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Benita Heiskanen and Albion M. Butters

- 1 This thematic journal issue grew out of meetings of an international research network hosted by the John Morton Center for North American Studies at the University of Turku in Finland. The project developed alongside the many twists and turns that took place from the start of the presidential primaries in 2015 to Inauguration Day in 2017. The group's first meeting took place in May 2015, a month before Donald Trump announced his candidacy. At the time, pundits were anticipating a weary battle between two political dynasties, with Jeb Bush and Hillary Rodham Clinton as the presumptive nominees. Whereas scholarly discourses related to presidential elections typically departed from a political science perspective, the purpose of this project was to bring a distinctly American Studies flavor to the discussion by exploring the election year as a complex nexus that intertwined political, socioeconomic, and cultural issues. The point was to demonstrate the ways in which the U.S. presidential election served as a locus of various societal power struggles. As soon as the real estate mogul and reality TV tycoon Donald J. Trump and the self-identified "Democratic Socialist" Bernie Sanders entered the race, we knew that we were onto something and that the 2016 election would not be "politics-as-usual." It became evident that the electorate in 2016 was highly disillusioned with mainstream politics, calling for a de facto change on a grassroots level.
- 2 Yet none of us could quite see it coming. Akin to many media analysts who were counting the days until the Trump campaign would implode in its own impossibility, we were eagerly speculating which scandal or gaffe would be too much for the U.S. public. As the election cycle progressed, we understood that U.S. political culture was changing before our very eyes and that we needed to take *change* itself seriously. Both Trump and Sanders challenged status quo discourses and directed the focus of the 2016 election to their prospective agendas. In so doing, they were able to mobilize a vast base of a previously inactive electorate—young and old, from diverse backgrounds—in unprecedented ways.

At the same time, popular culture gained tremendous importance in providing parallel discourses to political debates via both traditional and new media platforms. In light of these developments, our focus began to crystallize on the popularization of electoral politics. The change we were witnessing in the behavior of the electorate, as well as the unconventional campaigns, particularly called attention to the notion of the popular. From angry white men and meme-ing Millennials to Black Lives Matter activists and celebrity icons, masses of voters were expressing their viewpoints in grassroots movements and campaign rallies alike. Social media particularly energized these voters in unprecedented ways, as well as the candidates, who were trying to tweet their way into the White House. The process of popularizing electoral politics of the 2016 race had distinct consequences, not only in shaping political culture as we know it, but also in destabilizing established rules of political conduct.

- 3 In this thematic issue, we conceptualize the popularization of electoral politics in several ways. First, the rise of populism within both the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as among independents, struck a chord with voters fed up with mainstream politics. Secondly, the popularization phenomenon manifested a tendency by the Trump campaign and the media to steer clear of substance and policy questions, with a focus instead on a whole host of human interest issues. Donald Trump's ability to manipulate the media for his own purposes effectively won him the Republican nomination. The "attention at all cost" strategy guaranteed that substance matters remained on the back burner throughout the election. Trump's message was both simple and simplistic in his avoidance of any fine-tuning of policy details or specifics. Central was not what was said, but how it was said. As the public moved from one uproar, rumor, and scandal to the next, Donald Trump continued to dominate the news from coast to coast and around the world.
- 4 Thirdly, with personality politics and celebrity culture at the center of the election, politics turned into de facto reality TV, blurring the lines between popular culture and political discourses. While viewers and pundits were tuning in just to see what might be in store next, they were also participating in popularizing the electoral process. The failure of scholars and pundits to foresee the significance of Trump's celebrity culture status in the United States was an important aspect of the popularization process. As Trump had implicitly been in people's living rooms for years, his supporters could feel a sense of intimacy, even if they had never personally met him. Voters who yearned for an authoritarian leader had an image of Trump as a firm decision-maker. They had seen it on *The Apprentice* and they believed it. He fired people! Although the caliber of media icons endorsing Hillary Clinton—including such superstars as Beyonce, Jay-Z, Katy Perry, Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, and George Clooney—far outshone Trump's celebrity cachet, a key to his success seemed to be his ability to connect with his supporters much better than Clinton.
- 5 Finally, the appropriation and dissemination of popular culture discourses by social media for political purposes was key to the 2016 election. The first televised debate between Trump and Clinton was advertised like a major sporting event: some compared it to the Super Bowl, others to a heavyweight boxing match, yet others to *Star Wars*. The debate attracted the highest viewing rates ever, with some 84 million people tuning in on 13 different channels within the United States alone, and online viewership numbers being even bigger.ⁱ Social media provided both the candidates and the electorate with a medium of exchange and information, facilitating a mutual reframing of the hot-button

