the Wall”; “Finish the Wall.” Essentially, members of Trump’s base do not know what the Wall means. They must simply accept what Trump says it is at any given moment. As “enemies of the people,” another empty signifier, those who question the meaning of the Wall are outsiders and therefore can only be met with verbal abuse or violence (Trump, Twitter. July 22, 2019).

Trump’s Wall and Immigration Policy

The Wall functioned as a prophylaxis against those who embodied a threat to Trump’s America. “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (“Full text: Donald Trump announces a presidential bid”). During his term in office, Trump even declared a national emergency under the National Emergencies Act, 50 US §§ 1601-1651, alleging that “[t]hey say walls don’t work. Walls work 100 percent.” (“Remarks by President Trump on Emergency Executive Order”).

Trump launched his 2020 re-election campaign with the slogan “Promises Made, Promises Kept” (<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/>). Among those promises was the actual, rather than metaphoric, construction of the Wall; yet, as of June 2020, only 3 miles of new fencing had been constructed (U.S. Customs & Border Protection, Department of Homeland Security, Border Wall System, June 19, 2020). Other work had been restricted to replacing existing barriers, e.g., the 2.25 miles of fencing in Coleridge, CA, where Trump had a plaque (with his name) affixed to the fencing originally constructed during

the Obama Administration (Timm). Moreover, he had falsely contended that Mexico would pay for the Wall (“They may even write us a check by the time they see what happens” (Poor)), which he later claimed he had never said (Palma).

Trump asserted that his “big, beautiful wall” across the southern border would be made of concrete. As he said in his typically rambling, disjointed English, “[i]f you have a wall this thick and it's solid concrete from ground to 32 feet high, which is a high wall, much higher than people planned” (“Transcript of Donald Trump Interview with The Wall Street Journal”). In December 2018, Trump insisted that “an all concrete Wall was NEVER ABANDONED” (Trump, Twitter. December 31, 2018); yet, one month later, he suggested that the Wall need not be concrete nor even solid, but that it could be “barriers, fencing, or walls — or whatever you want to call it” (Quealy). In the first week of his Presidency, Trump claimed to reporter Jorge Ramos that he would build a 1,900-mile wall (Ramos). Yet, Trump contradicted himself in January 2019 by contending that “we do not need 2000 miles of concrete wall from sea to shiny [sic] sea. We never did. We never proposed that” (Hains).

Whatever the nomenclature or form of Trump’s Wall, it is clear that it cannot either physically or legally keep people out of the United States. Trump claimed that “[d]rugs & so much other big trouble can easily pour in. It can be stopped cold!” (Trump, Twitter. January 11, 2019); however, the DEA stated that the vast majority of drugs arrive in the United States through ports of entry, not by breaching physical barriers (CBS 5 Investigates). Still, the Trump Administration authorized the construction of eight prototypes of the Wall in 2018. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) conducted testing of these prototypes as well as a review of costs, and found that the four concrete prototypes suffered from “extensive” construction challenges, two of the alternative prototypes suffered “substantial” problems, and the last two “moderate” problems. In particular, only half could be built on slopes of more than 45%, and that only with significant additional work. Three could not be built on slopes of more than 15% and one was dysfunctional on any slope (*Southwest Border Security: CBP Is Evaluating Designs and Locations for Border Barriers but Is Proceeding Without Key Information*).

Even if the eight prototypes could be redesigned to handle the slope, the Wall had significant limitations. As Janet Napolitano, the former Secretary of Homeland Security in the Obama Administration, observed years ago, “Show me a 50-foot wall and I’ll show you a 51-foot ladder at the border” (Lacey). There even seemed to be little support for the Wall among members of the Texas delegation in Congress who worried not only about its cost and effectiveness but also the inevitable use of eminent domain by the federal

government against private property owners (Livingston). Indeed, the “Presidential Proclamation on Declaring a National Emergency Concerning the Southern Border of the United States,” issued February 15, 2019, specifically alluded to the power of federal authorities to effect, “if necessary, the transfer and acceptance of jurisdiction over border lands.”

