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Luke David Mechem
There is (Not) a Black President: A
Psychodynamic Exploration of
Doubts about Obama's Citizenship in
a Post-Racial America

ABSTRACT

Using the psychodynamic concepts of projection and paranoia, this paper examines the phenomenon of challenges to Barack Obama's American citizenship. Through analysis of various acts of media and political discourse, the birthers' claim that Obama is not a citizen—and can thus not be president—is situated within the larger context of the current ideological position of 'color-blind' racism and of America as 'post-racial.' Further links are made with sociopolitical conspiracy theory as well as with historical Nativist and populist movements. Through this exploration, the paper suggests that the significance of Obama's presidency and the intensity of the anxiety that it has produced are predicated upon an understanding of America as a white nation. The implications for antiracism work are also considered.

THERE IS (NOT) A BLACK PRESIDENT:
A PSYCHODYNAMIC EXPLORATION OF DOUBTS ABOUT
OBAMA'S CITIZENSHIP IN A POST-RACIAL AMERICA

A project based upon an independent
investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of
Social Work.

Luke David Mechem

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In early August 2010, over a year and a half after Barack Obama was sworn in as the first African-American President of the United States, CNN released the results of an opinion poll which found that 27% of those surveyed actively doubted that Obama was actually born in the United States. An additional 29% stated that he was ‘probably’—rather than ‘definitely’—born in the U.S., a requirement for legitimately occupying the post that Obama had won in the 2008 presidential election (Travis, 2010). While there had been vocal skeptics of Obama’s citizenship since the spring of the 2008 presidential primaries, this 2010 poll was the first indication that such doubts were perhaps widespread among the American population. These ‘birther’ claims about Obama’s foreign birth have been largely interwoven with the populist Tea Party movement that began in early 2009 and has enjoyed extensive media coverage from both conservative and more liberal outlets. The cry of the birthers—‘Where’s the birth certificate?’—reached the apex of its crescendo when mogul-cum-celebrity Donald Trump brought up the issue along side his political ambitions, most notably on an episode of *The View* in late March 2011. Approximately one month after this event, the Obama administration released for the first time this ‘long-form birth certificate’ because the American people “do not have time for this kind of silliness” (Shear, 2011).

A common critique of those who doubt Obama’s U.S. citizenship has been that their skepticism is motivated by their own racism; proponents of these birther claims have quickly

denied such accusations. The conscious motivations of these birthers aside, questions about Obama's citizenship have arisen within the context of complex racial discourse around the first black president. There have been clear instances of prejudiced speech against the president and members of his administration, but much of the discourse around the president has also been conspicuously de-racialized, at least on the surface. In a sense, discourse about Obama has simultaneously been *always* and *rarely* racial. The election of the first non-white president has created a shift in American's discourse about race in general: while he is the second president to be elected since the year 2000, there is a clearly millennial enthusiasm for the fact that his presidency has allegedly ushered in the era of a 'Post-racial America'.

The day after the results from the aforementioned poll were released, CNN posted an article on its website that purported in its headline to explain, "Why Obama is not first 'imposter' president and won't be the last," which contextualized the results of the poll within a long history of critics claiming the illegitimacy of presidents for various reasons, from Thomas Jefferson's foreign ties to France to Martin Van Buren's tendency to wear women's corsets. It is only on the fourth page of the piece that the author mentions Obama's race and, after doing so, ends the article by returning to the refrain that accusations of illegitimacy are an unavoidable reality of American political culture and history (Blake, 2010). Race is mentioned and then swiftly erased, ostensibly suggesting that Americans aren't being *racist* in doubting Obama's legitimacy, but rather are simply being "Americans." Without a racial context, it is difficult to understand why Americans just so happen to question the location of *this* president's birth. Even positing a subterranean racist motivation, birther claims make little sense: Obama was born in Kenya; Obama was born in Indonesia; Obama was born in the U.S., but gave up his citizenship when he

moved to Indonesia as a child; Obama was born in the U.S., but his mother was too young for him to qualify as being a natural-born citizen. The logic of these accusations does not hang together, suggesting a strictly irrational motivation. Ultimately, refutations of the legitimacy of Obama's presidency can be seen as symptomatic of a deep cultural and national anxiety about the race of the country's current leader. Moreover, rather than being the anxiety or fear of a small population of invested or virulent racists, the fact that less than half of Americans polled believed that the president was definitely born in the United States strongly suggests that this anxiety is far more endemic than previously thought.

This paper attempts to make sense of this anxiety and the almost feverish attempts to delegitimize Obama's presidency through an exploration of the nuances of the birthers' claims within the context of racial and de-racialized discourse about Obama. Central to this discourse is the notion of a transcendently post-racial America, an idea that fails to take into account the deeply entrenched and widespread facets of American politics, economics, culture, and history that teem with racism. Engaging with post-racial discourse about Obama from the very start, chapter two introduces projection as a key concept from a psychodynamic perspective. Chapter three hones in on the intersections between projection and post-racism by exploring the effects of projecting racism itself. Chapter four underscores the affective dimensions of projection and introduces object relations theory as an important lens for understanding the link between projection and paranoia. Chapter five places paranoia within political and historical phenomena that are necessary for contextualizing and understanding American anxiety about Obama. The following chapter suggests that anxiety about Obama's presidency has as much to do with the racial

identity of America as it has to do with the racism of Americans. The final chapter considers the possible implications of these findings for those who strive to fight back against racism.

CHAPTER TWO

Projection: What You See is What You Are

“The white racist needs the ‘nigger’ because it is the ‘nigger’ in himself that he cannot tolerate.” - Lloyd Delany, paraphrasing James Baldwin (1968, p. 161)

Remembering Blackness, Forgetting Whiteness

The introduction to this paper provided a very brief overview of the ways in which doubts about Obama’s citizenship have become a part of national discourse. An aspect of that discourse has also been that many mainstream voices have been quick to reject these doubts as racist. At the same time, while the majority of demands for proof of Obama's citizenship have come from advocates on the far right of the political spectrum, there are some notable exceptions. In December 2010, long-time Obama supporter and liberal political commentator Chris Matthews voiced his support of the attempts of the new Hawaii governor, Democrat Neil Abercrombie, to locate more tangible evidence of Obama’s Hawaiian birth. Matthews, who describes himself as an “enemy of the birthers,” aligned himself with Abercrombie’s proposal that further verification of the president’s citizenship would “end this nonsense” (Mirkinson, 2010). Whether further evidence or proof about Obama’s citizenship would indeed quell birthers’ demands may well be beside the point, as this strategy ultimately legitimizes the sense of uncertainty about the president’s legitimacy. By discussing the topic on his nationally available cable program, Matthews not only continued to keep the issue of Obama’s citizenship in the public consciousness, but in

aligning himself with the birthers' demands—even as a specious strategy to undermine them—justified the very “nonsense” he hopes to stop.

This is certainly not the first instance on Matthew's *Hardball* that the host has found himself mired in the complications of inadvertent legitimatization in an effort to support the president. In January, 2010, commenting on the far-reaching appeal of Obama's State of the Union address, Matthews stated that, “I forgot he was black tonight for an hour... Here's an African-American guy in front of a bunch of other white people... and we've completely forgotten that tonight—completely forgotten it” (Phillips, 2010). In this moment, Matthews brings to the fore the issue of Obama's race, as he simultaneously extols the president for being in some vague way “post-racial.” As he later tried to clarify his statement on *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Matthews juxtaposed the context of the importance of race in daily—and particularly urban—life with Obama's speech: “And then to see a president of the United States who is African-American I was thinking tonight, this isn't even an issue... it wasn't in the room tonight” (Phillips, 2010). Matthew's assertion is predicated upon an implicit support of a “colorblindness” formulation or discourse, which, it has been argued, is the dominant racial ideology of contemporary American politics, (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Obama's race is both there (“who is African-American”) and not there (“it wasn't in the room tonight”). Any claim of such colorblindness—which is founded upon the awkward proposition that one does not see the very thing that one is referencing—depends upon an understanding that America has moved beyond “race” in very profound ways. Matthews' claim of forgetting—and then rather pointedly remembering—Obama's race also highlights a key feature of post-racialism, the invisibility of whiteness and its removal from the racial equation. If Obama was “not black” for those sixty minutes, what was he? Matthews does not go so far as to say

that Obama was being white; instead it is the very absence of any postulation of what exactly Obama *was* during the State of the Union that locates the invisibility of whiteness as the necessary underpinning for colorblind and post-racial ideologies. When Obama was not black, he wasn't white, but rather was *normal*.¹

In exploring the historical shifts in the ways that racism functions in American society, anti-racist writer Tim Wise suggests that while Obama's election may indeed demonstrate that an overt, hyper-prejudiced, 'old-fashioned' racism might be defeated when individuals are convinced that their personal interests supersede racial bias, nothing about his presidency signals that the country has "moved beyond" either race or racism (2009, p. 19). Instead, Wise argues that a "newer, slicker Racism 2.0" might have even contributed to Obama's election; the president serves as a sort of exception that proves the rule, as an outlier that justifies negative beliefs and attitudes about "the rest of the black people" (p. 23). In his 1983 preface to his classic *White Racism*, Joel Kovel asserts that "racism reconstitutes itself on whatever terrain is provided" (1970, p. xxv); in the context of colorblind, post-racial racism, this involves the perverse ability for whites to hold respect or affection for individual people of color, while continuing "to look down upon the larger mass of black and brown America with suspicion, fear, and contempt" (Wise, p. 23). While racist beliefs and attitudes continue to be directed at "the mass" of brown bodies, Obama is able to rise above their fold, fulfilling the cinematic trope of the "magical negro," a particularly American reconstitution of the "noble savage" of literary theory.

¹ Although all racial constructs are inherently created and maintained through discourses and relationships of power, throughout this paper the term "white" is used when referring more casually to the 'racial status' of many Americans and the racial category of whiteness at its most surface level; the term is capitalized-'White'-when its use is *focused* on the power inherent in this construct.

And yet, to be magical or noble makes one no less a savage nor any less a negro; Obama's status as both an African-American *and* an exception to blackness underscores the complexity of the relationship between the president's race and questions about his citizenship. In exploring the tensions inherent within this exceptionalism and the complexities of racism within a post-racial context, a psychodynamic theoretical lens can allow for an understanding of the motivations and processes that drive behaviors and assertions that are not always readily apparent in the actions and statements themselves. Projection is the primary psychodynamic construct that has been used to analyze issues of racism and prejudice and has been used to the extent that it has been branded a "buzzword" in literature reviews and meta-analyses of psychological studies and theories of racism (Dalal, 2001; Frosh, 2002). Before applying this idea to the current topic, a more clear understanding of the concept of projection and its relationship to culture is necessary.

Projection in Psychodynamic Theory

In considering the ways in which human beings interact with their external worlds, psychodynamic theories suggest that problems arise when an individual's instincts or drives conflict with the rules, morals, and mores that have been internalized as growing children navigate their ways through family and cultural systems.² The psychic conflict between the instincts/drives and these internalized regulations gives rise to an experience of a dis-pleasurable anxiety that must be alleviated. In many psychodynamic theories—especially ego psychology—this anxiety is assuaged by the unconscious use of defense mechanisms that mediate the internal conflict; projection is one

² For the purpose of this paper the terms "instinct" and "drive" (*Instinkt* and *Trieb*) will be used interchangeably, although Freud's distinction between these two concepts developed significantly later in his career (Freud, 1962; Fenichel, 1946; Jaffee, 1982).

of many ego defenses that are unconsciously used to solve these anxiety-producing psychic dilemmas. The dominance of ego psychology in popular Western understandings of psychology and human experience has introduced defenses such as repression, denial, and rationalization into the informal vernacular, although their usage is often muddied by a sense that these defenses are being used consciously. Unlike coping mechanisms, which are generally used knowingly, defense mechanisms are never conscious, but rather their effects feel natural and unquestioned; as with conscious coping mechanisms, all individuals use unconscious ego defenses as one could not thrive—nor even survive—in society without managing internal conflicts.

Freud first mentioned projection in a letter he wrote in 1892, but it took several years for the concept to be included in his published papers (Quinodoz, 2005, p. 24). In an exploration of the neurotic elements inherent in jealousy and paranoia, Freud described projection as the “second layer” of jealousy, one in which a person is suspicious of his or her partner’s fidelity because of his or her *own* actual infidelity or internal impulses toward infidelity; Freud argues that a married person’s fidelity is always maintained within the context of temptation and that one is able to deny this experience only when “he projects his own impulses to infidelity onto the partner to whom he owes faith” (Freud, 1923, p. 2). When Anna Freud continued her father’s work, much of her theorization of the psychodynamic issues in childhood focused on solidifying an understanding of these defense mechanisms and separating their internal, unconscious processes. Her expansion of projection noted its prominence in the earliest periods of child development and described the ways in which even very young children project those impulses that are not desirable outside of themselves: “a ‘strange child,’ an animal, even inanimate objects are all equally useful to

the infantile ego for the purpose of disposing of its own faults” (Freud, 1966, p. 123).

Psychoanalytic historian Peter Gay defines both theorists’ understanding of projection quite clearly as “the operation of expelling feelings or wishes the individual finds wholly unacceptable—too shameful, too obscene, too dangerous—by attributing them to another” (1998, p. 281n).

As is the case with all defenses, projection is common in all individuals, including those who do not currently struggle with severe mental health issues. While each person has unique unconscious preferences for various defenses, the way in which better-functioning individuals tend to use defenses is "flexibly and selectively rather than rigidly and pervasively" (Goldstein, 1995, p. 73). Even the most highly functioning people can use projection as a defense and, like other defenses, it can have not only negative, but positive effects (p. 78). Nancy McWilliams (2004) argues that "in its benign and mature forms, [projection] is the basis for empathy” and Anna Freud described projection as sometimes serving as a form of altruism, when the patient "displaced her wishes onto objects who she felt were better qualified to fulfill them” (McWilliams, p. 108; Freud, 1966, p. 108). That being said, projection is considered a developmentally early defense, one that arises in the first stages of life. Addressing these early, or "primitive," defenses, McWilliams describes the ways in which they "operate in a global, undifferentiated way in a person's total sensorium, fusing cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions" and states that they are inherently preverbal, belying "a lack of attainment of the reality principle and a lack of appreciation of the separateness and constancy of those outside the self" (p. 98). In moving toward an understanding of projection and racism it is important to highlight that projection has a powerful and confounding effect on thoughts, feelings, and behavior and is a defense that

privileges the individual's internal experience over a stable sense of the outside world and the inherent value and subjective experience of the other humans that populate it.

Projection: Cultural and Psychic Interplays

Similarly, in understanding the connections between projection and racism, it is vital to understand the ways in which projection and issues of culture are highly interrelated. The effects that projection has on the "real world" can take place at a variety of levels, from individual fights to political campaigns, from small community conflicts to large-scale military assaults. Jung concisely conveyed the cultural and political effects of projection: "Political agitation in all countries is full of such projections, just as much as the backyard gossip of little groups and individuals" (1978, p. 181). The effects that racist projections have at the societal level are just as clear, and yet an exploration of projection as a way of understanding racism requires a sense of the ways in which the use of that defense is influenced by culture.