issues outside the framework of the traditional media outlets. Social media drove users to express competing narratives, ranging from Donald Trump wielding Twitter as a tool to belittle his opponents in a manner reminiscent of his television show to supporters of Bernie Sanders firing up grassroots support for his “political revolution.”

- 6 The popularization of electoral politics will have long-term consequences in the United States and elsewhere. The 2016 election year came to exemplify how, to use Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Anna Sfardini’s characterization, “politics is invested with the styles and platforms of popular culture.”ⁱⁱ In addition to changing political rhetoric, the election fundamentally shifted the *where* of politics. Indeed, the popularization of electoral politics resulted in the distribution of political discourses far beyond mainstream political channels, from popular culture platforms to cyberspace. As social media fosters new ways of engagement in politics, it also brings politics into people’s comfort zones. Ever since Trump became the Republican Party’s nominee, pundits were wondering whether he would begin behaving more “presidential” and adopt more conventional approaches to governance and communication. At some point, it became evident that neither would be the case. Trump did not adopt more statesmanlike comportment, as per the existing standards, nor did he change his ad hoc communication style. What he did instead was alter established political practice. Consequently, media commentators no longer expect the President to resort to traditional media to communicate his message; it is generally understood that Twitter is his principal medium of communication. The very nature of the conversation has changed. For example, when Bernie Sanders took issue with Trump’s attempt to repeal Obama’s signature legislation, the Affordable Care Act, his response was to bring with him to the Senate a giant cardboard printout of a tweet that Trump had sent out during the campaign vowing not to cut Social Security, Medicare, or Medicaid—urging the President to tweet that he had not changed his mind.ⁱⁱⁱ Pundits, too, eagerly follow Trump’s late-night and early-morning tweet storms to try to make sense of the President’s agenda. It is important to take this shift in political practice and rhetoric seriously and to make sense of its various ramifications.
- 7 The articles in this volume engage the popularization of electoral politics by examining specific points of crossover, which are both representative of the shifts seen in this presidential race and possible causes for its outcome. The articles in the first section call attention to 2016 as an election of change, the populist resurgence that the election came to exemplify, and the immediate reactions—including various violent outbursts—that the unconventional campaigns instigated. The second section discusses the changing rhetoric in the election cycle, with a particular focus on various popular culture and new media platforms that became central to the race. While the authors may make some historical references, the decided emphasis of the articles is on the election year as a process, as it evolved from the very first debates until Inauguration Day.
- 8 During the course of the 2016 election, there emerged growing “fuzziness” between the political and popular cultural spheres. In his article, Erik Hieta explains the ways in which the public perception problem experienced by Hillary Clinton was related to an economic disconnect and ties to Wall Street. Meanwhile, Benita Heiskanen’s discussion of memes showcases one example of “fuzzy” popular culture signifiers that the candidates had little control over. As Albion M. Butters and Pekka Kolehmainen demonstrate, Bernie Sanders enjoyed cult status, if not ascension to the level of pop icon; for instance, the fact that a bird landed on his podium during a speech in Oregon was deemed very significant for

many of his supporters. His was a quiet sensationalism, that of the archetypal wise old man, but no less powerful for that.

