

## “On Calling Donald Trump ‘Corrupt’”

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**Abstract:** This chapter advances an eccentric model of corruption both to understand various disturbing features of Donald Trump’s political career, and to explore the risks of using the term “corrupt” as a pejorative label for Trump. Here corruption refers to *the transfer of value from higher to lower positions along a moral gradient through a violation of the sacred*. Curiously, Trump himself celebrates his own sacrilegious transfer of value from the “elite” to those ordinary (coded white) people positioned at the bottom (the so-called “Deplorables”) of a moral gradient identified with “The Establishment.” Therefore, adversarial assertions of Trump’s corruption risk mimetically affirming the modes of agency he arrogates to himself. More specifically, they risk testifying to his successful transfer of (mostly symbolic) value through a set of three tactics—excitation, transduction, and shunting—explored throughout the chapter.

Should we call Donald Trump “corrupt”? This question is different from: Is Donald Trump corrupt? Let’s put the second one on ice and reword the first with an eye to the present context: It’s late in 2020. Trump has lost the election to Joe Biden but has refused to concede, citing wild allegations of mass ballot fraud. While the end of his presidency seems nigh, Trump nonetheless remains well-poised to exert significant influence on a large swath of the American Right. So, for those of us who would like to see Trump (and Trumpism) dissipate as soon as possible, what are the benefits and risks of calling Donald Trump “corrupt”?

The benefit is obvious: The term fits the bill, at least in regard to liberal definitions of corruption, e.g. “the breach of public trust for private gain” (Transparency International). Trump’s words and actions boasted of such breaches both during his presidency and before. Back in 2015, Candidate Trump predicted his future stance on Saudi Arabia when he told a

crowd, “They spend forty million dollars, fifty million dollars [on my properties]. Am I supposed to dislike them? I like them very much” (Condon et al. 2018). Certainly, Trump liked the Saudi royal family enough to embrace uncritically its claims of innocence when the journalist Jamal Khashoggi was killed in its custody in October 2018 (Wright 2018). Trump was impeached in 2020 for another violation of the public-private divide: He urged Ukraine’s president to dig up dirt on his Democratic rival, Joe Biden. Then, just before his acquittal by a Republican-controlled Senate, he repeated the offense by calling for the Chinese government to do the same (Altieri and Rocca 2019). And all this is of a piece with Trump’s frequent use of non-disclosure agreements and a “no memos” and “no paper trail” modus operandi at the Trump Organization, both of which he brought to a White House where employees now sign documents barring them from “making disparaging comments” about him (Orecchio-Egresitz 2020).

These examples suggest that Trump normalizes, even naturalizes, his own corruption. I worry therefore that calling him out on something that he celebrates about himself could play into Trump’s hand. Allegations of Trump’s corruption risk mimetically affirming the man’s self-positioning within an imagined moral schema and inadvertently empowering the forms of agency he arrogates to himself within that schema. To elaborate this worry, I begin by conceptualizing corruption not as a first-order fact on the ground (i.e. a kind of malfeasance) but as a second-order (or meta-level) representation of misdeeds.<sup>1</sup> At this meta-level, calling a wrongful action “corruption” shapes how we imagine that act. Corruption is here *an interpretive grammar that formulates malfeasance in a specific way-- as the transfer of value down a moral gradient through the violation of the sacred.* I understand value very broadly to

mean anything that fortifies or energizes someone, whether economically (money, labor), sociologically (prestige), or psychologically (morale, vitality). Corruption implies that its doer enjoys access to some higher sphere of value which he or she taps illicitly, transferring this value out of that sphere and into others positioned lower down the same moral ladder.