In psychodynamic theories the instincts/drives are generally understood to be biologically determined, but the internal prohibitions against them, which cause the internal conflict that defenses mediate, do not develop on their own accord within the psyche; internal prohibitions are the response to the individual's real experiences in the world—and the rules, morals, and judgments that come with external reality—and the ways in which those experiences are taken in. The most obvious prohibitions are legal ones, which purport to be a manifestation of the social contract, the boundaries that groups of human beings (cities, states, nations) have chosen to set for themselves. One of the most examined cultural rules is the prohibition of incest, which is maintained not only at the level of legal prohibition, but also by religious and cultural

prescriptions. While the incest prohibition is nearly universal, the limits placed on incest—for example, whether or not one's first cousin "counts"—are quite different in various locations and within different cultural contexts, which highlights the cultural influence upon even the most “natural” prohibition. Beyond legal, governmental, and religious restrictions, the sense of what violates cultural norms can be found in the stories that are told, whether through oral tradition, through print, or through newer media such as television and movies. Babies come into the world with no sense of these limitations and it is the responsibility of their caregivers to convey to them the rules of their given world. Later, peers and schools also play a vital role, but in the first few years of life, humans learn the "Nos" of the world through their caregivers, who in turn have learned them throughout their own lives. Psychodynamic theories prioritize the parents—and particularly the father—as the most important factor in the development of internalized prohibitions and superego functions, but at the same time, caregivers might be understood as merely serving as transmitters of cultural norms. In essence, it is culture that dictates the content, that determines what needs to be projected. As Rasmussen and Salhani (2010) note, the projected attributes are those that are “unacceptable to the dominant social order in which one is embedded” (p. 496).

Given the prominence of projection at multiple levels, one could argue that to best identify the values of a given culture, the gaze should be trained not on the behaviors within that culture, but rather on the behaviors which that culture attributes to its enemies and outcasts; the logic of projection would have it that a culture's values can be seen as the opposite of what it projects onto its “others.” The shift from focusing on the prohibitions in the individual unconscious to the prohibitions of the larger culture in which that individual exists is not a new proposition. Joel

Kovel argues for the existence of what he calls the "Cultural Ego," the "egos of a mass of personalities as they present themselves in a historical situation"; this cultural ego (and the concomitant cultural unconscious) can be seen as "the summation... of the unconscious mental processes of the people in a social group," an understanding which prioritizes internal and cultural semiotic systems, especially insofar as the process of meaning-making is held out of awareness (p. 104). The move from projection as an individual, intrapsychic defense used to alleviate internal conflict to projection as a defense and meaning-making process used at the cultural level can make readily apparent the ways in which this defense can be used to better understand racism within a given historical and cultural context.

Blacks as Blanks, Racism as Projection

Frosh (2002) summarizes the breadth of psychodynamic theorizations of racism as projection as a process "in which the denigrated other is made to carry unwanted aspects of the self" and links this projective process with the historical and institutional realities of oppression, in line with many other authors, researchers, philosophers, and psychological theorists (p. 391; Adorno, et al., 1950; Altman, 2000; Bird, 1957; Clarke, 2003; Fanon, 1968; Fonagy & Target, 2003; Gordon, 1993; Headly, 2006; Kovel, 1995; Kristeva, 1988; Newman & Caldwell, 2005; Rustin, 1991; Tan, 1993; Timmi, 1996; Traub-Werner, 1984; Wachtel, 1999; Zilboorg, 1947). Within the projective frame, the aspects of the racial and "denigrated" other that are so readily self-evident and abhorrent do not belong to this other at all, but rather to the hegemonic cultural gaze that is fixed upon the other in judgment or disgust. What *does* belong to the racial other is a (supposedly) clear outward marking of their status as other—specifically a racial other—and such a

status opens them to bear projections.³ Exploring the biology involved in prejudice and ethnic populations, Barker argues that “the ‘badge’ of color of your skin does not indicate any necessary difference under the skin, [yet] it is inevitably treated as though it did (1990, p. 22); analyzing the ways in which individuals develop and utilize stereotypes, Zebrowitz (1996) found that physical appearance does play a key role in allowing prejudiced perceptions to supersede any new information about the other. As Dalal states, “the black and the Jew are incidental to the proceedings,” which is to say, it is not the person (of color) who is involved in the unconscious work of projection, but rather it is the very fact of their coloredness—the (person of) color—itsself that is involved (p. 62). Rasmussen and Salhani (2010) highlight this sense of racial difference as mere projective possibility, referring to race as an “empty container” that becomes filled with “projections that are shaped in part by historical influences, current culture, and media discourse” (p. 497).

In his psychohistory of racism, Kovel makes a clear distinction between what he considers primary and secondary symbolization activities, which brings some clarity at this juncture. The primary activity, he argues, is the fantasy around that which is prohibited or repressed; the projection of that content into an oppressed group—which is then seen as having those fantastical and prohibited wishes, attributes, and behaviors—is but a secondary process (p. 94). While this distinction breathes space into the over-determined aspects of racial prejudice, it is also crucial insofar as it highlights the ways in which primary symbolization is so deeply entrenched that,

³ It is also of note that it was the visible marker of racial otherness that also marked as property Africans brought to America early in its history. The American system of chattel slavery differed greatly from traditional forms of slavery precisely because it was based in race (Hornsby, 1997, p. 136). The shift from the use of poor, white European indentured servant to the use of hereditary, property-based slavery was ultimately an economic decision and one based on the *visibility* of enslaved blacks’ marked appearances (Lovejoy, Candido & Addoun, 2008, p. 63).

retroactively, it has *always already* belonged to those who are the subject of secondary symbolization. For example, in the paragraph above, Frosh's use of the word "denigrated" refers to racial others that are the subject of projection and oppression and yet this word, meant to indicate that these individuals are stained or sullied through no fault of their own, comes from the Latin *denigrare*, meaning "to blacken" (Denigrate, p. 457). The word Frosh used to highlight the passive victimization of the objects of projection comes from the same stem as the word "nigger."

In his landmark study of prejudice, Gordon Allport (1954) argued that the content of projections have so little to do with the target of those projections that prejudiced beliefs and attitudes belong *exclusively* to the viewer; he goes so far as to compare the objects of projections (i.e., racial others) to the ink blots used as a medium for projective psychological testing. He links this idea of the amorphous, pre-symbolic object of projection with the ease of projection, or the objects' ability to fully receive the projection:

It is far easier to project an inner state upon an outer object if the outer object lacks a firm structure of its own... Our inner anxiety may be great, but still we do not see thugs in broad daylight if they are not there. At night, when objects are shadowy, projection of fear is easier. (p. 363)

Of course, there is absolutely nothing "less structured" or more "shadowy" about actual individuals of color, but instead the observer *cannot see* the real, embodied individual in front of him as a whole person with a complex history, personality structure, hopes, and fears. This is the result of "depersonalization," a psychodynamic process that alters one's perception of another person, reducing them to merely an object. Describing this process as "manifested by stark denial of reality," Delany (1968) states firmly that, "the racist denies the reality that he is interacting with other humans" (p. 157).

A clear indication that projected racist attitudes and beliefs are based in projection and not the inherent attributes of racial others is the tendency for the categorical content of these projections to stay relatively unchanged despite who the object of projection happens to be. Non-white racial groups bear the burden of hegemonic white culture's prohibited pleasures (especially sex), or they embody a lack of central values, such as cleanliness and hard work, values that are so tightly held that one forgets that they can serve as the foils for very real bodily pleasure. In his *Redneck Manifesto*, Jim Goad (1998) makes an argument for the inclusion of poor whites into this mass of racial others and, in doing so, confronts hegemonic white culture's stereotypes head on:

Stereotypes often mention bacterial problems—chinks boil alley cats, niggers smell bad, and toothless hillbillies get dirty feet from walking barefoot to the outhouse. Some sexual dysfunction or aberration is frequently attributed—chinks fuck like rabbits, niggers fuck like monsters, and rednecks fuck their mothers. (pp. 75-76)

While the content of these projections belong to the seer and not to the seen, the social and political effects are devastating in real ways:

The product of false projection is the stereotype, the transference of socially unpalatable thoughts from subject to object. This is particularly interesting in the study of racism, in that stereotypical constructions of otherness form the basis of both direct and indirect discrimination and exclusion from equality of opportunity. (Clarke, p. 83)⁴

Focusing specifically on African Americans, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988) argues that the direct opposition of signifiers such as “industrious/lazy,” “law-abiding/criminal,” and “responsible/shiftless” serves to “single out Blacks as one of these groups ‘worthy’ of oppression... The most significant aspect of Black oppression seems to be what is believed about Black Americans, not what Black Americans believe” (pp. 1331, 1358).

Obama as a Tribesman and as a Huxtable

Having explored projection as a key psychodynamic construct used to explain racism, as well having offered a cultural contextualization of how this process operates racially, the application of this concept to issues surrounding Obama's presidency shows clear instances in which projections and traditional racial stereotypes have been used to assail the president's legitimacy. In March 2009, the window display in a Florida bookstore showed a book about Obama alongside a variety of nature books about monkeys less than a month after the *New York Post* ran an editorial cartoon that depicted policemen shooting a chimpanzee that is clearly implied to be the President of the United States (Thompson, 2009; Burkeman, 2009); both of these instances play upon a long-standing racist trope of racial others—especially those of African descent—as “primitive.” Placards at Tea Party rallies have “depicted [Obama] as a witch doctor, denounced his supposed plans for ‘white slavery,’ and likened Congress to a slave owner and the taxpayer to a ‘n_____r’” (Campo-Flores, 2010). A widely-circulated photograph of Barack Obama standing with members of his extended family dressed in traditional Kenyan garb anticipates what will happen when “this bunch starts running around the White House,” identifying his relatives by both fictitious “black” names (e.g., “Pookie,” “Nettie,” “Rashid”) and behaviors/attributes that run like a catalogue of racist stereotypes (e.g., “jail,” “crack addict,” “fugitive,” “gay porn star”) (Mikkelsen, 2008, March 20). It could be argued that the circulation of news about Obama's African family serves a racist function even when that news is objectively true. In October 2010

⁴ Again, the historical link to slavery is clear here. Lovejoy, Candido, and Addoun (2008) explain that “the association between Africans and slavery resulted in a high level of prejudice against blacks during and after slavery. It became a common misconception that the enslavement of Africans must have arisen as the result of racial difference” (p. 65). In reality, it was *enslavement* itself that led to racial difference.

both mainstream and fringe news media outlets announced that President Obama's 52 year-old half-brother, Malik, had married a 19 year-old woman who was now his third wife; many news sources further sensationalized the article by using headlines that highlighted polygamy and referred to the young woman as a "teen" despite the fact that she is legally an adult and able to marry not only in Kenya, but in every district of the United States (Odula, 2010a; Odula, 2010b).

These instances of racism are striking, in part because they stand out against a discourse around Obama that has generally been less overtly racist, or even racial. At first glance this could well be evidence of a movement toward a post-racial society, one in which racial others are no longer suitable targets for projections, a realization of Kovel's argument that, at times, secondary symbols (in this case, racial others) can no longer represent the primary symbolism (the contents that hegemonic white culture projects onto them) or "primary meanings which gave them their cultural validity" (p. 102). Along the lines of the argument of racism-as-projection, Thomas Merton famously stated that "the Negro problem is really a *white* problem... rooted in the heart of the *white man himself*" (Bennett Jr., 1970, p. 254); if racism is a psychic or spiritual affliction of white culture, perhaps the election of Obama and the inauguration of a post-racial era signals a psychic healing in the hegemonic white cultural ego. However, if one broadens the range of vision beyond Obama to include all African-Americans, the very claim of the existence of a post-racial era—a claim that is made without regard to the realities of continued institutional, structural, and interpersonal racism—is an attempt at a dreamlike wish fulfillment. In the study of prejudice and perception it has been found that a perceiver's desired goal, such as confirmation of a hypothesis or a more accurate impression despite the hypothesis, has a strong influence over the expectations and experience of targets and often leads to self-fulfilling prophecies (Jussim & Fleming, 1996); in

much the same way, those who hypothesize that a post-racial era was inaugurated with Obama are less likely to see the status and reality of a wider range of black Americans. Tim Wise, whose “Racism 2.0” allows for the coexistence of respect and appreciation of individual people of color with suspicion and contempt for people of color at large, argues that Obama has been able to be acceptable to white Americans through the same model of whitened blackness, or “Huxtability,” that made *The Cosby Show* a hit television series; appreciation for Obama as an individual in no way changes racism directed at the rest of African-Americans, who stay just as black as shows like *Good Times* and *Sanford & Son* (Wise, p. 102).

In the examples cited above, racist stereotypes and projects have been attributed to Obama, and yet his status as the “exception that proves the rule” has ultimately meant that such accusations do not “stick.” Insofar as racial others can only serve as exemplary objects for projection if they are indeed racially “other,” Obama may just not be “black enough” to have these attributions stay put. Indeed, Glenn Beck has even suggested Obama’s “whiteness” on air: Obama “is colorless... you don't notice that he is black. So he might as well be white, you know what I mean?” (Media Matters for America, 2007). In response to this state of affairs, some attempts to smear Obama racially have worked more desperately to reestablish his racial otherness. In his cover story for *Forbes* in late September 2010, Dinesh D’Souza—a conservative author who infamously argued in his 1995 book, *The End of Racism*, that American slaves were treated “pretty well” and that American blacks suffer from a “civilization deficit”—attributed Obama’s allegedly “antibusiness” stance to his cultural and genetic heritage (Wise, 2010). Claiming that Obama’s mindset is one of “Kenyan anticolonialism” and that it is incomprehensible to mainstream

Americans, D'Souza links President Obama so tightly with his father that racially charged accusations against Obama Sr. become wholly transposed or displaced upon the president:

So who was Barack Obama Sr.? He was a Luo tribesman who grew up in Kenya and studied at Harvard. He was a polygamist who had, over the course of his lifetime, four wives and eight children. One of his sons, Mark Obama, has accused him of abuse and wife-beating... From a very young age and through his formative years, [President] Obama learned to see America as a force for global domination and destruction. He came to view America's military as an instrument of neocolonial occupation. He adopted his father's position that capitalism and free markets are code words for economic plunder. (pp. 93-94)

Former Speaker of the House and conservative commentator Newt Gingrich embraced D'Souza's article and the argument that Obama is not understandable without being seen in his African context. Gingrich, who has stated that he will "send [D'Souza's article] to people regularly," claims that Obama is "a person who is fundamentally out of touch with how the world works" and that his presidency is based upon a "con":

I think [Obama] worked very hard at being a person who is normal, reasonable, moderate, bipartisan, transparent, accommodating – none of which was true... he was being the person he needed to be in order to achieve the position he needed to achieve... He was authentically dishonest. (Costa, 2010)

One of the more striking aspects of Gingrich's response is the tension between the use of the word "con," which is replete with a connotation of both criminality and intentionality, and the proposal of an "authentic dishonesty." Here the former Speaker brings to the fore the specter of Jim Crow era "passing" and supports the ideology of "one-drop" hypodescent, which has dominated the American racial system since the mid-1600s (Davis, 2006, p. 17). Going a step beyond the near-universal adherence to the one-drop rule by referring to the "biracial" Obama as "black" or "African-American," Gingrich points to a kind of *cultural hypodescent* in which Obama may claim to be "African-American," but despite his best efforts, he will always be an *African*, a Luo tribesman, a

Negro. If hegemonic white America's projections don't stick on Obama it is only because the majority of Americans have fallen for Obama's con.