According to Rep. Will Hurd, a Republican congressman whose district abutted the Mexican border, most immigrants either claimed asylum or were treated by the Trump Administration as asylum seekers ("Rep. Hurd: New interpretation of law responsible for staggering migrant increase"). Under U.S. law, asylum seekers cannot be deported until their claim for asylum is heard by a federal immigration judge. Contrary to statements by the Administration, migrants may apply for asylum anywhere along the U.S. border, not just at ports of entry. Accordingly, any migrant who crosses the Rio Grande, for example, may apply for asylum, and, if they do so upon contact with U.S. Customs and Border Patrol personnel at the border, they are *ipso facto* legal asylum seekers, not illegal immigrants. (8 U.S. Code § 1158(a)(1)). A border wall cannot stop asylum seekers, unless CBP officers illegally turn them back to Mexico (in violation of the internationally recognized doctrine of *non-refoulement*) (Al OtroLado et al. v. Kelly et al., Case No. 2:17-cv-5111, U.S. Dist. Ct. (Central Dist. Of CA, July 12, 2017)). Trump himself issued a Presidential Proclamation which denied the right to claim asylum to anyone who does not do so at a port of entry—a flagrant violation of 8 U.S. Code § 1158(a)(1) (“Presidential Proclamation Addressing Mass Migration Through the Southern Border of the United States”).

Prior to 2018, unauthorized immigrants in the United States had steadily declined, from a high of 12.2 million in 2012 to 10.5 million in 2017 (Krogstad, Passel, and Cohn); yet, Homeland Security’s policy shift, treating all migrants as asylum seekers, had a tangible effect on the influx of immigrants at the southern border, reversing that trend. As Rep. Hurd noted, word spread through the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) about the changes in U.S. government policy, producing an explosion of migrants who came to the border either out of legitimate fear for their lives or to escape crushing poverty in their native countries. As a result, as of the summer of 2019, migrants arrived at the U.S. southern border at the rate of over 100,000 per month, or over 1 million per year.

In 2019-2020, there were only 465 federal immigration judges (Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice) who faced a backlog of 1.2 million cases (TracImmigration, “Immigration Court Backlog Tool”). Once asylum is claimed and a credible fear

interview is passed, each case takes on average 760 days to process (TracImmigration, “Average Time Pending Cases Have Been Waiting in Immigration Courts as of April 2020”). Immigration judges were overwhelmed, and, according to one judge who spoke anonymously, “Morale has never, ever been lower,” leading many to quit or seek early retirement (Frazin). The result was a skyrocketing migrant population overwhelming Homeland Security detention centers along the border and throughout the United States. Accordingly, the Trump Administration’s Department of Homeland Security implemented the “Migrant Protection Protocols,” which permitted U.S. authorities under § 235(b)(2)(C) of the Immigration and Nationality Act to sequester asylum seekers in Mexico until their asylum hearings, but here it was the regulation, not the Wall, which prevented migrants from remaining in the United States.

Caused in part by the change in Homeland Security policy regarding the treatment of all migrants as asylum-seekers, the humanitarian crisis worsened in June 2019 with the announcement of cuts in U.S. foreign aid to governments in the Northern Triangle. Although the State Department would continue funding previously awarded grants from FY 2017, \$200 million, unallocated from FY 2017, would not be distributed nor would some \$450 million in FY 2018 funds (Ortagus, 2019). The Trump Administration alleged that these governments had not taken the necessary steps to stem migration from their countries, even though the funds were targeted to reduce poverty, crime and violence—the main causes of migration, which even the conservative American Enterprise Institute admitted (Noreiga, 2019). Trump’s Wall and his immigration policy were therefore spectacularly wrongheaded. Yet, Trump orchestrated rallies around the United States where his followers wildly chanted, “Build the Wall!”, “Finish the Wall!”