My understanding of corruption as such a grammar draws on the work of linguistic anthropologist Paul Kockelman, who, amidst his wide-ranging insights into value, causality and agency, reserves an important place for gradients. Gradients “are indeed the ultimate source of power,” for Kockelman, because they allow people to assert comparisons (e.g. this hill is steeper than that one, this person is more competent than that one), to posit normative backdrops (e.g. this hill is unusually steep, this person is especially crooked), and to sketch their intended transformations of the world (e.g. we can prevent a landslide on this hill, we can drain this swamp) (2016: 414). Kockelman’s focus on hills and landslides is especially convenient because the metaphor of the incline is so apt for representing moral gradations. Corruption is often spoken of as moral movement in a downward direction, as a collapse of structure, as a succumbing to ever-present forces analogous with gravity—whether selfish individualism or “hyperengagement” with one’s social group (Hasty 2005: 284). Corruption’s opposite is therefore not rectitude but blessing, that is, the *sanctioned* enabling of value’s downward “flow along powerful lines of authority” (Bloch 1986: 43). If blessings exercise sacred authority in the service of distributing value downward, corruption violates, usurps, or circumvents the sacred to effect this distribution. This implies that, for our purposes, the function of “the sacred” (behavioral prescriptions, dominant symbols, mythic charters, etc.) is the very constitution of

those levees that contain distinct portions of value at different levels of moral gradation and prevent its entropic diffusion throughout these levels.

This levee metaphor is my own, but (like inclines) similar liquid images often feature in culture-internal idioms of corruption. I suspect this is because liquidity conveys value's morally anomalous movement, whether that anomaly pertains to the direction of value's flow or to its excessive rate of flow. It is not surprising, then, that contrasting formulations of corruption within the same polity will draw on similar, even partially overlapping, metaphors of viscosity. For example, Jennifer Hasty (2005), in her ethnography of corruption formulations in contemporary Ghana, finds a distinction between, on the one hand, anticorruption officials who figure corrupt persons as vampiric consumers draining the nation's vital fluids and, on the other hand, ordinary Ghanaians who reckon corruption as, instead, an "intensification of ... the vital flows coursing through the political body" (274, 278). These examples suggests that images of liquidity may help Ghanaians to reckon the difficulty of grasping and holding value. Liquidity corroborates the intuited risk that even great sums of value can quickly slip (drain) away through the smallest of openings.

Regardless of the metaphors expressing it, I would wager that some kind of gradient-based corruption grammar is a representational resource in the moral imaginaries of all cultures. Most anthropologists would shy away from so grandiose an assertion, but we nonetheless imply as much when we claim witchcraft to be a premodern analogue of corruption (e.g. Smith 2009; Turner 2007; Blundo 2007). Witchcraft narratives often frame the mundane facts of interpersonal jealousy as assaults on the life force of the person envied, as famously reported by E.E. Evans-Pritchard: The envious Azande witch trespasses into the

victim's house, approaches his defenseless, sleeping body, eats "a little of the soul of his vital organ" and brings a little back to fellow witches who "combine in their... subsequent ghoulish feasts" (Evans-Pritchard 1976 [1937]: 14). Azande ideas of witchcraft treat the bounded integrity of a defenseless human body as a sacred principle, not unlike European vampire lore and accusations of Jewish blood libel in medieval Europe (Dundes 1991). The act of penetrating and draining their victims' bodies empowers these different violators—all of whom are positioned below their victims on a socio-moral ladder. Indeed, these violators are often degraded minorities, whether explicitly, as with Jews, or implicitly, as with Orientalized vampires.<sup>2</sup>

One might object that an allegation of Trump's corruption made from within the liberal framework ("the abuse of public trust for private gain") is less stigmatizing than the examples named above. Certainly, those working at Transparency International have nothing against private gain per se, but they may nonetheless regard the public sphere as more virtuous than the private because it encompasses "society as a whole," whereas the private sphere consists of "other incidental, lesser groupings (such as the family)" (Bobbio 1989: 3). Moreover, even the liberal variant of the corruption grammar implies a violation of axiomatic republican principles, such as the subordination of a ruler to the rule of law.