This attempt to re-other Obama is clearly linked to other attempts to make Obama alien in terms of both in terms of his unfamiliarity and his citizenship status. If Obama is unable to be "black enough" to hold projections, he must be "other" in a different way. Echoing Gingrich's claim of a true, primal Obama hidden under the modern, presidential guise, the birther conspiracy posits for Obama a birthplace—an origin—that not only invalidates his presidency, but can hold the racial line between those who project within hegemonic white culture (non-poor whites) and those who readily receive those projections (everyone else).

Barack Obama as Barry Soetoro

One instance of this re-othering that is closely tied to birther beliefs can be seen as particularly desperate and bizarre. For the last few years, various personal websites and discussion boards have been engaged in transforming Obama into a man named "Barry Soetoro." Soetoro is a citizen of Indonesia (and, occasionally, Kenya) who split his childhood in two different elementary schools: an Islamic madrasah where he was indoctrinated into Wahhabist militarism as well as a Catholic elementary school, Fransiskus Assisi in Jakarta, where he was also instructed in the ways of Islam. On his registration paperwork for the latter, Soetoro's religion is listed as "Islam." Later in life, Soetoro attended Occidental College in the United States, applying for international student financial aid as an Indonesian citizen. A photograph of Soetoro that appears on several sites is an image of a young Barack Obama with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. A short, grainy video clip from Obama's presidential campaign (a clip in which the audio and video tracks

are rather obviously not aligned) shows him telling a reporter that, “John McCain has not done enough to talk about my Muslim faith.” Soetoro went to great lengths to become known as Barack Obama, including the hiring of a supportive fellow Democrat and “Department of Homeland Security-trained document specialist,” named Jay McKinnon, to forge the Hawaiian birth certificate that was posted to the Obama campaign’s website. Despite his attempts to serve as Commander-in-Chief under a false identity, Soetoro has never been able to provide a real birth certificate, any documentation of a legal change of name, nor documentation of legal repatriation (if he was indeed ever a citizen of the United States), and no certification of baptism or any evidence of conversion from Islam (Mikkelson, 2009; Miller, 2009; Hyperbole Media, 2010; Temple, 2008; Higgins, 2010; “Meet the ‘chubby boy’,” 2010).

This narrative is of interest not only because of the questionable reality testing found in its internal contradictions or serpentine legal reasoning, nor only because it points the way from projection to paranoid conspiracy theory, but rather because it conveys a sense of the real, historical Obama as occupying a “space in-between” black and white, not because of his parents’ racial identities, but because he is simultaneously known and unknown.⁵ As a racial other, he should be well-suited for mass cultural projections and yet as President of the United States, he embodies the highest symbolic position in American political culture, the ultimate father figure with which to identify. To allow for proper projection of immoral or non-Christian thoughts (“my Muslim faith”), ruthless and anti-democratic aggressiveness (indoctrination into Jihadist Islam),

⁵ While it is not within the scope of this paper, the creation of “Barry Soetoro” as a rhetorical alter ego and, through an emphasis on legal and immigration *facts*, as a separate living entity might be explored to good effect through the lens of Freud’s notion of the “uncanny,” especially insofar as it may be seen as a perverse inversion of Freud’s reading of the Rankin notion of doubling as “insuring against the destruction of the ego” (Freud, 1955, p. 235).

and unhealthy bodily pleasures (the cigarette droops lazily from Obama's lips), this narrative not only alleviates the tension of his occupying the "space in between" by removing him from the presidency through the fantastical stripping of his citizenship, but also re-others him racially, culturally, and religiously. Project serves as a useful model for understanding the ways in which Obama has been constructed and reconstructed to hold aspects of the human experience that cause internal conflict for white Americans and, as the next chapter argues, the construct of projection is also important for understanding the "post-racial" context in which this discourse has occurred.

CHAPTER THREE

Reverse Racism as a Consequence of Projective Processes

“One of the Greatest Evils in Society”

The psychodynamic concept of projection has proven itself moderately useful in better understanding the complex—and at times bizarre—ways in which Obama has been made to be more "other" than he may appear to the collective cultural ego; through the lens of projective logic, the complexity of Obama's "racial mark" has also pointed toward a better understanding of the psychic work behind the need for him to be not only racially, but nationally other. As explored in this chapter, projection can also be seen as a source for the insistence upon a post-racial America, as well as a lens through which to better understand the political consequences of this notion.

The very claim of a post-racial society—a claim that is made without regard to the facts and realities of continued institutional, structural, and interpersonal racism—is one that shows a dreamlike forgoing of the reality principle. The need to assuage the psyche (both individual and cultural) of the anxieties produced by internal conflict is so great that reality is forced to bend itself to the psychic will. In this allegedly post-racial era, not only can racism be partially explained through projection, but racism itself has become projected *content*. Like aggression, sexual desire, and other internal aspects that cannot be fully experienced as belonging to the self, racism needs to be found in others. As with all projected content, the inability to hold one's own racism stems from cultural and social injunctions against having racist or prejudiced beliefs. While there still

certainly exists a small population of white power holdouts, hegemonic white culture now sees itself as decidedly “not racist.”

A clear example of the cultural prohibition of racism came during a November 2010 interview with former president George W. Bush, who discussed his memoir *Decision Points* with NBC’s Matt Lauer in an hour-long prime time special. Lauer asked Bush about a passage in the book in which the latter had described the worst moment of his presidency: “At an NBC telethon to raise money for Katrina victims, rapper Kanye West told a primetime TV audience, ‘George Bush doesn’t care about black people’... Five years later I can barely write those words without feeling disgusted” (2010, p. 325). The passage goes on to describe other accusations that race impacted the government’s slow response to the disaster and also conveys Bush’s growing sense of anger as he touts his own “racial tolerance credentials”:

I was raised to believe that racism was one of the greatest evils in society. I admired Dad’s courage when he defied near-universal opposition from his constituents to vote for the Open Housing Bill of 1968. I was proud to have earned more black votes than any Republican governor in Texas history. I had appointed more African Americans to top government positions, including the first black woman national security adviser and first two black secretaries of state. It broke my heart to see minority children shuffled through the school system, so I had based my signature domestic policy initiative, the No Child Left Behind Act, on ending the soft bigotry of low expectations. I had launched a \$15 billion program to combat HIV/AIDS in Africa. As part of the response to Katrina, my administration worked with Congress to provide historically black colleges and universities in the Gulf Coast with more than \$400 million in loans to restore their campuses and renew their recruiting efforts. I faced a lot of criticism as president... but the suggestion that I was a racist because of the response to Katrina represented an all-time low. I told Laura at the time that it was the worst moment of my presidency. I feel the same way today. (pp. 325-326)

As Lauer read the latter section of this passage aloud, Bush responded that, “I resent it, it’s not true, and it was one of the most disgusting moments of my presidency.” Upon hearing West’s direct quote again, the former president confirmed what he had written in the book: “Yeah, I still

feel that way as you read those words. I felt them when I heard them [then], I felt them when I wrote them, and I felt it when I'm listening to them [now]." Bush was not swayed by Lauer's suggestion that some readers might "give [him] some heat" because, "you're not saying that the worst moment in your presidency was watching the misery in Louisiana, you're saying it was when someone insulted you" (Bell, 2010).

These moments convey unambiguously that racism—specifically in its personal, intentional, prejudiced form—is prohibited culturally, not just from a "liberal" or "progressive" perspective, but in a much broader way. Accusations of racism constitute the nadir of Bush's presidency and the idea of being a racist is so "disgusting" that Bush mounts an itemized defense against it in terms of political decisions he's made. Moreover, he frames this defense from the quintessential locus of cultural prohibition, his childhood, during which he learned from his family what constitute "the evils in society."

Shortly after this interview, Matt Lauer also spoke on air with West, who issued an apology to Bush, albeit a somewhat convoluted one: "in my moment of frustration, I didn't have the grounds to call him a racist... I believe that in a situation of high emotion like that, we as human beings don't always choose the right words" (Matthews, 2010).⁶ Conveying a newfound identification with Bush's emotional response, West used his Twitter account to state, "I went up there to express how I was empathetic to Bush because I labeled him a racist and years later I got labeled a racist," referencing the negative public response to his interruption of Taylor Swift's acceptance speech at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards, which was often interpreted as racially

motivated in media discourse (Shahid, 2010; Martens, 2009). This attribution of a racial motivation to West's interruption can itself be understood as a projection of the observer's own racism; the viewer moves his or her racially-marked perception of West—interrupting the young, white Swift who is oft marketed as “innocent”—into the brown body of West himself.

Reverse Racism

Indeed, since Obama's candidacy for the presidency, there seems to have been an increase in public accusations of racism stemming *from* people of color, especially African Americans.⁷ The charge that black Americans participate in or benefit from “reverse racism” (or “black racism”) has reemerged historically when there are perceived threats to white privilege, and has often been a response to legal and policy matters, most recently issues of Affirmative Action or Equal Protection legislation and policies. In this new post-racial context, however, the supposed *source* of reverse racism has shifted from legal, policy, and symbolic domains (institutional racism), and is now experienced as being rooted in the hearts and psyches of individuals. This relocation of reverse racism from the political to the personal register carries with it a change of motivation, from a political exaggeration of historical and bygone disadvantages that face people of color, to a personal disdain and prejudice against whites. If “reverse discrimination” were about unfairly

⁶ Of note, Spike Lee also questioned West's word choice shortly after the incident, suggesting that the performer was too *limited* in his understanding of the motivation behind the Bush administration's incompetent response to the devastation on the coast: “Bush doesn't care about poor white people, either... Bush doesn't care about poor people, period” (Pitts, 2007).

⁷ A particularly notable exception was the response to 2011's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, a parenting memoir written by Yale law professor Amy Chua, who is ethnically Chinese. When controversial and de-contextualized excerpts from her book were published in the *Wall Street Journal* under the title, “Why Chinese Mothers are Superior,” the public response to her strict parenting methods and her “racism” was one of outrage that led to death threats against the mother of two (Clarke, January 2011).

benefitting blacks, “reverse racism” is more specifically about the oppression and “denigration” of whites. The onslaught of accusations of reverse racism have sharpened since Obama received the Democratic nomination in 2008—and was the first person of color to be the nominee from one of the major parties—and attributions of deeply held and potentially dangerous racism against whites have often been focused on Obama and individuals linked with him. Six months after Obama’s inauguration in 2009, Fox News personality Glenn Beck announced on a morning show that the president has “a deep-seated hatred for white people or the white culture” (“Glenn Beck: Obama,” 2009). Obama’s nomination of Judge Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court also faced this reverse racism backlash after a comment that Sotomayor made while addressing a law symposium in 2001—“I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn't lived that life”—was isolated and promulgated by a variety of conservative media figures including Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Lou Dobbs, Tucker Carlson, and Ann Coulter, all of whom referred to the nominee as a “racist” or “bigot” (Media Matters for America, 2009). This use of misrepresentation to support an accusation of reverse racism seems almost innocent in comparison to Tea Party supporter Andrew Breitbart’s careful editing of video footage of Department of Agriculture administrator Shirley Sherrod’s address to the NAACP in July 2010; Breitbart posted and publicized video excerpts of her speech that suggested that she was a “bigot” and that led to her forced resignation. The full version of the narrative, which was later released, proved to be a narrative about Sherrod’s personal journey and growth, a morality tale about “racial reconciliation” (Stolberg, et al., 2010).

These ubiquitously reported examples are part of a larger body of political and discursive instances that point toward a growing sense of white anxiety and urgency around reverse racism

that can be understood, at least in part, as a projective process and a direct consequence of the misguided insistence upon a Post-Racial America. Beyond the unconscious tendency for “perceivers’ goals [to] moderate the influence of their expectations... when they are offered an incentive for confirming a belief about a target,” those who believe reverse racism have intentionally accentuated and misreported statements and events to prove to the American public—and likely to themselves—not only that blacks can be racist, but that they certainly are, and are callously so (Jussim & Flemming, p. 174). While there is ample data to show that race continues to play a critical role in life outcomes for Americans, recent polls have shown that 44% of Americans identified “discrimination against whites as being just as big as bigotry aimed at blacks and other minorities” and that less than a full one-third of Americans believe that White Americans have a “better chance of getting ahead in today’s society,” only three percent more than believe that “too much has been made of the problems facing black people” (Blake, 2011; Zernike, p. 216). If America is indeed post-racial, if “society” (read: “whites”) no longer discriminates or even sees race, it sets the stage for the current reactionary political refrain: “they’re the real racists.”

From ‘African-American’ to ‘un-American’

“Their racism” is often contrasted with “our tolerance.” In an analysis of the ways in which race has played a role in the campaigns of recent prominent African American politicians, James (2010) argues explicitly that, “voting-*while*-black elicits racial profiling at the polls... yet, whites voting *black* manifests as an anti-racist act” (p. 27). In the context of whites’ generous and deeply democratic willingness to vote for a black man, African-Americans who vote for the same

candidate exhibit a self-interest that slides into selfishness and, ultimately, a tribal group allegiance that is inherently undemocratic.

Insofar as blacks are seen as “undemocratic,” they begin to bear the stain of being “unpatriotic.” Throughout his campaign, allegations of a lack of patriotism stalked Obama, ready to leap upon any hint of evidence, be it a missing flag on his lapel or his wife’s assertion that she was proud of America “for the first time in [her] adult life” (Frederick, 2008). While white candidates have also faced the charge of not being patriotic—or at least not patriotic enough—as part of their opponents’ political strategies, Obama continues to face the much more emotionally charged accusation of being “un-American” (Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). The belief that Obama was not born in the United States certainly makes him “not American,” and yet the accusations push beyond a lack of American citizenship or indifference to America, but toward a belief in the president’s utter disdain for the country he leads. While the suggestion that Obama is a “Muslim intent on destroying the United States” has clear racial implications, the louder and more frequent accusations that he is a “Communist” or a “Socialist” displaces his un-American brown body into the Cold War, allowing such charges to highlight his antipathy for America, while *whitewashing* the racial basis of this accusation.

Historically, narratives around discrimination against whites has utilized a trope of “innocence” to cover over the historical and economic realities of white privilege (Ross, 1997); in this new post-racial landscape, thanks to the distortion of seeing one’s projected racism coming from racial others, reverse racism is experienced as something personal, driven, and ominous. Obama has a deep-seated *hatred* of white Americans, and thus of America itself. He is a domestic insurgent who supports white slavery and will use his executive office to brutalize whites

economically and physically. This sense of danger associated with the reverse racism of the Obama presidency is embodied in discourse around the “New Black Panther Party,” a relatively small Black Separatist organization that has no relation to the Black Panther Party that was active in America from the mid-1960s until the early ‘80s; instead the NBPP has been described as “a tiny group that exists mainly in the fevered imagination of its few members” and yet it has been extensively covered by Fox News and other conservative, white commentators (Robinson, 2010). The Obama presidency and the “end of racism” in America has brought with it a shift to a passionate and pathological reverse racism that is dangerous not only politically and economically for whites, but that threatens to attack and destroy the white body itself. This danger is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Workings of Racial and Political Paranoia in Post-Racial America

This chapter will explore the experience of the fear surrounding Obama by way of Kleinian object relations theory, which is useful in making the clear progression from projection—the key concept employed in chapters one and two—to paranoia, which is a key element of the argument that follows in next chapters.