- 9 As the borders between the presidential race and a reality show dissolved, Trump cultivated the “star” image, which along with the fact that he was not a career politician helped his populist message. In many ways, his identity was larger than life before the race even began, and this insulated him from real barbs that would have taken down anyone else. Oscar Winberg and Samira Saramo probe the ways in which his unique brand of insult politics and alpha-male meta-violence unexpectedly played to his advantage among his supporters. These aspects also reflected the growing divide and culture wars of the nation, as exemplified by Outi Hakola’s analysis of caricatures on comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* and Niko Heikkilä’s discussion of the rising alt-right movement in online popular culture. Furthermore, Trump’s fame allowed him to dominate the mainstream media in an extraordinary way. In the traditional top-down model, large news conglomerates had great power over the way in which they could mediate the political sphere for the public; this remained the case for Sanders in the 2016 election, where he was all but ignored until that was no longer possible. Yet, the character of the media is inherently receptive; as a vessel for information, it requires content—and Trump provided wonderfully juicy stories. In this way, Trump managed to appropriate the media for his own purposes during the campaign. As President, when no longer able to directly manipulate it, he declared most mainstream media outlets as the “enemy of the people” that he represented.
- 10 After the election, both the Republican and Democratic parties had to grapple with identity crises. The vigorous grassroots participation that the populist insurgencies attracted during the primaries revealed a cauldron of tensions among the business-as-usual GOP and DNC party structures, raising questions about the future of the U.S. political establishment. Would the election mark a paradigm shift in bipartisan politics? Would the two-party system be tenable in the future? Throughout the election year, the understanding of conservatism, liberalism, and progressivism was renegotiated alongside grassroots activists’ contesting of mainstream politics. Trump supporters challenged the Republican elite—including the old guard, neoconservatives, and the power brokers in charge. Michael Lind of *Politico* characterized the shift as “country-club Republicans” having been replaced by “country-and-western Republicans.”^{iv} The grassroots activists of the left wing of the Democrats were also on a collision course with the party’s mainstream. During the primaries, Sanders’s supporters were vocal in challenging the centrist wing of the party, represented by Hillary Clinton. Ultimately, however, a major loser in the election was the DNC establishment. Some of the party’s grassroots activists longingly looked back at Bernie Sanders’s primary campaign, posing “what if” questions. What if the Democrats, too, had dared to go with a change agent? That Sanders openly labeled himself as a “Democratic Socialist” seemed too far out from the perspective of establishment politics, but if anything, Trump’s candidacy was far, far beyond the ken of establishment politics.
- 11 One could make the case that the 2016 election was an “American Studies” election par excellence, as it brought attention to the understanding of nation, national identity, and “American-ness.” Whether delineated through political, social, or cultural lenses, the understanding of “American-ness” after the election was in flux. For example, Chris Matthews of MSNBC’s *Hardball* described the state of the nation after the election as a “war-torn city” and a demolition zone. Several commentators in the United States

employed the term “World War III” to describe the divisive rhetoric used during the campaign. The film director Michael Moore had a habit of referring to Donald Trump as a “Molotov cocktail.” Following on the martial metaphors used to describe the election, the logical question to be asked is, can the war-torn nation be united again after a ceasefire? In his victory speech, President-elect Trump proclaimed: “Now it is time for America to bind the wounds of division, have to get together. To all Republicans and Democrats and independents across this nation, I say it is time for us to come together as one united people. It is time. I pledge to every citizen of our land that I will be President for all of Americans, and this is so important to me. For those who have chosen not to support me in the past, of which there were a few people, I’m reaching out to you for your guidance and your help so that we can work together and unify our great country.”^v If we take this statement at face value rather than as pre-scripted political parlance, we would need to ask some tough practical questions. How could such unification effectively happen?