Trump and Authoritarian Discourse

In his seminal *Course in General Linguistics*, Ferdinand de Saussure, widely regarded as the father of modern linguistics, laid out the fundamentals of semiotics. The signs of language are broken down into two components: signifiers and signifieds. The signifier, appearing in either spoken or written word, is related to an underlying concept, the signified (Saussure 114). Linguistic expression is based upon the opposition, rather than similarity, of signs in any sequence (Saussure 120). The meaning of a particular signifier, i.e., its signified, is arbitrary, yet, at the same time, frequently varies whenever employed. Accordingly, given the innumerable instances of a sign’s use in different linguistic contexts, the signified slides under the signifier, and organically produces multiple meanings. Learning a language entails the ability to intuit these nuanced (or gross) distinctions in meaning. Although arbitrary, the sign’s meaning is normally derived from a community of speakers (Saussure 14), and the meaning of a signifier may change over

time. Hence, it is the linguistic community that generates the meaning of any spoken or written communication.

Authoritarian discourse is the exception to the rule. As Alain Goldschläger noted in his classic essay, "Towards a Semiotics of Authoritarian Discourse," authoritarian vocabulary "is no longer a semantically rich and debatable sign but an empty unassailable *tekmerion*." A *tekmerion* in Greek is a sign which is beyond disputation; it is either accepted or rejected. "Asemantic, the word cannot be discussed" (Goldschläger14). An authoritarian sign is void of all meaning. The signifier is subject to semantic desubstantiation, "a linguistic process aimed at canceling all semantic values and references on which the listener could lay hold" (Goldschläger16). It "refers to the ideology as a whole, thereby losing all specific value: it cannot stand alone, outside of the unspoken total discourse" (Goldschläger14).

Nowhere is the phenomenon more evident in the modern era than in Trump's Wall. The meaning of the Wall is incomprehensible. It is a Wall, a fence, a barricade, a divider, a barrier, steel slats, or a moat . . . with alligators (Shear and Davis). It is 10' high, 30' high, 50' high. It is solid and yet transparent. It is concrete, stone, steel, wire, and concrete again. It is medieval and modern. It is yet to be built or already built or in the process of being built. It is "anything you want it to be"; yet, to Trump, it is other than what his critics say. Trump insists, however, that "A Wall is a Wall!" (Trump, Twitter. January 31, 2019); yet, the tautology does not tell us what that is. "After all, having created the word, only the leader really knows what it means" (Goldschläger17). Trump argued that the building of the Wall was a national emergency; yet, simultaneously, he said that he did not need to build it. Despite the Wall's incomprehensibility, Trump continued to speak about it, seemingly *ad infinitum*. In her study of Mussolini's speeches, Barbara Spackman dubbed such authoritarian oxymorons "[a] rationalized irrationality, a referential nonreferentiality" (117). This "wooden language" (*la langue de bois*) contains and yet transcends contradiction (Tigno and Franco 181). "The essential consequence of this is the illusion that the locutor can transcend the words and their antinomy to reach that superior level of understanding where a new coherence exists and where unity prevails. Everything reinforces the power relationship between the omniscient emitter and the ignorant receiver" (Goldschläger18). Clearly, the Wall did not work in any rational sense. Accordingly, Trump's political rivals and media commentators were stunned by his persistent invocation of the Wall. Yet, Trump's Wall did work in one important respect.

Although "inept," "insecure" and "incompetent," according to the British Ambassador to the United States (Oakeshott), Trump fortuitously discovered the political alchemy of

authoritarian discourse. Citing Bahktin, Henrietta Serban describes authoritarian discourse as “monoglossia” (18) in which the linguistic flow is unidirectional, originating in the authoritarian leader who wields the empty signifier in an exercise of power, thereby “weaponizing language” (Akbaba203). The empty signifier can only be filled with meaning by the authoritarian leader, i.e., it means whatever he says it means at any given moment. Monoglossia is a favorite tool of Donald Trump, most notably in his use of Twitter. Trump almost always tweeted in the first person, letting everyone know that he was in control of the discourse. Twitter particularly fit his needs because it is truncated, subverting the possibility for any rational discussion, and exists as a form of planned obsolescence (Gounari15-17). Trump moved forward from one tweet to the next quickly, thereby effacing the substance of a prior communication, and controlling the news cycle. His tweets were dotted with hyperbole, capitalization, and exclamation points, to imply that they were “backed by force and intimidation” (Tigno and Franco 164). As Barbara Spackman concluded, “language itself may function as one of the realities of force and violence” (133).