Obama as Grim Reaper

Although many Americans believe that 2010's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act did not go far enough in reforming the nation's complicated and ineffective health care system—13% of Americans, according to a January 2011 Washington Post/ABC News Poll (Cohen)—there is still reason to understand its passage as an important achievement for the Obama Administration. Just over one year after his inauguration, Obama was able to sign into law the most significant change to federal healthcare policy since Medicare was established in the Social Security Amendments of 1965, almost half a century earlier. Whether or not it is an expletive-worthy "big deal," discourse around the legislation certainly coincides with Vice President Joe Biden's public assertion at the televised signing: "Mr. President, you're the guy that made it happen" (Adams, p. 23). Indeed, the legislation has been so tightly identified with the president that it has been dubbed "Obamacare" by many of its detractors. Insofar as this legislation has been

seen as an extension of Obama, understanding the difficulties that health care reform faced may well inform an understanding of the ways in which the psychodynamics of racism have been at play in regard to his presidency more generally.

While the issue of national healthcare is complex and lends itself to heated debate, the discourse around this legislation was intensified by the introduction of a particularly potent accusation. In August 2009, former Vice Presidential nominee Sarah Palin used her profile on Facebook to charge the proposed healthcare reform legislation with a ruthless means of cost control:

The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's "death panel" so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their "level of productivity in society," whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil (Palin, 2009).

The existence of these alleged "death panels" was quickly debunked; in fact, her unfounded accusation was named the "lie of the year" by the *St. Petersburg Times'* Pulitzer Prize winning *PolitiFact* project (Holan, 2009). Even experts who were opposed to the proposed legislation found the suggestion of such panels "shocking, inflammatory, and incorrect," but this did not prevent the fabricated issue from influencing the national debate and causing outraged citizens to protest at "health care town halls" across the country (Snow, Gever & Childs, 2009; Martin, 2009).

Thorough readings of the legislation, a presidential response, and news coverage of the inaccuracy of the death panel claim could not constrain many citizens' anger and fear because the power of Palin's claim lies not its factual veracity, but in the deeper psychic truth it embodies. She presents in these few lines an America that she knows, one with which readers are also meant to identify; it is against "our" America that she positions the imminent slaughter of the elderly and

mentally retarded babies. “Our” America is represented here as something unmistakably vulnerable, and the predator that means to attack it is described not only as utterly “evil”, but is specifically stated to be coming directly from Barack Obama. Although absent any manifest references to race, this assertion draws from the pool of fear and anger harbored in response to a perception of reverse racism. It simply didn’t matter if these death panels were actually present in the legislation because the legislation wasn’t the point. Instead, Palin’s statement and some people’s outrage were linked to a sense of “our America” being under threat from something evil and aggressive embodied in Obama and his presidency. The fact that Obama is cast as a “Socialist” in discourse around health care is not only—or perhaps even predominantly—the easy association with “socialized medicine”; as a signifier “socialism” is used to bring to the fore something that is in opposition to “democracy” and to mark Obama as undemocratic and “un-American,” reifying racist impulses toward Obama without actually using the words.

Projection and Paranoia in Object Relations Theory

In the same way that the concept of projection elucidates and contextualizes the shifting dimensions of racism in Post-Racial America, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between projection and paranoia can help explain and ground an understanding of this sense that there is something in (quite literally *in*) Obama that is “out to get us,” something aggressive, dangerous, and evil.⁸ In order for the construct of paranoia to be brought to the fore, however, the previous discussion of projection will be expanded upon through an examination of the

understanding of projection in Object Relations theory, specifically the pioneering work of Melanie Klein.

In many respects Klein's understanding of the subject's psychodynamic tensions and defenses are quite similar to her Freudian predecessors, and yet as her theories began to gain popularity in Britain in the late 1920s, it caused a serious conflict between what became known as the "London" and "Viennese" schools of psychoanalytic thought. While these tensions began as issues of technique—for example, whether or not young children can be properly analyzed—as Klein's theory continued to develop, her understanding of human nature began to diverge more pointedly from that of Freud and his daughter Anna. When the latter arrived in London in 1938 these tensions intensified, until there was eventually a series of hearings and a formal split in the British Psychoanalytic Society (Mitchell & Black, p. 86).

The subtlety of these conflicting theorizations of human nature are important to highlight in order to better appreciate projection through a Kleinian lens. The language used to describe the projective process is very similar for both Klein and Freud; the difference in these conceptualizations of projection is not how the defense functions, but rather what function it serves. While Freud theorizes that the formation of personality focuses on the navigation of the Oedipal drama, Klein describes the key issues of that period—the fantasy of incest and the development of the superego—as being present from a much earlier age, “although in more ‘primitive,’ frightening forms” (Mitchell & Black, p. 87). Whereas Freud would have the resolution of the Oedipal complex result in solid, organized structures, for Klein the conflicts of the Oedipal

⁸ As explored below, this paranoid sense of catastrophe has been linked to American political discourse in the past; a clear understanding of these psychodynamic processes can complicate previous notions of political paranoia as well as connect these descriptions to issues of race and racism.

scene are there nearly from birth and cannot be resolved. Indeed, for Klein the psyche is never fully cohesive or solid, but rather “remains always unstable, fluid, constantly fending off psychotic anxieties” (Mitchell & Black, p. 87).

Indeed, the nature of these anxieties is of importance as well. As discussed above, for Freud anxiety serves as a signal of a conflict between the instinctual drive and internalized cultural values and prohibitions. Klein’s work recognizes the great power of the drives, but also believes that these drives are not primary, but are “object-related” from birth; Goldstein (2001) put Klein’s understanding in more humanistic terms, stating that “[Klein] argued that the goal of life was relationships with others (objects) rather than instant gratification” (p. 31). Human beings are built for relationship to objects and, as such, the anxieties that arise in the psyche are not only in response to issues of the drives as Freudian thought emphasizes, but also to issues of objects. Instead, as object-related subjects, human beings born from, of, and into the human fold, “each of us struggles with the deep terrors of annihilation, paranoid anxiety, and utter abandonment” (Mitchell & Black, p. 88). Because of Klein’s emphasis on the interactions between subject and object, as well as the importance of such interactions that occur only within unconscious fantasy, the subject exists as a porous—or penetrable—entity that struggles to maintain cohesion.

Within this context, projection is not simply seen as a defense that allows for the subject to eliminate tensions between the drives and prohibitions, but rather serves as an attempt to maintain the very nature and boundaries of the subject by forcing the terrifying aspects of the drive out and into an object. Juliet Mitchell stated Klein’s understanding very simply: “in projection, the ego fills the object with some of its own split feelings and experience” (Mitchell, 1987, p. 20). Projection serves as a stopgap for the annihilation anxiety inherent in early experience, which

stems not only from the loose confusion of not experiencing the self as whole or singular, but also from the terror of experiencing one's own drives. It is through the process of projection that the subject is able to make sense of what is a part of the self and what is 'out there'; moreover the terrifying aggressive drive is pushed "out there," so that the subject is left intact.

While this projective defense may help to solidify the sense of a cohesive and bounded subject, its primary drawback is the creation of a new environment in which the subject is located. Now free of the more terrifying parts of itself, the subject is surrounded by the objects that are "out there," that have now been imbued with its own projected aggression. This experience has been previously connected to racist projection, both traditionally—the black body holds the aggression and the sexual impulses of the subject in white hegemonic culture—and in the Post-Racial context in which the black body holds racism itself and directs it toward whites.⁹ Klein described the horror of this developmental scenario in very clear language: "the child conceives of them as actually dangerous—persecutors who it fears will devour it, scoop out the inside of its body, cut it to pieces, poison it—in short, compassing its destruction by all the means which sadism can devise" (Klein, 1975a, p. 262). It is within the context of this ramification of the projective process that we can find the origins of paranoia. That which was too horrifying to be experienced as a part of the self was projected out in an attempt to alleviate the subject's anxiety, but now that violent aggression is readily seen in the external objects surrounding the subject. The dangers are not

⁹ Many psychodynamic theorists make a clear distinction between simple projection and 'projective identification,' which Goldstein (2001) describes as a scenario in which "not only is an aspect of the person put onto an external object but the object begins to feel or behave in ways that are in keeping with what has been projected" (p. 58). In a sense, projection becomes projective identification as soon as the object picks up the defensive ball and is suddenly a two-player game. This paper incorporates both of these phenomena under the umbrella of "projection."

unknown, but rather are known all too well—as they belong to the subject—and, as such, projection “results in their developing persecutory fears of the environment” (Goldstein, p. 72). Klein originally framed the first several months of life as the “persecutory phase,” but later understood this period of fear and danger as the “paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1975b, p. 2).

While the latter terminology is certainly striking, it signals the relationship between the paranoid sense of persecution and the use of a very early unconscious defense called “splitting.” The centrality of splitting within early object relations can be seen if one follows the results of projection. The subject, overwhelmed by the experience of its own aggressive impulses, projects them into external objects; having now imbued its environment with its own rage and aggression, the subject experiences the world as aggressive and persecutory. And yet, the objects that populate this environment are still necessary for the subject, which must psychically split the objects into their “good” and “bad” parts in order to understand and cope with the world. Klein’s theorizations came from the observation of very young children who are quite literally dependent upon the very objects that terrify them or that they hate. As Clarke (2001) states clearly, “the mother is therefore split into two persons: a person who is a loving provider and a mother who is frustrating and hated” (p. 292). These dynamics permeate and constitute the paranoid-schizoid position, the name of which not only highlights the persecutory violence surrounding the subject, but also the “violence of the fissure that splitting creates” (Kristeva, 2001, p. 67).

Political Paranoia, from Hofstadter to Rape Metaphors

This persecutory fear, the very stuff of paranoia, is at the heart of experiences of reverse racism and is seen clearly in discourse that borrows the racist ethos and logic while denying the

presence of “racial” content. The lens of projection has revealed paranoia as an integral element in the experiences of racism; paranoia has also proven itself a concept useful in exploring political discourse even absent the overt involvement of race. Studies have suggested that paranoid fear has been a driving force for political decisions in the West dating back to the Crusades and that it not only affects partisan political debate and international politics, but is a key factor in the formulation of policies spanning from corporate and medical regulation to immigration and veteran affairs (Pipes, 1997; Robins & Post, 1997; Showalter, 1998; Knight, 2000). Racist fear of Obama is whitewashed through accusations of Communism—or more often when speaking of health care reform, Socialism—and it is anti-Communism itself that serves as the ur-example of political paranoia within the American imagination, with references to “witch hunts” and McCarthyism. Indeed, the most well known articulation of paranoia in American politics dates from the era of the Red Menace.¹⁰ First published in 1964, Richard Holfstadter’s classic essay, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” is a historical paper that argues that paranoia serves as a thread that runs throughout American political thinking. Focusing on the political right, Holfstadter posits that for American political minorities, paranoia had consistently served as a predominant style of distorted perception and rhetoric in political discourse, a style that is a “way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself” (1965, p. 4). Holfstadter posits that the paranoid style makes use of projection as a way to provide “exponents of the paranoid style an opportunity to project and freely express unacceptable aspects of their own minds” (p. 34); although he does

¹⁰ The emphasis on color in language around Communism is of note. There is a linguistic slide between the idea of a “Red” and a “Black.” One can see clearly that while “Communism” now serves as a way to express xenophobic fear or anger without violating the prohibition against racism, during the Cold War—before racism was fully prohibited by the hegemonic white culture—Communism was in fact color-marked or *racialized* in order to be emphasized as more “other,” less “American.”

not explicitly make the connection between this projection and his own definition of the paranoid style, one can see that this “way of seeing the world” is indeed a means of “expressing oneself.”

Hofstadter’s use of popularized psychodynamic terminology has been influential and yet the author makes explicit his intention to use the term in specifically non-clinical manner. He describes the paranoid style and contrasts it with clinical paranoia at the beginning of this historical survey:

In the paranoid style, as I conceive it, the feeling of persecution is central and it is indeed systematized in grandiose theories of conspiracy. But there is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious [sic], overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. Insofar as he does not usually see himself singled out as the individual victim of a personal conspiracy, he is somewhat more rational and much more disinterested. (p. 4, italics in original)

While Hofstadter asserts that the conspiratorial dangers of the political paranoiac are not experienced as directed “specifically against him” it is clear that in the contemporary context this does not preclude the sense that it is *experienced* as if it were. Palin does not express concern about all of America’s youngest citizens, but about the very mortal safety of her own child, whose medical condition doubles the signification of innocence and vulnerability. Certainly she frames her statement within a context of “the America I know and love”—a very eloquent embodiment of Hofstadter’s “a nation, a culture, a way of life”—and yet the content that follows is deeply personal. The personalization of conspiracy and danger are also clear in the ways in which paranoid political rhetoric is particularly *embodied*. Both the mainstream *New Yorker* cover—featuring a Muslim

extremist Obama doing an “urban” fist-bump with his wife who is depicted as a militant black-pride revolutionary with an AK-47 machine gun strapped to her back—and the more fringe assertions of his plans for white slavery are about a threat to the *bodies* of Americans. Right wing commentators’ use of rape metaphors—statements that are strengthened by the covert connection with the trope of black men and sexual violence—is a particularly clear and problematic way in which the threat against a “way of life” are anything but impersonal. Media figures—like the male Limbaugh, Beck, and Savage—blend the economic and the bodily in their claims like Savage’s that “Obama is raping America. Obama is raping our values. Obama is raping our democracy.” Limbaugh warns to “get ready to get gang-raped again, folks.” Beck underscores the bodily connection lest the listener misses it: “you’re being raped by your government—raped” (Media Matters for America, November 19, 2009). Projected aggression and sexuality come home to roost through the paranoid experience of a vile sadism located *out there*, reified in government and policy, but embodied in the body of the president.

This Time It’s Personal

There are likely multiple currents that have carried this intermingling of the personal and the political, ranging from merging of policy and identity in both identity politics and the intensification of Christian fundamentalism to the emphasis on the private as public in current television programming. While it is not within the scope of this paper to explore the reasons why this is the case, it is clear that the personal and political have becoming increasingly and perhaps intractably blended together. Hofstadter’s paranoid style—conceived nearly a half century ago—is not wholly equipped to understand the more intense dynamics at work now. Hofstadter uses

paranoia as simile: the user of the paranoid style is *like* a person experiencing paranoia. In holding back from engaging more fully in psychodynamic underpinnings of paranoia proper, Hofstadter's sense of a paranoid "style" implies a sense that its users merely speaks *as if* he or she were paranoid, relying upon a suggestion that these individuals are in some covert way aware of their strategy.¹¹ In a sense, Hofstadter's paranoid style is not so much about being paranoid as it is about *doing* paranoia, about *paranoiding*. In the contemporary context this understanding of a performative paranoia does not provide a sufficient lens for understanding the workings of political fear that is also always personal. To move from simile to metaphor, to embrace more fully the political paranoiac as experiencing paranoia as opposed to using it, the Kleinian lens highlights the experience of a threat not to way of life, as Hofstadter argues, but to life itself. If one is to seriously engage with the idea of the existence of a Cultural Ego, the impulse that is projected into others and then experienced as coming from outside is a kind of as-if-aggression, but is the very real, embodied and sadistic aggressive drive, experienced with an intensity akin to Klein's vision of the baby fearing that it will be eaten, dismembered, that the persecutor will "scoop out the inside of its body." It is from this perspective that one can best make sense of the connection between paranoia and aggression, both personal and political. Gregory Rochlin's colorful description of projective motivations and consequences is apt here: "[the young child] finds it more manageable to cope with a monster of his own making than to carry about within him his own menace" (1973, p. 176). Although free of this inner menace the subject is nonetheless left with a monster and violence is a time-honored means for monster management.