It is tempting to classify Donald Trump's sundry odious behaviors as so many violations of myriad sacred principles (religious or secular) and to trace the value (in capital and in government offices) he has channeled from the state to himself and his cronies. But what is so peculiar about Trump is how he revels in his own transfer of such value. Even as he explicitly denies the charge of corruption and hurls it back at his adversaries, Trump nonetheless employs

himself within a corruption narrative. He acts out a revolutionary drama in which his corruption serves as a means of exposing and reversing the ostensibly worse corruption of “Establishment” institutions and ruling liberal elites. Trump theatrically attempts to transfer value (mostly dignity and self-control) from groups associated with the Establishment and toward those “ordinary” (and implicitly white) people from whom it has ostensibly been stolen: This is what was meant by his infamous 2016 campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again.”

In what follows, I try to make sense of Trump’s most defining forms of sacrilege—his bigotry and insults, his incitement of fringe groups, his interminable lying, his comedic shamelessness—by showing how, taken together, they dramatize a form of corruption that he simultaneously casts as virtuous, or anyway rebelliously productive. More specifically, I show how these reprobate behaviors operate as a set of three tactics, which I label excitation, transduction, and shunting. Consciously or not, these tactics activate and broadcast Trump’s transfer of value down an imagined moral gradient. As I explicate these three tactics, I elaborate my worry that our repetition of the corruption allegation could increase the efficacy of Trump’s value-transferring tactics.

### **Excitation: Inducing the Swelling of Value beyond Control**

Commentators on both sides of the U.S. political divide have sought to capture the flustered excitation of Trump’s opponents with the term Trump Derangement Syndrome. The expression originates with the psychiatrist and (generally conservative) journalist, Charles Krauthammer (2017), who defines this syndrome as “not just general hysteria ... but ... the inability to distinguish between legitimate policy differences on the one hand and signs of [Trump’s] psychic pathology on the other.” While Trump’s opponents may indeed exhibit

“hysteria,” the pathology requiring explanation is not theirs, but Trump’s. In this section, I claim that Trump strategically induces “derangement” in his adversaries—the “Establishment,” the “Radical Left,” the “Lib-tards,” the “Social Justice Warriors,” the “Fake News Media,” even moderate conservatives, the so-called “RINOs” (“Republicans in Name Only”). Through his aggression, “political incorrectness,” and appeals to fringe groups, Trump excites his adversaries so that they lose their composure and self-control, and thus their ability to retain their hold on these and other symbolic-affective values that Trump ultimately seeks to unmoor and make available for appropriation by his political base.

Trump induces panic and outrage in his opponents by showcasing to them his ability to stoke a widespread American tendency toward conspiracy thinking and uncanny experience. As analyzed by anthropologist Susan Lepsetter (2016), the central motif of this uncanny “feeling structure” is captivity, which she argues reflects the economic dislocations and resulting malaise of the late 20th-century U.S. (p. 29). Captivity, or more precisely, a dialectic between captivity and release, mobilizes plots of capture and appropriation (alien abduction, child sex trafficking, government diversion of subterranean waters, etc.) that have particular appeal among (largely white) people experiencing downward social mobility (p. 103).

This “structure of feeling” (a phrase borrowed from the Marxist literary critic, Raymond Williams) need not attach itself to any one account of the social world it resists. It exists in an “embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined” and predisposes people to intense credulity toward any number of captivity narratives (Williams 1977: 130). These certainly include Trump’s own accounts of the “fake news media” and the “deep state.” However, Trump is less a purveyor of a particular conspiracy theory than he is a screen onto

which various groups project their fantasies of elite value appropriation and hoarding. Note how Trump prefers to figure himself as the witness to such claims-- *I hear people are saying*-- rather than as their primary source (Anderson 2018). Trumpism is indeed a sort of populism (à la Laclau 2005) that assembles an open-ended chain of association among fringe groups that Trump “hears” without explicitly endorsing: “Stand back and stand proud” he says to the right-wing Proud Boys (Associated Press 2020); “There are very fine people on both sides” he says, equating the neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville with their opponents (Politifact 2019); “I know they are very much against pedophilia, they fight it very hard,” he says of the QAnon group, whose members maintain that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshiping [Democrat] pedophiles (The Guardian 2020). This evasive courtship has a doubly infuriating effect on opponents who witness both Trump’s amplification of such dangerous narratives, and his ability to dodge accountability for his endorsement of them.