Frequently, Trump made use of the imperative, a grammatical form widely embraced by his followers. “The use of the imperative form is the most obvious feature of authoritarian language [and] . . . imbues it with truth, universality, and finality” (Tigno and Franco 163). Such slogans as “Build the Wall!” and “Finish the Wall!” “signal that the entire speech was to be understood in another frame of reference and was not debatable. At this clarion call, the listener has to change from a reasonable being to an obedient subject submissive to the whims of the speaker” (Goldschläger16). Goldschläger argued that authoritarian movements are characterized by a pyramid structure in which the leader sits at the top. The closer to the top, the more likely an individual might understand the meaning of the *tekmerion*. However, even among those privileged few within the movement, no one truly knows its meaning other than the leader, who may change it at any moment without notice. Even those closest to the leader do not understand authoritarian discourse. As we have seen in the Trump White House, staff frequently scrambled to interpret what Trump meant, sometimes to his displeasure. As for those at the bottom of the pyramid, what political commentators call his “base,” comprehension of authoritarian discourse was simply impossible. They must accept the leader’s direction on faith and act to advance his political agenda as best they can (Goldschläger13). The authoritarian leader is therefore frequently depicted as an individual with a charismatic gift, “a supreme Genius,” (Serban23) who understands a world that they do not, and on whom they depend for their very well-being.

Observation of Trump's rallies confirmed his charisma, at least with his base. His egotism, indeed, his narcissism, was commonly noted in political commentary by left, center, and right. Trump made that abundantly clear in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention when, after enumerating the ills that beset his supporters, he declared, "I alone can fix it" ("Donald J. Trump Republican Nomination Acceptance Speech"). His tweet storms were not generated on the POTUS channel, but rather on his personal Twitter account. As if to embody the relation of leader and masses described by Freud in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* in which the leader serves as the dominant ego ideal of a group (Freud, 1976 [1921]), Trump concluded, "I am your voice" ("Donald J. Trump Republican Nomination Acceptance Speech"). Like other authoritarians, regarded by their followers as geniuses, Trump considers himself as "not smart but genius . . . and a very stable genius at that!" (Trump, Twitter. January 6, 2018). The leader who wields authoritarian discourse is most often associated with a cult of personality, e.g., Mussolini, Hitler, Franco (Serban 17-18). Trump's followers believe him to be above criticism and beyond the moral expectations of normal human beings—a fact which seems to have caught even Trump by surprise. As he commented during the 2016 campaign, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters, OK? It's, like, incredible" (Dwyer). He believes he is the greatest president to have lived, including Lincoln and Washington (Ecarma), whom he criticized for failing to name Mt. Vernon after himself. Trump, on the other hand, identifies with his signature policy personally. "I want it to be so beautiful because maybe someday they'll call it The Trump Wall" (Schwartz).

From Authoritarian Discourse to Aggressive Xenophobia

The link between authoritarian discourse and policies of aggressive xenophobia lies in the authoritarian personality of the leader. The classic *Authoritarian Personality* study identified the attributes of the authoritarian personality and developed interview methods and questionnaires (in particular, the F (fascistic) and E (ethnocentric) scales) to survey different segments of the American public.

The F scale included statements used to elicit responses that could be judged against certain authoritarian attitudes: conventionalism, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, anti-intraception, superstition and stereotypy, power and "toughness," destructiveness and cynicism, projectivity, and sex ("exaggerated concern with sexual 'goings-on'") (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, and Sanford 148-150). To be sure, Trump is no prude, and, indeed, prides himself on his sexual exploits, as can be seen by

the Access Hollywood tapes, his alleged affairs with a porn star and Playboy Playmate, the allegations of rape or attempted rape by numerous women, and his past association with alleged child molester and sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein. Nevertheless, there are a number of these attributes which are strongly evident in Donald Trump. He engaged in stereotypes about Jews, African-Americans, and Hispanics. He rejected scientific conclusions about global warming and ordered the EPA to excise the term “climate change” from their documents and projects. He aggressively engaged in mockery to belittle his opponents, calling them losers, and believes that he must always “get even”; yet, at the same time, he acquiesced in the most embarrassing fashion to dictators like Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong Un in a blatant display of authoritarian submission. He directed hostility, not only toward his political opponents and the press, but also to his own White House staff who feared him. He regarded any kind of tender-mindedness or human compassion as weakness, refused ever to apologize for insensitive statements or actions, and held, above all, that power and “toughness” are necessary if he is going to dominate others.