¹¹ There is an argument to be made that some spokespeople for the Right—Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, etc.—don't *really* believe what they are saying. Media figures and politicians certainly have political and profit motives for peddling fear and are in no way immune from having their own psychic reasons for needing to serve as *agents provocateur*.

Tea Party Patriots as Blind Murderers

In suggesting a profile of those who are most vulnerable to taking on the paranoid style, Hofstadter points to American “*minority movements*,” emphasizing not the size of these movements per se, but the sense of marginalization experienced within their ranks (p. 7, italics in original). More recent literature exploring the etiology of political paranoia has highlighted the role of humiliation and loss—especially within the context of historical or current economic violence and social injustice—or the subjective experience of disenfranchisement as key unconscious motivators in the development of political paranoia and has argued that this paranoia ultimately serves to “restore the entire humiliated group’s self regard” (McWilliams, 2010; Robins & Post, 1997, p. 61). Those prone to paranoia are understood to be vulnerable to its sway due to the very fact that they have pre-existing political and psychic vulnerabilities. These experiences of humiliation lay the groundwork for anger, which is further intensified into rage, mutated into aggression, and finds an object through the paranoid and projective processes. In his comprehensive work on the paranoid process, Meissner (1978) argues that

the shift from a level of anger to a level of hostile destructiveness [is] the influence of the paranoid ideation which saw the object of aggression as powerful, destructive, hostile, and capable of coldly and malevolently crushing [the subject]. (pp. 654-55)

It is the anticipation of one’s own victimization—or very often in current political discourse, the experience of oneself as *always already* victimized—that not only gives space for aggression but wholly justifies it. Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) use a metaphor for paranoid aggression that makes this process perfectly clear: “the blind murderer has always seen his victim as a persecutor against whom he must defend himself” (p. 187). In the current political climate, this intersection between paranoia and aggression is perhaps most clearly seen in the growth and

rhetoric of the Tea Party. In fact, the titles of two of the first popular works written about the new populist movement highlight the rage existing within its ranks: *Boiling Mad* and *Mad as Hell* (Zernike, 2010; Rasmussen & Schoen, 2010); rather than being rejected as a pejorative assessment, this label of rage has been embraced by the Tea Party with a resounding, ‘Yes. *We are* mad as hell and we’re not going to take it!’ Throughout the late summer of 2009, right-wing activists disrupted many “health care town hall” meetings throughout in the country, outraged by the proposed reform; reporters for ABC News described the video footage of these protests as showing, “red faced, finger-pointing, hopping-mad people” (Cox & Harry, 2009). Widely circulated video footage of these events showed citizens shouting down representatives, asserting themselves into their personal space, and shaking angry fingers and fists, often to the applause and shouts of fellow protestors (Raju, 2009). In one town hall meeting, a 59 year-old man got within two feet of Senator Arlen Specter, and shouted loudly that the representative was “trampling on the Constitution!” When security came to intervene, the protestor screamed to loud applause, “God is going to stand before you, and he’s going to judge you!” (Urbina & Seelye, 2009).¹²

By March of 2010, the Tea Party’s aggression had increased: official statements and videos showed a Tea Party protestor spitting on Representative Emanuel Cleaver and there were further accusations that racial and sexual epithets were also shouted at black and gay Democratic representatives (Tiron & Burke, 2010; Huffington Post, 2010). A sign during the same period of

¹² Following the Kleinian tradition, Wilfred Bion applied object-relations theory to the functioning of groups and how they manage projection; he identified three primary categories of “basic assumption groups” based upon the underlying emotional state of the group. The categories include the dependency (leader-focused) group, the pairing group (making the messiah or the millennium), and the fight-flight group, under which the Tea Party can clearly be categorized: “the group behaves like a frenzied mob out to destroy the identified enemy” (Robins & Post, p. 84).

protest used police crime scene tape as its border and juxtaposed a photograph of the Capitol building with a picture of a gun; the word “warning” was followed by the sentence, “if a Brown can’t stop it a Browning can,” referencing Republican senator Scott Brown and a Browning firearm (Shakir, 2010). The next month, Democrats condemned “acts of violence” against representatives, including bricks thrown through office windows and a cut gas line in the home of a representative’s family member, whose house was targeted because right-wing activists had posted the incorrect address online (Miller, 2010). Another Democratic representative was threatened when a coffin was left in front of his house and yet another representative was informed that, “snipers were being deployed to kill children of those who voted for health care overhaul” (Sherman, 2010; Martinez & Miller, 2010). The Senate Sergeant-at-Arms went so far as to email all senators and staffers, urging them to “remain vigilant” to ensure their safety (Rucker, 2010).

When a shooter—who has not been connected with the Tea Party or right-wing activism—wounded nineteen people, six of them fatally, during an open meeting held by Arizona Representative Gabrielle Giffords in January, 2011, media discourse highlighted violent political rhetoric as a potential cause. A great deal of focus went to Sarah Palin’s website, which had an image of superimposed simulated gun sights over a map of the United States, targeting districts whose representatives had voted for health care reform and included a phrase reminiscent of John Wayne: “it’s time to take a stand.” While Palin claimed that the symbols were not intended to be gun crosshairs and argued that the focus on political discourse “serves only to incite the very hatred and violence [journalists and pundits] purport to condemn,” Giffords’ office had also been vandalized earlier that year shortly after Palin’s crosshair picture had been posted and she had sent out a Twitter message saying, “don’t retreat, instead RELOAD!” (Huffington Post, 2011; Daily

Mail, 2011). Shortly after this shooting, a poll found that 45% of likely U.S. voters were “at least somewhat concerned” that those who oppose Obama’s policies would “resort to violence” (Rasmussen, 2011). At a town hall meeting in Georgia just over one month after the Arizona shooting, the first question that citizens in attendance posed to Republican Representative Paul Broun was, “who’s going to shoot Obama?” (Aued, 2011).¹³

Cognitive Closures and Wooden Worlds

‘Defensive aggression’ is one of the most visible and problematic sequelae of the paranoid process, but this process is itself steeped in a destructive disconnection, a shift in perception that can range from an overly-rigid, but still functional understanding of the world to a near total disconnection from consensual reality. As previously discussed, research on prejudice and perception has shown that observers’ prejudices distort their perception, leading to the overrepresentation of and overemphasis on data that confirms those prejudices (Jussim & Fleming, 1996). Allport refers to this as “mote-beam projection,” a reference to the biblical parable in which Jesus challenges, “why do you look at the speck of sawdust [mote] in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank [beam] in your own eye?” (Allport, p. 390; Matthew 7:3 New International Version). This reference is particularly descriptive of the distortions of the paranoid process if one sets aside the traditional interpretation of an admonishment against hypocrisy and instead

¹³ A common defense of highly charged or aggressive rhetoric has amounted to little more than a snide, ‘C’mon, can’t you take a joke!’ While the suggestion that this threatening rhetoric is meant as an attempt at humor is quite dubious, but if that were the case it suggests that when humor serves as a veil for underlying aggression it is sometimes a thin veil indeed (Freud, 1905).

understands that, for the observer who has an eye full of plank, the world is made of wood.¹⁴ Meissner describes this perceptual distortion in paranoia as a poverty of complex cognitive categories or schema into which new data can be sorted. He articulates a paranoid propensity toward a motivated “cognitive closure” that causes “truth and meaning [to] tend to accelerate ahead of proof,” with the vivid description of how “the theoretical hare is always ready and willing to outdistance the empirical tortoise” (p. 611). Shapiro (1973) emphasizes that the way in which paranoia distorts one’s understanding of the world not only insofar as it influences what the subject sees everywhere, but also—and as importantly—by what is *not* seen; the author categorizes this unseen aspects of the world as “the obvious, the apparent, the plain face value of things,” contending that it is these very factors that would otherwise “modify and qualify the significance of the [paranoid] indicators themselves” (pp. 64, 65).¹⁵

This *loss of proportion* can be seen in the uproar that erupted over President Obama’s intention to address public school students in 2009. Parents who kept their children at home rather have them go to school and see the 15 minute speech were quoted on the front page of the *New York Times* as saying that “it seemed like a direct channel from the president of the United States into the classroom, to my child” and, “I wouldn’t let my next-door neighbor talk to my kid alone... I’m sure as hell not letting Barack Obama talk to him alone” (McKinley & Dillon, 2009).

¹⁴ If the biblical metaphor were extended to paranoid aggression, one can see a perversion of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as they would do unto you if you didn’t throw the first punch.”

¹⁵ While deficits are exaggerated in the paranoid process, there is no such thing as wholly accurate reality testing. Meissner states, “our cognitive contact with reality is never total, never complete, never without its gaps and lacunae, never grasps totally, without the accompanying processing of input information by a series of cognitive schemata and categories which organize and construct the world of inner meanings” (p. 610).

The Florida Republican chairman Jim Greer released a statement that used the frame of Greer “as a father of four,” stating that he was

absolutely appalled that taxpayer dollars are being used to spread President Obama’s socialist ideology... the idea that school children across our nation will be forced to watch the president justify his plans... is infuriating [and bypasses] American parents through an invasive abuse of power. (Silverleib, 2009, p. 1)

This outrage reveals not only a fearful emphasis on the threatening indicator (Obama) and one’s own vulnerability (‘our children’), but also illustrates the ways in which those facts that might give this threat a sense of proportion—i.e., official releases of the speech that merely encouraged students to work hard and stay in school, as well as precedents such as speeches to school children from both the first President Bush in 1991 and Reagan in 1988—are bypassed entirely.¹⁶ A similar example of a loss of context is found in recent criticisms of Obama for using the term *czar* to describe high-level officials with the accompanying accusation that this language reveals his Socialist leanings; in fact, however, the term *czar* has been used by journalists and media figures as a nickname for officials since the early 1940s and Obama’s predecessor appointed over thirty such czars during his tenure (James, 2009).¹⁷ These distortions in perception are an important part of the paranoid process and serve as a crucial link between paranoia and conspiracy theory, the subject of chapter four.

¹⁶ It is of note that while Obama’s 2009 speech did not mention policy matters even obliquely, Reagan’s 1988 speech to school children informed them that taxes were such “a penalty on people that there’s no incentive for them to prosper” (Silverleib, p. 2).

¹⁷ Of course, George W. Bush’s creation of the “Homeland Security Czar” post is much more linguistically reminiscent of the KGB (Committee for State Security) than Obama’s “green-jobs,” “science” or “health” czars.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conspiracy and Nativism, or Paranoia in Action

My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Conspiracy

The previous chapters have identified projection as the quintessential construct for understanding racism psychodynamically and have continued to its link with paranoia. This chapter will explore further one particular way in which paranoia is manifest politically and culturally. Indeed, while Hofstadter labels the persecutory elements of American political discourse the “paranoid style,” the driving idea in his essay is not paranoia per se, but rather the associated phenomenon of *conspiracy theory*. For the political paranoid, Hofstadter argues, conspiracies aren’t something that have operated “here or there in American history,” but that instead the user of the paranoid style believes in “a ‘vast’ or ‘gigantic’ conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events” (p. 29, italics in original). Although it serves as a quintessential feature of his style, Hofstadter leaves an understanding of the meaning of “conspiracy theory” to his readers. The publication of *Paranoid Style* spawned a variety of academic works on the issue of conspiracy theory and its place within American culture—many written later at the turn of the century—and yet definitions of what the term means vary widely. While a full exploration of the nuances of various understandings of conspiracy theory is beyond the scope of this paper, there are several conceptualizations that are helpful in understanding how and why conspiracy theory functions within the political context.

While Hofstadter is transparent about his use of the term "paranoia" as a pejorative, current literature examining conspiracy theory identifies it as an incredibly common and often legitimate way of understanding the world; in recognition of the ways in which theorizations of conspiracy, cover-up, and propaganda are a central way in which the majority of Americans (at least occasionally) make sense of political realities, this paper follows the lead of scholars such as Peter Knight, Michael Barkun, and Robert Alan Goldberg and use the term without any intentional negative or dismissive connotation. Conspiracy theory can be contrasted with its polar opposite, "contingency theory," which emphasizes the random aspects of historical causality and ultimately suggests that, "chance, accident, and 'screw-ups'... largely determine history" (Willman, 2002, p. 22). As an understanding of how history has been and is being made, conspiracy theories can be seen as serving as "popular explanations of the workings of power, responsibility, and causality in the unfolding of events" (Knight, 2003, p. xi). The most simple definitions attribute to conspirators "deliberate agency," while more nuanced and postmodern understandings of conspiracy theory point to societal issues such as sexism and racism, suggesting that, "certain states of affairs... are not merely the result of chance but are the perhaps unintended consequence of a series of attitudes and ways of behaving that together amount to something that *may as well have been* a conspiracy" (p. 16).¹⁸

Various scholars and authors have pointed to a marked increase in the prevalence of conspiracy theory amongst the American population since the 1960s (Barkun, 2003; Dunn &

¹⁸ Here the influence of the unconscious is paramount and not only in personal but political contexts. Responding to Donald Rumsfeld's assertion in 2003 that 'unknown unknowns' are more dangerous than 'known unknowns' and 'known knowns,' Zizek (2004) argues that the real danger is the unspoken fourth term: "the main dangers are, on the contrary, the 'unknown knowns,' the disavowed beliefs and suppositions we are not even aware of adhering to ourselves" (p. 10)

Redden, 1995; Goldberg, 2001; Kelly, 1995; Knight, 2002 & 2003; Melley, 2000; Pipes, 1997; Polyp, 2011; Robins & Post, 1997; Rogin, 1987; Showalter, 1997; Sommers, 2011; Willman, 2002; Wojcik, 1997). The popularity of conspiracy theory as a commodity is evidenced by the *X-Files* franchise, the films *JFK* (1991) and *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), as well as the fervor over *The Da Vinci Code* (Knight, 2000). In large part this has been correlated with a series of historical events; Goldberg (2003) highlights some of these phenomena in describing how the second half of the twentieth century saw “believers [make] conspiratorial puzzle pieces of Marilyn Monroe, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, Vietnam POWs, the moon landing, Watergate, Bill Clinton, Princess Diana, and Y2K” (p. 9). Other authors cite Nixon’s lists of enemies and the activities of COINTELPRO and American intervention in Latin America as having motivated public skepticism of official stories; incidents like the controversies surrounding assaults by government agencies at Ruby Ridge in 1992 and Waco in 1993 also broadened sympathy for victims and questions about government cover-ups of violent political and social interventions. From this conspiratorial mosaic, Goldberg identifies five “major plot lines” that have dominated conspiracy discourse: the establishment of the New World Order; the assassination of John F. Kennedy; the government cover-up of a UFO crash site in Roswell, New Mexico; the rise of the antichrist; and the “plot against black America” (p. 9). In large part the literature is only now beginning to incorporate conspiracy theories surrounding the attacks of September 11, 2001 and to take into account conspiracy theories that center around skepticism of climate change theories and phenomena (Ahmed, 2002; Marrs, 2006; Walker, 2008; Wright, 2006; Zwicker, 2006).