- 12 Whether the nation has any prospects of being reunited after the 2016 election is intrinsically tied to the question of entitlement: who defines and has claim to “American-ness”? The socio-cultural contestation of who is entitled to define “American-ness” was at the forefront of the election from the beginning of the primaries. As Jake Cusack writes in *Quartz* magazine, “It matters that America continues to believe itself as a country that welcomes ‘your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.’”^{vi} Three days before the election, the *New York Times Sunday Review* editorial entitled “Imagining America on November 9” claimed the following: “Let this election have the salutary effect of reminding Americans as a nation who we are, and the good we can do, when we are put to the test.”^{vii} As the new president assumed office, many expressed uncertainty about what “American-ness” might mean or where the nation is headed. The only thing that anybody could agree on for sure is that the nation was put to the test. The U.S. presidential election demonstrated a complex web of issues requiring robust interdisciplinary explanatory power combining historical, political, and cultural analysis. This journal issue provides lenses for examining the popularization processes of electoral politics during the 2016 race and its broader ramifications.
- 13 The articles range in their consideration of the popularization of electoral politics from a variety of angles—sometimes taking them as distinct, but also tracing their intertwining—to illustrate the complex nature of the election and the forces at work in it. Albion M. Butters opens the discussion of the presidential contest by examining change not just as a rhetorical trope, but a force in the election itself. The significance of this “election of change” can be found in the way in which emerging ideologies and latent populist strains combined in a perfect storm, attracting new voters, swaying existing ones, and overturning all expectations. Butters contextualizes the power of the change event in terms of causes and conditions, including the use of new forms of media to create popular narratives, the ability of the candidates to articulate compelling arguments against the status quo, and growing dissatisfaction with government and the media. He also demonstrates how a dynamic shifting of interpretative frames on the part of both candidates and voters, exemplified in post-truth discourse and catalyzed by the online exchange of signifiers from popular culture, acted as metanarratives which not only defined the story but how it should be told.
- 14 Erik Hieta focuses on Trump’s economic populism. Through a historical contextualization of specific moves that Trump made, from token gestures like forgoing his salary as president to adopting Reagan’s successful strategy of promising to help the common

person in financial dire straits, Hieta frames how Trump was able to identify and leverage current prevailing economic conditions in order to gain votes—despite being a billionaire himself. Identifying how multiple fractures across the U.S. led the public to embrace candidates who were not funded by super PACs (and, by proxy, special interests and Wall Street), Hieta addresses the strong shift in populist perception around these super PACs, dark money, and corporations, commenting on its significance for the future and how Trump’s multiple conflicts of interest have led to a new era in U.S. politics. He connects the outsiders’ message of Washington being “broken” with popular entertainment representations over the decades, such as movies that romantically portray the “charismatic outsider” entering politics to set things straight, thus identifying a linkage between economic populism and popular culture.

- 15 Samira Saramo explores new ideologies manifested in the election in the emerging social movement of “Trumpism,” defined in terms of populism, strongman politics, and identitarianism. Introducing the idea of “meta-violence” and exploring its impact on the U.S. electorate, articulating how Trump used inflammatory rhetoric and cultural division—including othering, the “birther” movement, and masculine ideology—to construct an alternate “American” identity, she draws on a rich cast of characters, from Jeet Heer to David Duke and Richard Spencer, as well as Trump himself, to complicate the notion of violence as both implicit and explicit and, importantly for this volume, informing modern populism in dangerous ways. Saramo argues that the impact of Trumpism is best understood through the lens of meta-violence, evidenced by extreme emotions, social antagonisms, and international tensions.
- 16 Oscar Winberg situates Trump as the latest Republican in a long line of right-wing adherents, but also demonstrates how he redefined it to suit his own purposes. Instead of elevating the debate, for example, Trump was able to sidestep the expectations of the media and neutralize his opponents. Winberg draws on an ample selection of insults employed in the campaign to construct a powerful argument of how this election rhetorically differed from previous ones, but was also a culmination of populism’s evolution over the decades as a radicalized ideology. On the one hand, Winberg points out that Donald Trump’s mocking and insulting rhetoric in the 2016 presidential campaign was widely described as both norm-breaking and, surprisingly, not politically harmful. On the other hand, his article reveals that Trump fits into a long history of incendiary language and right-wing populism, but the use of insult politics remains controversial and politically dangerous.
- 17 Niko Heikkilä’s article provides an in-depth look at the alt-right movement, examining its efforts to engage the political mainstream in relation to the campaigns of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. He examines the rise of white nationalist discourse, both implicit and explicit, as well as other outlying forms of the radical right, as it entered mainstream conversation by means of online trolling, memetic media, and provocative speech. The alt-right promoted controversy through provocative online actions, especially espoused by Trump’s alt-right supporters, which drew a considerable amount of media attention. Heikkilä uses the case study of Pepe the Frog, a cartoon character appropriated by white supremacists and the broader alt-right, to demonstrate the ways in which the campaigns of Clinton and Trump respectively sought political advantage by contestations of popular culture connected with hate discourse and online antagonism.
- 18 Pekka Kolehmainen examines the importance of social media in the election by exposing its function to create and sustain narratives—both intended and alternative—in line with