According to the study’s authors, these authoritarian traits manifest themselves in ethnocentrism, measured by the “E” scale. Although many of Trump’s supporters view the Wall literally, indeed, some even started a GoFundMe page to raise money for its construction (<https://www.gofundme.com/TheTrumpWall>), the Wall is actually an ideological border, much like that conceived by General Juan Carlos Onganía of the Argentine Junta during the “Dirty War” of the 1970s (Graziano 14). The Wall is an *ideologeme* which bifurcates the American body politic into ingroup and outgroup. As Bakhtin suggested, the *ideologeme* is a word that succinctly captures the mythic worldview of the speaker (Bakhtin, 1981, 419). In doing so, it not only defines what the ingroup is not but also generates a “master fiction,” the semblance of the ingroup’s alleged “national essence” (Billig, 1994, 14). In his brilliant text on the Argentine “Dirty War,” Frank Graziano described the manifestation of ethnocentrism in an actual political context. Mytho-logic’s nature, he argued,

is reductionist, and its disdain for the texture of reality is conspicuous; it demands the “reorganization” of reality in formal conformity with its binary block-logic and in conceptual conformity with the precepts that sustain it; it exploits stereotypes as its foremost discursive strategy; it lumps all gradations of distinction into polarized extremities, into binary oppositions modeled finally on Self and Other (Graziano 108).

Consequently, the Argentine body politic was divided between: Good/Evil; Life/Death; Truth/Lies; Protect/Destroy; *patria/apatria*; and Right/Left. The binaries were so aligned to identify the Junta with all that was good, life, truth, protection, patriotism, and conservatism, while the opposition was synonymous with evil, death, lies, destruction, subversion, and socialism (Graziano 115). At its worse, the Junta devoted itself to obliterating the Left—literally—turning its political opponents, even those disinterested and complacent, into the disappeared, the *Desaparacedos*. “Since the discourse has no rational content or a very limited and secondary one, there is no possible discussion but only physical confrontation.” (Goldschläger 14).

Just as the Argentine Junta in the “Dirty War” divided the body politic, so too does the Wall metaphorically divide the U.S. populace between those who support Trump’s authoritarian agenda and those who stand in opposition. As a master fiction, the Wall is designed to protect the “national essence” from defilement, and thereby “Make America Great Again.” “The new walls defend an inside against an outside where these terms ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ do not necessarily correspond to nation-state identity or fealty, that is, where otherness and difference are detached from jurisdiction and membership, even as the walls themselves would seem to demote and demarcate precisely these things” (Brown 94). Those “beyond the pale” are to be met by violence, a constant threat levied by Trump since his 2016 campaign.

The metaphor of the Wall threatens at times to bleed into a literal reality. Under Operation Diligent Valor, miming the nomenclature of a military operation, U.S. Customs and Border Protection forces, trained at, and assigned to, the U.S. border with Mexico, were deployed in July 2020 in the streets of Portland, Oregon, ostensibly to defend federal property under 40 U.S. §1315; however, the real reason seems to have had more to do with inciting Black Lives Matter protestors, conjuring a threatening “Other,” and thereby advancing Trump’s Presidential re-election prospects (Lang, Dawsey, Barrett and Miroff).

His rallies have been replete with threats of brutality, as exemplified by those held in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Las Vegas, and Warren, Michigan in 2016. Trump urged his supporters, “If you see somebody getting ready to throw a tomato, knock the crap out of them.” He personally incited the crowd, “I’d like to punch him in the face” and threatened a protester, “I’ll beat the crap out of you.” He assured his followers that “[i]f you do [beat him], I’ll defend you in court. Part of the problem is no one wants to hurt each other anymore. Maybe he should have been roughed up. I don’t know if I’ll do the fighting myself or if other people will” (Keneally). Trump not only targeted protesters. He

segregated journalists at his rallies and then vilified them, encouraging his supporters to assault them. One reporter in particular, Katy Tur of MSNBC News, was regularly excoriated by Trump, and consequently was threatened with rape and death in hate mail from Trump supporters (Fenwick). He praised Rep. Greg Gianforte, a Trumpite Republican Congressman from Wyoming up for re-election, who body-slammed a reporter during an interview (Keneally). Even in March, 2019 in a *Breitbart* interview, he warned, “I can tell you I have the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the Bikers for Trump – I have the tough people, but they don’t play it tough — until they go to a certain point, and then it would be very bad, very bad” (“Exclusive — President Donald Trump: Paul Ryan Blocked Subpoenas of Democrats”).