The increase in conspiracy theory at the turn of the century has also been attributed to “improvised millennialism,” a term Barkun (2003) uses to denote a style of eschatological interest

that is no longer rooted in “some well-defined set of ideas, whether grounded in sacred texts, political ideologies, or philosophical teachings,” but is instead grounded in a “relentless and seemingly indiscriminate borrowing” (p. 18). This conceptualization has been supported after its publication by increasing interest in the year 2012, which some are anticipating as either a period of apocalyptic destruction or a world-altering shift in consciousness based on fringe reconstructions of Mayan calendars and futurology, paired with a pastiche of New Ages ideas and various pseudoscientific concerns such as geomagnetic pole reversal, super volcanoes, and astrological alignments, with some also arguing that cataclysmic events in 2012 will center around a long-awaited alien invasion. Other academics have focused on the ways in which the widespread availability of untested information online—and the ability to find communities of other citizens to share information and ideas with—has contributed to an acceleration in the spread of conspiracy theories (Coale, 2004; Parish, 2001), which is indeed an important factor in the set of conspiracy theories explored below.

Within this context of ever-broadening conspiratorial discourse, it is important to return to the crucial function that conspiracy theories can serve for both individuals and groups. Just as political paranoia can reestablish the self regard of a disenfranchised group, at its best, conspiracy theory has been described as giving “hope, unity, and purpose that often seems beyond the reach of the powerless (Goldberg, 2001, p. 260); this is a function that can easily be overlooked, especially in the face of arguments that are outlandish and purported outcomes that readily lend themselves to CGI-laden summer blockbuster films. At the same time, this sense of unity that this way of thinking provides often has a problematic underbelly, as suggested by Freud’s oft-quoted description of the development of group aggression: “it is always possible to bind together a

considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness (1962, p. 72). Indeed, even when conspiracy theory is not dismissed as specious political rhetoric, as an outgrowth of the projective and paranoid processes it can be understood as an attempt to “delineate and explain evil,” but one that always ensures that “the locus of evil lies outside the true community in some Other, defined as foreigner or barbarian, though often... disguised as innocent and upright” (Barkun, p. 3; Wojcik, 2007).

Aliens, from Roswell to the Oval Office

“It’s been quite a year... lots of ups, lots of downs, except for my approval ratings, which have just gone down. But that’s politics. It doesn’t bother me. Besides, I happen to know that my approval ratings are still very high in the country of my birth.” – President Barack Obama, May 2010 (Simmons, 2010)

Just as the Tea Party served as a clear example of paranoid defensive aggression, the movement is also associated with a contemporary set of conspiracy theories that exemplify this function of locating evil outside the “true community,” attempting to prove that the perceived threat is coming from a literal “foreigner.” Individuals who believe that Barack Obama was not born in the United States—and thus not eligible for the presidency—are often called “birthers” in the media, a term that plays upon the moniker “truthers,” which has been used to describe adherents to a number of conspiracy theories surrounding the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. (Polyp, 2011, Sommers, 2011). Certainly not all adherents to the Tea Party ideology have “birther” beliefs and not all who deny Obama’s American citizenship are aligned with the specifics of the Tea Party platform, and yet the overlap between the two constituencies appears to be extensive. Beyond the merger of these two loosely defined groups in media discourse, the two

factions are generally aligned politically in a broad sense, and the Tea Party seems to make use of the rhetoric and effects of the birther argument to buttress its own ethos, even when not explicitly endorsing its claims.

There are several arguments for why Obama is not a U.S. citizen; they are relatively wide-ranging and often mutually exclusive. As examined, the spectral presence of “Barry Soetoro” has emerged as an attempt to ‘re-other’ Obama, bringing with him purported evidence for these theories that ranges from grade school registration paperwork and applications for financial aid in college to copies of his Kenyan birth certificate and analysis proving that his U.S. birth certificate is a forgery (Mikkelson, 2009, August 3; 2009, September 16; 2009, September 17). For many inclined to doubt Obama’s citizenship, the type of birth certificate he has provided—more specifically the ‘long-form’ type that he has *not* provided—serves as evidence that he’s hiding something, which for some is proof enough. The conspiratorial elements of the birther argument are often implicit, focusing more on Obama as an imposter and a liar than on the networks of complicity and deception that would be required to secure the presidency as a non-citizen, but elements of conspiracy proper reveal themselves more fully in the figure of Jay McKinnon, the previously mentioned document specialist who was trained by Homeland Security and who has admitted to forging the birth certificate that was then made available on the Obama campaign’s website (Miller, 2009). One argument against his citizenship relies on a detailed analysis of the constitutional requirements for natural-born citizenship and argues that Barack Obama’s mother—the sole parent who was a U.S. citizen—was too young when he was born for him to qualify as ‘natural-born’ (Mikkelson, 2008). Another details how, in claiming Indonesian citizenship in his teens, Obama *ipso facto* renounced his U.S. citizenship permanently (Mikkelson, 2009, September

17); other theories argue that Obama's dual citizenship (for some American and Kenyan, for others, American and Indonesian) was not recognized by the foreign country of his immigration and as such had to have abandoned his U.S. citizenship in order to be a citizen there (Miller, 2008). The promulgation of images of Obama's Kenyan birth certificate requires little foray into international or constitutional law by showing that he was not born in the United States in a straightforward manner (Mikkelsen, 2009, September 16). Another fleeting argument against Obama's citizenship was that when he was born in 1961, Hawaii was not yet a state and as such Obama cannot be a citizen.

Through a variety of means, these arguments have been easily refuted and the evidence on which they are based has been rejected and very often ridiculed. Indeed, the birther arguments have been seen as irrelevant at best and annoying at worst by a wide range of interested parties, from Hawaii's Department of Health to the press aides of the Obama White House (Smith, 2010).¹⁹ Generally, birther arguments have only really been taken seriously by those who *already* believe them; these true believers have themselves been widely dismissed as mentally ill or pathologically racist, and characterized as a "dumb group of internet psychos" (Pareene, 2009). While it is reasonable and responsible to weigh the merits of the birthers' claims, the focus on refuting the details and making factual correction exemplified Knight's observation that "dismissals of the 'epidemic of paranoia' seek not merely to condemn but also to refute and correct in order to cure the disease" (2000, p. 9). This goal to stop the 'birther talk' (Governor

¹⁹ A more notable exception to this generalization is social critic and registered Democrat, Camille Paglia, who has written on Salon.com as well as stated in an NPR interview that the birthers' have been incorrectly labeled as racists and that "there are legitimate questions about the documentation of Obama's birth certificate" (Weigel, 2009).

Abercrombie’s “end this nonsense”) not only lends legitimacy to the arguments by keeping discussion of Obama’s birth certificate on American’s television and computer screens, but also reifies the very sense of an “us” and a “them” that makes the birthers’ stance so problematic in the first place.

Perhaps more importantly, this strategy also leaves unchallenged the underlying conspiracy zeitgeist, as evidenced by counter conspiracy theories that argue that the Tea Party is *not* the grassroots movement it claims to be, but is *really* a heavily-funded mouthpiece for a small group of conservative organizations—with keen attention being paid to FreedomWorks and its founders—who all publicly deny their involvement. From Nancy Pelosi’s infamous dismissal of the Tea Party as “Astroturf,” to exposés in *The New Yorker*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Atlantic Monthly* complete with photographs of shadowy, ominous figures, refutations of birther arguments as conspiracy theories (in the most pejorative, ‘you are crazy’ sense) also leave room for the assertion of counter conspiracy theories (in the ‘objective and rational’ sense) (Mayer, 2010; Dickinson, 2009; Good, 2010). Citing current studies of the discrepancy between the use of conspiracy theory and our understanding of it as such, Harper points out:

When someone enunciates a conspiratorial account with which we disagree, labelling them as paranoid and calling their beliefs “conspiracy theories” is an option. However, when “we” adopt conspiratorial accounts we, of course, see ourselves as knowing what is really going on... (p. 9)

In relation to current conspiratorial thinking on the political right, American liberals often view their own conspiratorial understanding of that thinking as wholly legitimate and untainted by the workings of projection and political paranoia.

This focus on disproving birther theories also undermines a full appreciation for the informal and often interpersonal quality of their development. While skepticism about Obama's citizenship has reached the level of national discourse, its beginnings can be traced back to very informal and local sources with the intersection of in-person and online rumors about Obama found in barbershops and mass-forward emails, toward the end of the 2008 presidential primaries.²⁰ In late June of that year, the *St. Petersburg Times*, which won a Pulitzer for its coverage of the 2008 elections, issued a fact checking report that described the growth of these rumors thusly: "It started as a whisper, a trickle of nagging doubt... Soon, e-mails and blog posts were flying. As the pace quickened, the tone sharpened... At full throttle, the accusations are explosive and unrelenting..." (Hollyfield, p. 1). As these isolated rumors began to increase in both their speed and their intensity, they began to coalesce into more cohesive conspiracy theories and counter-narratives. The same week that the aforementioned fact-checking report was released, the *Washington Post* published an article that examined some of these rumors and the confusion they were causing for a voter in a small Midwestern town, where "false rumors about Obama have built enough word-of-mouth credibility to harden into an alternative biography" (Saslow, p. 1).

The origins of these rumors and the sources used by birther conspiracy theorists are often the very grounds on which they are summarily dismissed, but it also of note that it is precisely the questionable nature of these sources that links the Tea Party into the vast catalog of conspiracy

²⁰ Due to the nature of these sources, attempting to track down original postings of these rumors is nearly impossible. Several of these early emails are catalogued and can be found through the Urban Legend Reference Pages, a website that was created fifteen years ago to explore urban legends, forwarded emails, and internet-based rumors. Popularly known by its URL, "Snopes.com," the website receives over 300,000 hits per day and its unbiased treatment of the rumors it explores has been confirmed by FactCheck.org, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Pogue, p. 1; Novak).

theories. Barkun describes conspiracy theories as relying upon what he calls “stigmatized knowledge,” or sources that have been forgotten, superseded, ignored, rejected, or—most importantly—suppressed (p. 23). Not only do the cognitive closures associated with paranoia distort the importance and reliability of certain kinds of information, the very logic of conspiracy theory suggests that the very stigmatization and suppression of information or evidence is *a part of the same conspiracy*. Conspiracy theorists presume that “when their own ideas about knowledge conflicts with some orthodoxy, the forces of orthodoxy will necessarily try to perpetuate error out of self-interest or some other evil emotive” (Barkun, p. 27). There has been a related kind of self-fulfilling prophesy for the “birthers,” whose push for transparency and evidence of Obama’s American birth has been met with the legal restriction of such information.

On May 12th, 2010, Hawaii’s governor signed into law an exemption to the state’s statues pertaining to the disclosure of government records. “Act 100,” which passed the state senate unanimously and the house of representatives by a large margin, allows government agencies to deny “vexatious” requests for information, specifically duplicate requests for the same piece of information submitted by the same individual (Act 100, 2010). While the law applies to all agencies, it specifically targets “people who repeatedly request a copy of Obama’s birth certificate”; according to testimony from the director of Hawaii’s Department of Health, “the time and state resources it takes to respond to these often convoluted inquiries are considerable (Haq, 2010). The Department had attempted to preempt some of these inquiries by launching a website to answer the “frequently asked questions related to... the vital records of President Barack Hussein Obama II” and to provide to all visitors frequently requested documents and information that the state was legally compelled to provide (Hawaii State Department of Health, 2010). The website has been

updated to reflect Act 100, indicating that the Department is under no legal obligation to respond to requests for information related to the certification of Obama's birth.

There is a temptation to dismiss the proponents of birther arguments in the same breath as refuting the arguments themselves. Indeed, a common response is not only to pathologize "birthers" ("reactionary racists"), but also to highlight their marginality ("a fringe group"). However, such an assessment rests upon an assumption that those who are the most vocal are the only individuals who hold doubts or suspicions about Obama's citizenship; unfortunately, this faulty assumption perpetuates a skewed sense of the beliefs of the American population. In August of 2010, CNN released the results of an opinion poll on the topic of Obama's citizenship. Less than half of those interviewed believed that Obama was "definitely" born in the United States, with twenty-seven percent believing that he was either "probably" or "definitely" born in another country. While these beliefs were correlated with political affiliation, less than a full two-thirds of those identifying themselves as Democrats believed that Obama was "definitely" born in the United States (CNN Opinion Research Corporation, p. 2).

There is certainly a possibility that many of those who responded that Obama was "probably" born in the United States did so out of a sort of rational agnosticism: "Well, I suppose I don't *know for sure*." In a sense this type of epistemological skepticism may well be one of many indicators that conspiracy theory—as will be explored below—has become incorporated into mainstream political thinking in what Knight (2000) considers the shift from "plausible deniability" (knowledge of the 'dirty work' is kept below a certain pay-grade so the higher-ups can plead ignorance and the conspiracy can continue) to the "undeniable plausibility" that conspiracies may well be at work in current political and social events based upon the fact that they have been

in the past (p. 24). After all, the events in Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 may not have been related to extra-terrestrial spacecrafts, but it is now an admitted fact that the government's original narrative of a 'downed weather balloon' was indeed a cover-up (of secret high-altitude spy planes) and that agencies including the CIA and NSA were instructed to perpetuate this smokescreen (p. 26). Still, well before this information was finally released, the American public doubted the government's story: within months of the first modern UFO sighting, 90% of Americans had heard of UFOs—and within less than a decade a full 46% of Americans believed in UFOs (Barkun, p. 80). Is it surprising, then, that over half a century later, with the revelation of many government cover-ups that so many Americans think it plausible that there is an alien in the Oval Office?²¹

Certainly there is the possibility that the ubiquity of questions surrounding Obama's citizenship is based on the thrill of sensationalism and a general distrust of official stories that has little to do with Obama's race. However, an understanding of conspiracy theory as correlative with political paranoia suggests that the frenzy over Obama's citizenship has much more to do with race—with the otherness of the terrestrial alien. It is in this way that the Tea Party is connected with a long history of groups whose conspiratorial mindset is connected to a paranoid rhetoric that is inextricably infused with issues of race.

²¹ The alien invasion is seen manifest in one often emailed rumor in late 2010 that showed a photograph of Obama speaking in the White House and suggested that changes to décor are evidence that, as promised, Obama has changed America: "The Oval Office is now stripped of the traditional red, white, and blue, and replaced with middle eastern wallpaper, drapes, and decor. The hallway that he walks out of to talk to the press now has middle eastern chairs, drapes, etc... the bright yellow drape behind him every time he speaks from the white house [has] Arabic symbols on it and has been there from the beginning" (Mikkelson, 2010, August 3).