the different candidates and their supporters (fans). Drawing a connection between the election and entertainment, Kolehmainen finds various archetypes in play, from heroes to anti-heroes to the hero-maker, some of them based on historical tropes and others entirely new. Such a comparison opens his inquiry to an investigation of temporalities and how, by employing a hybrid media model that supported a dynamic flux of meaning-making, the dominant contenders were able to leverage current events and also evade them in the construction of their respective narratives. In particular, Kolehmainen's analysis focuses on Trump's successful use of this model and popular culture to operate outside of political conventions.

- 19 Using *Saturday Night Live* as her case study, Outi Hakola focuses on the political role of comedy and its function in constructions of collective identity, tracing how impersonations of presidential candidates on the show have changed over time, using specific examples to illustrate a shift from traditionally comical, non-threatening representations to critical caricatures of Donald Trump in the 2016 election or sympathetic depictions of Hillary Clinton. Hakola employs framing theory to draw conclusions about the importance of comedy to affect voters' perceptions, and in the process she raises questions about the political agenda of *Saturday Night Live*'s producers.
- 20 Benita Heiskanen considers the ways in which Internet memes acted as an intersection of electoral activism and politico-cultural discourses over the course of the 2016 race, providing content for the mobilization of new voters and alternative representations in social media. She addresses the epistemological significance of memes vis-à-vis their power for making—and disseminating—truth statements and the ability of people to differentiate between information and misinformation. Heiskanen showcases specific memes created of the main candidates during the long election season, tying them to especially cogent moments and hot-button issues in order to illustrate multiple—and often competing—levels of discourse. Her analysis reveals the increasing ability of this form of participatory media at the junction of politics and popular culture to call attention to candidates' contradictory or incongruous statements, while enabling mememakers to take a stand on and react to developing political events in real time.
- 21 The value in exposing the dynamism of the popularization of electoral politics is not merely historical or limited to the context of this election alone, but also important for understanding forces which will potentially continue to affect the United States and its global relations in the future. If anything, the results of the 2016 contest signal that the negotiations of power that led to its outcome will likely be reappearing in the next election cycle. This fact makes the popular a critical area of study. Fundamentally, the election demonstrated the intersecting aspects of U.S. politics, society, and culture: that politics do not take place outside of socio-cultural issues and, vice versa, that socio-cultural issues do not take place outside of politics. Moreover, issues of social power relations were at the forefront of this election. The many tensions in this arena that surfaced during the election year also exemplify a link between policy issues, public discourses, media representations, and the social realities of the United States.

NOTES

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- v. “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Victory Speech,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/us/politics/trump-speech-transcript.html>.
- vi. Jake Cusack, “America is more fragile than you think: A former Marine Corps officer on why voters must defeat Donald Trump,” *Quartz*, November 4, 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://qz.com/827376/america-is-more-fragile-than-you-think-a-marine-corps-officer-on-why-voters-must-defeat-donald-trump/>.
- vii. “Imagining America on November 9,” *New York Times Sunday Review*, November 5, 2016, accessed March 3, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/opinion/sunday/imagining-america-on-nov-9.html>.
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ABSTRACTS

This special issue of the *European Journal of American Studies* examines the popularization of electoral politics during the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. The popularization processes include the rise of populism penetrating the U.S. political landscape; a media focus on human interest, rather than policy substance questions; personality politics and celebrity culture at the center stage of the election; and the appropriation and dissemination of popular culture discourses by social media users. The articles draw from transdisciplinary American Studies approaches to tackle a range of issues which arose during the election, from contestations of “American-ness” and competing narratives of truth—or “post-truth”—to questions of campaign finance and displays of violence, verbal and physical. The issue also takes a closer look at specific expressions of popular culture as reflected in the media, specifically in relation to the rise of nativism and the alt-right movement, the political impact of comedy on the election, and the significance of memes in the battle over image and meaning-making. The processes of popularizing electoral politics of the 2016 race had distinct consequences, not only in shaping political culture as we know it, but also in destabilizing established rules of political conduct.

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