MAGA, of course, has a not-so-hidden subtext: “Make America White Again.” Trump refused to denounce the support of David Duke, white supremacist and former Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, claiming incredulously that he knew nothing about the group (Resnick). It is this subtext which generated support for Trump among so-called white nationalists—an assortment of Neo-Nazis and Klansmen, who caught the nation’s attention during the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, VA. Marching in a torch-lit parade, reminiscent of the Brownshirts, they shouted, “Jews will not replace us! Blacks will not replace us!” (Spencer and Stolberg). Trump claimed that there were some “very fine people” among the white nationalists who assaulted counter-demonstrators, injuring dozens and killing Heather Heyer (“Full Transcript and Video: Trump’s News Conference in New York”). For Trump, those opposed to “us” need to be cleansed from American society. They are immigrants who, as he notoriously claimed, come from “shithole countries,” such as Haiti and West African nations, rather than Nordic countries like Norway (Davis, Stohlberg, and Kaplan). As he demanded in his attacks on four Democratic congresswomen of color, they should “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came,” even though all are U.S. citizens and 3 of 4 were born in the U.S. (Trump, Twitter, July 14, 2019). His followers, of course, turned his tweet into an authoritarian slogan, chanting at his rallies, “Send Her Back!”, ostensibly targeting the Somali-born Representative Ilhan Omar, who distinctively wears a hijab.

The reaction of his supporters at rallies suggests that, although there are those Trumpites who literalize the *ideologeme* of the Wall, they all accept the deployment of the metaphor by Trump to vilify the Other, particularly those from Central America. Trump initiated his campaign by calling migrants from Mexico criminals and commonly conflated migrants with criminal gangs. “The mass incursion of illegal aliens, deadly drugs, dangerous weapons, and criminal gang members across our borders has to end”

("Remarks by President Trump on the National Security and Humanitarian Crisis on our Southern Border"). Trump legitimated his rhetoric through the invocation of mythopoesis. As Van Leeuwen and Woldak have argued, "[t]he telling of stories is one of the most important strategies in racist and antisemitic discourse in non-official contexts. One story or event is taken as evidence for a general norm of behavior . . . Interestingly only negative stories are functionalized" (1999, 110). "Creating stories to build consensus"(Akbaba, 2018, 204), Trump paraded the families of crime victims (whom he christened "Angel families") before various audiences, from the Republican National Convention to Congress, to slander all migrants, claiming that "Americans" have been murdered by "border-crosser[s] and illegal immigrants" (Lind, 2019).

In his mythopoetic stories, Trump suggests that those who approach the southern border are less than human. **"You wouldn't believe how bad these people are. These aren't people. These are animals"** (Davis). In one Instagram post, the President's son, Donald Trump Jr., compared migrants to zoo animals: "You know why you can enjoy a day at the zoo. Because walls work" (Haltiwanger). Not surprisingly, many ICE agents, like Trump's supporters at rallies, regard immigrants, including those who are seeking asylum from persecution by the gangs Trump denounces, as unworthy of humanitarian treatment. ProPublica exposed the Facebook group "10-15," composed of some 9,500 members inside and outside of ICE, which reveled in the deaths of migrants in custody (Thompson). Messages used such terms as "guats," "wild ass shitbags," "beaners" and "subhuman" to describe migrants, and one thread concluded with glee that a child, floated over the Rio Grande by his father in a plastic bag, was already in the trash (Thompson and Lind).