Going Nativist

In their employment of a diffuse notion of ‘birther’ conspiracy to both explain Obama’s presidency and to undermine his legitimacy, the Tea Party takes its place in a long line of conspiracy theorists that reaches back to the country’s founding. Indeed, Melley (2000) describes how conspiracy theory has “animated our popular culture from the Republican period to the present, at times swaying popular influence,” suggesting that it has become a fundamental part of American politics, serving as a paranoid symptom of “a more pervasive anxiety about social control” (p. vii). Similarly, Knight (2000) describes a “remarkable continuity in the discourse of American conspiracy over the centuries,” although, as previously mentioned, he notes important shifts in the nature of American conspiracy theory culture in the last half century that will be explored later (p. 23).

One striking aspect of this American conspiratorial history is the frequent and pervasive incorporation of race as a key component of the object of paranoid fear and aggression. Especially when tied to issues of immigration—as in Nativist movements—this paranoid conspiracy theorizing suggests that beyond Melley’s proposal of anxiety about social control there is a fear of invasion at the root of these beliefs, a fear of being *infested* by the racial other. This fear has also been present historically in American Populist movements that pit the ‘normal, average American’ against the threats of both government elites and those American citizens who fall outside of the obliquely defined ‘normal’ criterion. The intersections of conspiratorial paranoia and racial xenophobia have been most overt in movements like the Know-Nothing party of mid-1800s and the (second two incarnations of the) Ku Klux Klan, a group that has been characterized in the popular imagination by its white supremacist ideologies and terroristic strategies, but one that was also

heavily tied to Populist and Nativist frameworks, that was engaged in legitimate political tactics as well, and that has been estimated to have comprised up to approximately 14% of the eligible American population in the mid 1920s (Jackson, 1992). While less crudely manifest, this racial and ‘othering’ dynamic was also infused in the political paranoia of movements that have proclaimed themselves to be ‘race-neutral,’ like the John Birch Society, which opposed the Civil Right Movement of the 1960s out of a concern about Communist involvement in the movement rather than out of explicitly racist reasoning.

Because of their dependency upon conspiratorial thinking, their use of paranoid aggression, and their utilization of race within a populist/Nativist paradigm, the Tea Party has been linked with these earlier American movements in a wide range of publications, from *Newsweek* to *Perspectives on Global Development & Technology* (Bertlet, 2011; Drum, 2010; Fineman, 2010; Frank, 2009; Fraser & Freeman, 2010; Jonsson, 2010; Mayer, 2010; McGrath, 2010; Wickham 2010; Wilentz, 2010). The connection between paranoid affect, politics, and concern over ‘the other’ is clear in Fineman’s summation of the Tea Party: “this is the Populism of the right, 2010. Like earlier versions, it is angry, fearful, worried about losing ground to ‘Them.’ And, in the eyes of the right, President Barack Obama is chief executive of ‘Them’” (p. 1). A great deal of Tea Party rhetoric clearly comes from a populist ideology with key examples being the preference given to “mavericks” over “Washington insiders” and the elevation of “Joe the Plumber” to a figure who served as a folk hero during the 2008 presidential campaign. Beyond obvious questions like ‘are the Tea Partiers racists?’ and ‘is this anti-Obama stuff just because he’s

black?’ the racial and demographic politics of the Tea Party has been academically and journalistically linked with these earlier movements.²²

“But is the Tea Party *racist*?”

The Tea Party’s racial rhetoric has generally been more subdued than it was in previous movements because of the injunction against certain kinds of racism that is a party of the hegemonic white Cultural Ego.²³ Still, according to the *New York Amsterdam News*, an African American newspaper that has run continuously for over a century, as of fall 2010 the Tea Party’s growth was greatest “particularly in chapters that have produced some of the more extreme and racially tinged acts” (Jealous, p. 18). According to a report from the Southern Poverty Law Center, “racist individuals and groups have been drawn to the movement from the beginning; in most cases, they are forced out of their respective groups only when their beliefs and associations result in bad press (Zaitchik, 2010). It is not surprising that members of the Tea Party are quick to deny this racist aspect of their movement. In an April 2010 *Newsweek* story, the founder of a Floridian Tea Party group was clear in her assertion that “Nobody in the Tea Party movement that I know is a racist.” Another supporter—who suspects that Obama is not only a foreigner, but also Muslim—

²² Of course, there are certainly other similarities, as well, not all of which will be explored within this paper. Of note, however, is the argument that just as the Know Nothing party’s alliance with the Democrats in the late 1800s weakened the inertia of that movement, so the Tea Party’s incorporation into the Republican party may well undermine its growth and success (Jonsson, p. 2).

²³ Of course, the appropriation of the Boston Tea Party as the central image of this modern Nativist movement references back to that scene of the Sons of Liberty in 1773: middle-class White proto-Americans made up as Mohawk indigenous people, wearing as a costume the very people into which they had projected their own ‘uncivilized traits’. While this colonial exhibition of blackface may have been a precipitating factor in the Revolutionary War, the Mohawk themselves were forced into reservations in 1783, as soon as the war was over (Snow, 1994).

put the onus of the racism question on media representation of the movement: “It really makes me mad... They have tried to portray us as a bunch of radical extremists.” (Campo-Flores, p. 2). In contrast with these claims, however, the article also reports on the findings of a survey by the University of Washington Institute for the Study of Ethnicity, Race & Sexuality that suggest that Tea Party supporters are twenty-five percent more likely to be “racially resentful” than those who do not support the movement (p. 1). Indeed the research in question suggest that the population that supports the Tea Party is less likely to believe blacks to be hard-working, intelligent, and trustworthy than those Americans who do not support the Tea Party (University of Washington, 2010).²⁴ Tea Party supporters were also more likely than non-supporters to “strongly approve” of Arizona SB 1070—the strictest anti-immigration bill passed in generations which requires racial profiling—by a full thirty-six percent (Garber, p. 1; Archibold, p. A1). According to Christopher Parker the professor of Social Justice and Political Science who led this research, “People who approve of the Tea Party, more than those who don’t approve, have more racist attitudes” (*Newsweek*, 2010).²⁵

Of course, religion has historically played an important role in nativist/populist movements. The Know Nothings, for example, adhered more to a stated anti-Catholic platform than an explicitly racist one. Nonetheless, the immigrating Catholics during that period of history

²⁴ Only 35% of Tea Party supporters believed blacks to be hard working, as opposed to 55% of non-supporters. Tea Partiers were less likely to find blacks intelligent and trustworthy (by 14 and 16 percent, respectively) than were Tea Party skeptics (University of Washington, 2010).

²⁵ As Parker himself notes, Tea Party prejudices are not limited to issues of race. Only eighteen percent of Tea Party supporters believe that gay and lesbian couple should have the legal right to marry and slightly more than half also agreed that “compared to the size of their group, lesbians and gays have too much political power” (Siegel, 2010).

were predominantly from Ireland and Germany, ethnicities that had not yet been folded into whiteness (Ignatiev, 1995); the fight against Catholicism was *ipso facto* a racial one. The focus on religion was not so much a ‘cover’ for race, but a linguistic displacement based upon a perceived categorical merger. This same process is apparent in the contemporary American equation of Muslims with Arabs, a group that is currently categorized as ‘white,’ but is too marked to have been absorbed into Whiteness. The vitriolic assault against Islam now is no less aggressive and fantastic than the earlier characterization of the Catholic Church as fulfilling the role of the “Whore of Babylon” described in the biblical book of Revelation (Barkun, 2003). As a part of this tradition, the rhetoric of the Tea Party has consistently asserted that Obama is a Muslim and has been relatively successful in spreading concern that this supposed religious affiliation is necessarily a liability for America. According to the results of a survey released in the late summer of 2010, a full 18% of U.S. citizens believe that Obama is “secretly a Muslim” (McGreal, 2010); the meaning of this assertion is given meaning when juxtaposed with another poll that found that a quarter of Americans believe that “Muslim citizens are not patriotic Americans” (Time, 2010). Even with Islam taken out of the equation, nearly half of all Americans question Obama’s “claim” that he is a Christian (Pew Research, 2010).

While fear of being invaded or infested is certainly the paranoid aftermath of projection, that doesn’t mean that the Nativist outcry is in response to imaginary demographic shifts. Indeed, the birth rate for American women of color is on the verge of surpassing that of white American women and by 2050 it is estimated that nearly 20% of Americans will be first generation immigrants (Roberts, 2010; Pew Research, 2008). While this may seem catastrophic to the Tea Party, Americans who interpret these shifts positively also see it as an important change. It is

important to recognize, however, that anticipation of these kinds of shifts in population is neither new nor novel. As a nation of immigrants, America has been obsessed with immigration restriction since it was a loose affiliation of British colonies. Benjamin Franklin warned, in 1751, that Pennsylvania was becoming “a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion” (Schrag, p. 3).

From Right to Center

Fraser and Freeman (2010) state clearly that the rise of the Tea Party movement “reminds us that the moral self-righteousness, sense of dispossession, anti-elitism, revanchist patriotism, racial purity, and ‘Don’t Treat on Me’ militancy that were always at least a part of the populist admixture are alive and well” (p. 5); and yet the established link between this modern movement and the paranoid, populist groups of the past should not encroach upon the reality that significant differences suggest an important shift in how these movements function and view themselves. While earlier populist movements oscillated between a nostalgia for the (oft imaginary) past and a transformation of the culture and the nation, the last half century of conservative movements have pointed toward a trajectory that is “ever more restorationist and ever less transformative, ever more anti-collectivist and ever less anti-capitalist” (p. 3). This is about reclamation now, “taking back” America. As it becomes clear *whom* the country is being taken back from, it seems apparent that *when* the country is being taken back to is some time before the Civil Rights era.

Nativism is no longer a minority movement, but reflects a trend along nearly the whole of the right side of the Congressional aisle. The results of an April 2010 poll found that 28% of U.S.

adults identified themselves as supporters of the Tea Party movement. While the Tea Party may well attract ‘fringe’ racists, Tea Party demographics tend to generally reflect the nation at large (Saad, 2010). While photographs from protests often feature supporters who may well be read as working class or appear to be ‘outside the mainstream’ in some way, Tea Party supporters are actually wealthier than the general population (Zernike & Thee-Brenan, 2010). Taken as a whole, the Tea Party appears as “a kind of identity politics of the right” (Fraser & Freeman, p. 5).²⁶

These shifts in populism/nativism from the minority to the mainstream reflect the changes in conspiracy theory that have been noted above. The recognition of paranoid conspiracy as “undeniable plausibility” has been driven by conspiracy as a way of both explaining politics and operating in politics, leading to what can be understood as an American “conspiracy culture” (Knight, 2000, p. 3). In 1995, Michael Kelly suggested that the paranoid ethos “anti-establishmentarian protest, the politics of rage—has become so deeply ingrained in the larger political culture that the paranoid style has become the cohering idea of a broad coalition of plurality that draws adherents from every point on the political spectrum” (p. 64). Still, Kelly argues that “in its extreme forms, paranoia is still the province of minority movements” (p. 62); while Kelly is unclear in his meaning of ‘extreme form,’ the intervening time between his writing and the current political context has seen not only a major terrorist assault on U.S. soil, but two long, subsequent wars and other military actions. American flags have waved consistently for the

²⁶ Thomas Frank notes that despite political and economic clout, “the conservatives’ sense of their own exclusion is fundamental” and, when necessary, maintain the rhetoric of disenfranchisement by arguing that those “Republicans who held those high positions in Washington *haven’t been conservatives at all*” (pp. 6 & 9).

last decade and “support our troops” bumper stickers have found their way onto cars belonging to individuals from all sides of the political spectrum. There is reason to believe that in the period immediately preceding Obama’s presidency, even the more extreme forms of paranoia have moved toward the center.

As paranoia and populism merge more fully and have become more common, the focus of discourse becomes more sharply pointed at ‘the other,’ and yet there is a way in which this focus on *them* is also a story that tells *us* who *we* are. “Fears of un-American subversion,” argues Knight, “have played a central role in defining who or what is to count as properly ‘American’” (2002, p. 4). Davis (1971) adds that “movements of countersubversion have thus been a primary means of restoring collective self-confidence, of defining American identity by contrast with alien ‘others,’ and of achieving unity through opposition to a common enemy” (p. 362). Similarly, Coale (2005) argues that throughout American history, “our sense of a national identity has often been based on demonizing others, viewing ourselves in confrontation with ‘aliens’ and subversive ‘outsiders,’ whether religious, racial, or otherwise” (p. 16). While this final assertion follows many other theorists and scholars in understanding paranoia, populism, and conspiracy theory as defining “us” by fighting “them,” the suggestion that this “other” takes “religious, racial, or otherwise” forms sidesteps the importance of race in the very formation, constitution, and maintenance of American identity. Knight (2002) argues, “from the first encounters with the land and the people of the New World, the conspiratorial imagination of sinister forces has helped to constitute a sense of American national unity through a notion of *racial* identity” (p. 4, italics in original). Cornel West (2004) also highlights the necessity of understanding this historical reality if we are to take seriously any discussion of democracy:

The most painful truth in the making of America... is that *the enslavement of Africans and the imperial expansion over indigenous peoples and their lands were undeniable preconditions for the possibility of American democracy*. There could be no such thing as an experiment in American democracy without these racist and imperial foundations. (p. 45, italics in original)

The ways in which *they* define *us* is central to the processes of projection and paranoia as seen through conspiracy theory and populism/Nativism, but the racial dynamic of *them* cannot be underestimated in the ways that America has been constructed and reinforced as a White nation, one that sees itself only as a nation (and often as *the* nation), colorblind to itself. The temptation to attribute this primacy of Whiteness in an understanding of America's essence to white supremacists must be countered with the recognition that across the political spectrum, the Whiteness of America itself, like the whiteness of bodies fades out of sight in the gaze of the hegemonic white cultural ego. There have been many claims that the Tea Party is a racist group and as many counter claims that it is not; few people have paused to state the obvious, but hidden, the undeniable truth that the Tea Party is a *White* movement speaking on behalf of a *White* nation.

CHAPTER SIX

Historical and Psychic Reality of America as White

Identities, White and American

There is risk inherent in describing America as a White nation, of course: to label the country racially, to categorize it in this way makes invisible over one-third of the population who do not identify as white (Humes, et al., 2011, p. 4).²⁷ There is an ethical danger of theorizing people of color out of existence. This dilemma begs the nature of identity, a concept that excludes as much of the subject in question as it highlights. Identity and "the self" have been the object of inquiry and exploration for nearly every school of psychology, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics; a broad continuum of understandings range from the *essence* of the ancient Greeks to the social constructivist stance embodied in Foucault's assertion that the self is a fiction that is always being defined through continuous discourse. The impact of identity politics has also driven a variety of theorizations of the developmental process of racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender identity.

Freud's notion of identity rests in large part on the role of the subject's identification with others, most notably parental figures, as well as objects that have been lost (Freud, 2000; Freud,

²⁷ According to the Census bureau, 72.4% of the American population identifies itself as "white alone," but this number includes those who identify themselves as "white Hispanic and Latino Americans"; identifying this portion of the "white" population as such may fall in line with some contemporary constructions of racial categorization, but the in the very act of subcategorizing this part of the population is necessarily marked, which is to say not White.