As disturbing as these developments may be, perhaps the most unsettling trope in Trump's rhetoric was his use of the medical model to malign those who seek shelter in the United States. "The medicalization of pre-existing nativist prejudices occurs when the justification for excluding members of a particular group includes charges that they constitute a health menace and may endanger their hosts" (Kraut 2). Trump long identified immigrants with "deadly diseases" (Donald J. Trump, Twitter, August 5, 2014). "[Y]ou have a tremendous medical problem coming into our country. Tremendous problems. People don't want to talk about it" (Rodrigo, 2018). Consequently, it was not just that immigrant "caravans" are allegedly "invading" our country (Trump, Twitter, October 29, 2018), but that "they will "infest our Country" (Trump, Twitter, June 19, 2018). During the past year, Trump used the coronavirus as a way to suspend immigration at the border altogether ("Proclamation Suspending Entry of Immigrants

Who Present Risk to the U.S. Labor Market During the Economic Recovery Following the COVID-19 Outbreak”).

His use of the term “infest” served two purposes. On the one hand, “[t]he externalization of the infecting agent . . . serves to perpetuate the fantasy of an organic unity of the people” (Spackman 147). Hence, the health of the people, its “national essence,” must be protected through the prophylaxis of the Wall. On the other hand, the infecting agent, the Other, must be marginalized, isolated, and exterminated. In the past, this trope was employed by Hutu agitators in the Rwandan genocide of 1994, comparing Tutsi to cockroaches, and resulted in the deaths of between 500,000 and 800,000 (Valentino). The Nazis, of course, used similar imagery in the 1937 propaganda film, *Der ewige Jude*, in which Jews were compared to hordes of vermin. “Where rats turn up,” said the voiceover, “they spread diseases and carry extermination into the land. They are cunning, cowardly and cruel, they travel in large packs, exactly the way the Jews infect the races of the world” (*Der ewige Jude: The "Eternal Jew" or the "Wandering Jew"*).

Conclusion

Many of his supporters are not oblivious to the comparison. When, at a Florida rally describing ICE patrols along the border, Trump stated, “[H]ow do we stop these people?”, one of his supporters shouted, “Shoot them!” The crowd laughed—and so did Trump (Trump laughs after audience member suggests shooting migrants, 2019). In response to his Tweet urging his followers to “Liberate Michigan” (Donald J. Trump, Twitter, April 27, 2019), hundreds of armed members of the Michigan Liberty Militia occupied the Michigan state capitol in Lansing on April 30, 2019. On October 8, 2020, the FBI arrested and charged six militia members with a conspiracy to kidnap, “try,” and execute the Governor of Michigan, Gretchen Whitmer, who had encouraged the wearing of masks and imposed a partial lockdown on the state in opposition to Trump’s belittling of measures to contain the coronavirus (U.S. v. Adam Fox et al., 2020).

Support for Trump is widespread among armed militias across the United States, including the Three Percenters, Oathkeepers, Light Foot Militia, Proud Boys, Patriot Prayer, and Boogaloo Bois (Stall et al., 2020). “There has been a major realignment of militia movements in the US from anti-federal government writ large to mostly supporting one candidate, thereby generally positioning the militia movement alongside a political party. This has resulted in the further entrenchment of a connection between these

groups' identities and politics under the Trump administration" (Stall et. al., 2). The militias' devotion to Donald Trump uncannily replicates the fictive scenario of Lewis's novel.

The militiamen considered him their general and their god, and when the state attorney general announced that he was going to have Windrip indicted for having grafted \$200,000 of tax money, the militia rose to Buzz Windrip's orders as though they were his private army and, occupying the legislative chambers and all the state offices, and covering the streets leading to the Capitol with machine guns, they herded Buzz's enemies out of town. (Lewis, 1935).

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Endnotes

¹ Trump commonly capitalizes the term wall in his tweets to suggest that "the Wall" has some symbolic importance that exceeds its mundane definition, reminiscent of "Loading the Language" in Robert Lifton's study of ideological totalism. "The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed. . . . Totalist language, then, is repetitiously centered on all-encompassing jargon, prematurely abstract, highly categorical, relentlessly judging, and to anyone but its most devoted advocate, deadly dull: in Lionel Trilling's phrase, 'the language of nonthought.'" (Lifton 429).