1955a). Following Freud, Kleinian object relations sees identity becomes constituted in part through the 'introjection'—the taking in—of others and in the very building of this identity a power dynamic between the self and the other is established (Goldstein, p. 57; Norton, 1988, p. 179).

Stephen Frosh (2002), in his work to understand how psychodynamic theories explain the development and functioning of the self, recognizes that many theories “give primacy to the notion of the other, as formative of the self” (p. 393). For Lichtenstein (2003), this experience of difference that constitutes the self puts, in that same formative moment, the self in jeopardy:

for the infant, the not-I is the receptacle for all that is bad. The origin of the *other* as not only radically different but inherently threatening is in this split between the I and the not-I and the assignment of destructive potential to the latter. (p. 314)

White racial identity development and maintenance plays out this psychic dynamic continuously in defining the *I* against the *not-I*, the *White* against the *not-White*. “Most White people,” Harlon Dalton observes, “tend not to think of themselves in racial terms. They know they are White, of course, but mostly that translates into being not Black, not Asian-American, and not Native-American” (p. 15). The truth of this understanding of Whiteness is an underwhelming experience of the white person’s own race—and the race of other Whites—as being invisible, blank, simply not there. White writer Richard Dyer (1997) conveys the disembodied reality of White racial identity in a wonderfully incisive way: “other people are raced, we are just people” (p. 1). For White people, White is neutral: White is not there. The neutrality of whiteness is an essential component of understanding America as a White nation, not because contemporary discourse acknowledges the whiteness of America, but precisely because it doesn’t.

'American' in the *not-I* of the beholder

The developmental history of America is predicated on this White neutrality, with the exceptions being periods in which Whiteness becomes visible only in contrast to non-Whites being inferior—for this is the true subject matter of 'white supremacy'—and only then for immediate gain. There is the retroactive attribution of stupidity and laziness to Africans in order to harness the economic windfall of vile oppression and the constitution of indigenous peoples as "savage" in order to push the national boundaries and bounties further through genocide and manifest destiny. Although touted as a 'nation of immigrants,' America's immigration regulations and statutes have endeavored to make sure that those who become American were White (Ngai, 2004). Genova (2008) highlights that this regulating of who is American began at the very outset of the Union: "In what was the first legislative determination of access to U.S. citizenship, and, in effect, the first official definition of U.S. nationality, the first Congress of the United States mandated in the Naturalization Act of 1790 that a person who was to become a naturalized citizen must be "white". (153) This whites-only policy remained in effect for over 160 years. Though the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 focused on what was termed "porous borders," it seems unlikely that any influx of White Canadians would result in the fervent rhetoric and aggression around the Mexican border (Tichenor & Lee, 2008). In an unintentional, but direct reference to the racism inherent in the founding of and the understanding of America as white, the two most well-known, extremist activist groups that work directly to prevent Mexican citizens from crossing the border into White America call themselves the "Minutemen." The point is not that America is a racist nation, but rather that it is a nation defined by the maintenance of its own White identity. In the last fifteen years even the Republican Right's "Contract with America" has

become the Tea Party's populist "Contract *from* America," created by real Americans, White Americans, or as the organizer of the of the document has suggested, "from the bottom up" (Becker, 2010).

Preaching and Politics

What does it mean for a black man to be the leader of a White nation? Is it even possible for the *I* to be represented throughout the world by the figure of the *not-I*? Can a black man serve as the father-figure for a White nation? For many Americans, the answer seems to be a simple 'No'. Of course, that denial cannot remain so simple: Barack Obama is the president of the United States. And yet, he cannot be. Fantasy comes in to fill the cracks in the form of birther conspiracy theories, fuelled by paranoia, guided by projection. The aggression of the Tea Party's racial rhetoric is tied in with what can often be categorized as truly outlandish claims about Obama's lack of American citizenship and how that came to be. The fantasy doesn't hold together, doesn't stand up to rationality, but it doesn't need to; the purpose that this fantasy serves is the unconscious covering of the second term, of the very fact that a White nation cannot have a black president. There is a black president. There cannot be a black president. There is not a black president.

During the 2009 presidential campaign, controversy arose over the figure of Jeremiah Wright, the minister at Obama's church, whose impassioned sound-clips were scrutinized at length. "The government... wants us to sing 'God Bless America'," Wright preached, "Naw, naw, naw. Not God Bless America. God Damn America!" (Wright, 2003). So perfectly did Reverend Wright's 'racist, un-American' words reinforce and justify white Americans' fear about the consequences of an Obama presidency that if he had not been there to espouse such violent,

shocking messages, he would have had to be invented. And, in a sense, he was. Decontextualized, stripped of meaning and frame, Wright's sermons were edited down, ruthlessly cleaving away his message—the reminder of God's love in the face of oppression, the exhortation to trust God rather than nation—and then broadcast on televisions across the country. The Reverend Wright that was presented to America in 2008 was indeed invented, like Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, like Department of Agriculture state director Shirley Sherrod, like President Barack Obama himself. The president's speech about race in America—"A More Perfect Union"—was also shown on screens around the country after he delivered it in 2008 as a response to the controversy surrounding Reverend Wright. Wright, Obama argued, had a "distorted view of this country: a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America" (Obama, 2008). Considering the ways in which America itself—what's wrong and what's right—has been from the beginning and throughout its development based in a white identity and seeing the aggressive response to Obama's presidency as a challenge to that identity, the question of whether or not racism is endemic in America must be superseded by the question of whether racism has been and continues to be not only necessary for America, but the continuously repeating founding event without which America could not be.

The title of Julius Lester's 1968 book still captures the essence of the American fear of the other: *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!* Lester rebukes liberal America, the politics of speaking of the need for racial equality that comes with the inability to *listen* to the need for racial equality. "If anyone wonders why the anger of blacks is so often turned upon the white liberal," Lester writes, "it is because, while professing to be a friend, the white liberal has generally turned out to be more white than liberal whenever blacks assert themselves. Whites can never

conceive of blacks leading and whites following” (p. 53). Over forty years later, a black man is the leader of a White nation and the question of whether or not this is even conceivable is still up for grabs. What would it mean for Whites, for Americans as it were, to follow the lead of a black man? What would it mean to allow black leaders to speak, without political redaction for the sake of 24-hour newscycle fodder? What would it mean to simply listen?

Perhaps we can start with Wright:

This government lied about their belief that all men were created equal. The truth is they believed that all white men were created equal. The truth is they did not even believe that white women were created equal, in creation nor civilization...Prior to Abraham Lincoln, the government in this country said it was legal to hold African in slavery in perpetuity... Prior to the passing of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution, government defined African as slaves, as property. Property: people with no rights to be respected by any whites anywhere...

And the United States of America government, when it came to treating her citizens of Indian descent, she failed. She put them on reservations... When it came to putting her citizens of Japanese descent fairly, she failed. She put them in interment prison camps...

When it came to putting the citizens of African descent fairly, America failed. She put them in chains. The government put them on slave quarters. Put them on auction blocks. Put them in cotton fields. Put them in inferior schools. Put them in substandard housing. Put them in scientific experiments. Put them in the lower paying jobs. Put them outside the equal protection of the law. Kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education, and locked them into positions of hopelessness and helplessness.

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three strike law and then wants us to sing God Bless America. Naw, naw, naw. Not God Bless America. God Damn America! That's in the Bible. For killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating us citizens as less than human. God Damn America as long as she tries to act like she is God and she is Supreme...

The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent. Think about this. Think about this. For every one Oprah, a billionaire, you've got 5 million blacks that are out of work. For every one Colin Powell, a millionaire, you've got 10 million blacks who cannot read. For every one [Condoleezza] Rice, you've got 1 million

in prison. For every one Tiger Woods... playing on a course that discriminates against women...for every one Tiger Woods, we've got 10,000 black kids who will never see a golf course. The United States government has failed the vast majority of her citizens of African descent. (Wright, 2003)

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

'Let's pretend we're there and now let's apply these rules as a means of getting there.' I don't think you get there that way. You know, the basic structure of liberalism thinks so, and I think it's wrong... I think lying about reality is a lot riskier than fighting it by calling it what it is. You can't stop what you don't name."
– Catherine MacKinnon (Edmonds & Warburton, 2011)

The problem of *race* is inherently a *white* problem, not only a problem manifest in the prejudices of white people and the workings of the institution they have created and maintain, but it is a problem of *whiteness* itself. The landscape of contemporary American racism that has been sketched above through the lens of Obama's presidency provides a sense of the complicated context in which some whites strive to work against that racism. In light of the previous exploration of America-as-White, the very phrase “contemporary American racism” inadvertently embodies and obscures from view the central power of Whiteness: its naturalness, invisibility, and unmarked status. How does one work politically, culturally, and personally against a system of oppression that is inextricably bound to every aspect of the white experience?

The notion of “white privilege” has come to the fore as the primary construct used to signify and understand these aspects of the white experience of oppression on “this side” of hegemony. Amongst many who do antiracism work the metaphor of privilege is one that rests upon a sort of unintentional ownership of certain experiences inherent in one's whiteness, or what Peggy McIntosh refers to as “unearned advantages” and “conferred

dominance” (2008, p. 126). The resulting charge, then, is to recognize not only one's personal racial prejudices that have been taught by and caught from American culture and internalized, but to “recognize one's privilege” in order to live ethically.

While “white privilege” is the quintessential terminology for understanding the place of white people within racist systems, it can also be a somewhat slippery phrase. Just as whites may think of themselves racially only in reference to what they are *not* (black), so too many aspects of white privilege—the benefits bestowed upon whites within a white society—can be seen as references to what American whites aren't. White babies aren't twice as likely to die before their first birthday; African American babies are (Harris-Perry, 2011). White students are not less likely to be placed in high school honors courses despite their test scores and are not more likely to be suspended despite similar rates of school rule violations; African-American students are (Steinhorn & Diggs-Brown, 2000, p. 95; Skiba, 2000). Whites are not half as likely to get a call back for a job interview when they have similar qualifications to those who do; African-Americans are (Price, 2003). White youths are not incarcerated at a rate *forty-eight times greater* for first-time drug possession charges; African-American youths are (Human Rights Watch, 2000).

Another conceptualization for how whites can understand their experiences in racist cultures and systems is the raising of white individuals' racial and cultural self-awareness. This way of thinking about the position of whites within racism goes directly to the naturalness and invisibility of whiteness by “decentering” whiteness as a neutral, racial/cultural position from which others' race and others' culture can be “objectively” seen. Instead, whiteness becomes located in the same orbit as cultural and racial “others.”

This can be seen as an implementation of the critical cultural pluralist project that has too often been manifest in American society with its teeth removed, as in the neoliberal multicultural emphasis that all peoples are unique (“like snowflakes”), but that all people are ultimately the same (“we are all the same on the inside”). While the concept of white privilege examines the experiences that whites have (or often *don’t* have) because of their racial status, decentering emphasizes an underlying issue: whites don’t experience whiteness. Rather than simply producing evidence that America is a *racist* nation (and there is no dearth of evidence), the previous chapter suggested that the truth underlying racism in America is the deeper historical and psychic reality that the United States is a *white* nation.

Pluralist decentering cuts below the construct of white privilege to allow a heightened focus on the former term (“white”) rather than the latter (“privilege”). Clearly there is significant overlap in the experiences and realities that are described by these understandings and they are by no means mutually exclusive. However, there is a way in which the work of decentering can become imbued with the economic tenor of white privilege. Within the framework of decentering, the very construct of white privilege, with its reliance on the ethos of Eurocentric economic values and Western/capitalist legal systems, can be seen as a *white* construct itself. Moreover, the invisibility of whiteness-as-center is often counted amongst the privileges of whiteness, a general example of which is McIntosh’s “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race” (p. 125); the very understanding of this racial invisibility as a privilege is the result of its own white-centered bias, adhering to the assumption that being seen primarily as an

individual is preferable to being seen as part of a cultural or ethnic group, which is itself a culturally-infused value. The explorations and arguments found in the previous chapters suggest that the structure and ethos of the construct of de-centering may be a more useful discursive and didactic tool than white privilege for understanding the white experience in white America and for challenging the longstanding and insidious oppression of people of color in this country.

The application of the psychodynamic concept of projection showed that this defense is not only a way in which racism can function, but that racism can itself be an object of projection. In this paper, examples focused on the ways in which whites can project their own racism into people of color and experience “reverse racism,” but there is also a great danger of projecting racism into other whites. The most prominent example of this is the attribution of racism to whites who have suffered from economic violence and inequality, often for multiple generations. The projection of racism into poor whites is often facilitated by a regionalist and urbanist stance that associates racism not only with “white trash,” but with southern “hillbillies,” or country “rednecks,” who are conspicuously made racially other through reference to their skin tone. There is certainly ample evidence for liberals to argue cogently that “the Tea Party is racist,” and yet the energy with which that group is dismissed as dangerous, stupid, or mentally ill suggests that there is a likelihood that some of the racism that liberals see in the Tea Party is—in part—their own.

Indeed, the emphasis on “recognizing white privilege” can often be paired with a vigilance for speaking up in the face of racist statements or policies. At its best this is an ethical stance in line with choosing to act on behalf of one’s humanity rather than one’s

whiteness; at its worst such vigilance can serve as a kind of “PC-policing” in which liberals are able to work out their own racism through projective identification. This scenario can lead to a sort of “search and destroy” mission against racism, which will always result in finding prejudiced or culturally insensitive events or elocutions, very often in the “outside world,” but responded to with a fervor often reserved for attempting to strike down one’s own projected content. In small communities or subcultures that place a high value on social justice—such as the helping professions—this experience can be intensified by the sense that one is not only on the lookout for racism, but that one is also always being *looked at* as a possible racist. Work on political paranoia since the implementation of the “U.S.A. Patriot Act” has shown that increases in surveillance—and the experience of the same—does indeed increase the experience of paranoia (Bell, 2003; Clarke & Hoggett, 2004; Davis, 2001; Kershaw, 2008).

The benefit of using a psychodynamic lens to think about human experience is that it allows insight into the inner workings that drive human behavior and subjective phenomena. Quite often the forces that are at play within the psyche do not follow the rules of logic or the emphasis on linear temporality that White Western culture privileges in the external world. When behaviors or beliefs do not make sense from the outside, it can be of great use to explore the ways in which these anomalies are valid internally. This paper has emphasized one set of such illogical beliefs and behaviors and has honed in on the conflicts, anxieties, and strong affective states that drive them. Moreover, in taking historical and systemic realities into account, it has given a context for these internal dynamics and broadened the concerning phenomenon well beyond a small set of fringe,

reactionary groups and instead insisted upon the ways in which these dynamics affect all Americans. In considering how to work against oppression and how to undermine racism—and how to teach others to do so as well—it is misguided to ignore the internal psychic movements that animate human existence both clinically and culturally. To emphasize the way things should be in a prescriptive manner rather than to take into full account the hidden, conflicting, and counterintuitive realities of the psychic world is to choose—with the best of conscious intentions—moral correctness over strategic efficacy. When it comes to dismantling racism, such a choice is one that is ethically dubious and we only choose it at our own peril.

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