Trump’s derisive remarks against women and minorities reflect a similarly maddening strategy of double-voicing. He purposefully violates codes of decency through his endless stream of insults, and then provides the meta-linguistic framework through which such offenses should be exonerated: his refusal of “political correctness.” Here, the term “political correctness” refers both to the avoidance of “candid” (read racist, ableist or sexist) speech, and to an institutionally acquired register of appropriate speech that indexes a speaker’s formal education. I suspect that this second aspect of political correctness appears to Trump’s base as a value that they lack, a certain fluency in speaking inoffensively about group differences. To loosen their opponents’ control over this fluency, Trump and his supporters recode sensitivity to hurtful speech as the frailty of Leftist “snowflakes,” as a starchy, buttoned-up brittleness

crying out to be gleefully busted like bubble wrap. Yet what enrages Trump's opponents is not merely his pejorative stereotypes and racialized insults, but also his use of the label "political incorrectness" as a cloak for the material harm he visits on minoritized groups, such as his infamous "Zero Tolerance" border policy that separated undocumented parents from children who were then confined in "chain-link pens" (SPLC 2020; and see Shafer 2017: 7).

Indeed, Trump is not just politically incorrect; he's cruel and bullying. He violates codes of interpersonal decency so deeply shared that his targets have no practiced script for fending him off. What's even more gaslighting is that his worst verbal offenses are often hard to discern from the surface level of his words; instead of relying on outright slurs, he prefers context-dependent, yet highly transparent, incitements to bigotry. Such "dog whistling" (as it has come to be called) is so enflaming because it is at once obvious and plausibly deniable--at least within U.S. communicative culture (see Hill 2008: 88-118 and Hodges 2020). For example, Trump claimed that he was misconstrued when, while criticizing the judge overseeing civil fraud lawsuits against Trump University, he told his fans that the judge's "name is (dramatic pause) Gonzalo Curiel (Spanish-sounding syllables pronounced emphatically)"-- cue the boos from the rally (Gomes 2018). Trump's avoidance of explicit, lexical disparagement allows his supporters to frame his opponents' offense as paranoia or, worse, as projection. In this vein, conservative commentator Douglas Murray (2019) remarks that "the whole business of trying to hear dog-whistles is very basic: if you can hear the whistle, you must surely be the dog." Such comments create a no-exit scenario for Trump opponents, inducing outrage, hysteria, and lost verbal composure.

Trump didn't invent the tactic of inducing disfluency through outrage. That has been a page in the American Right's playbook since the 1980s, when then Congressman Newt Gingrich resolved that, for the Republicans to regain control of Congress, "they needed to embrace a smashmouth style of partisanship which revolved around character assassination, violating norms and tearing down governing institutions" (Zelizer 2020). The more recent meta-discursive suggestions of reactionary conservative commentator Ann Coulter (2004) follow in this same vein: "always outrage the enemy" and "never apologize to, compliment, or show graciousness to a Democrat" (pp. 12, 14). Yet Trump brings new skills to this game, some of which he learned as the owner of the Miss Universe pageant and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) Raw. When Trump shaved Vince McMahon's head during a WWE match in 2007 (Sports Illustrated 2017), he displayed the same castrating theatrics he would later use on the political stage when calling opponents names like "Low Energy Jeb" Bush and "Little Marco" Rubio. Similarly, Trump's demeaning of women adversaries such as Carly Fiorina ("Look at her face. Would anybody vote for that?" [Lange 2018]) echo his frequent sexual derisions as a beauty pageant judge, e.g. calling one winner "Miss Piggy" (Stuart 2016). Trump's body shaming proclaims the failure of his opponents to live up to "exaggerated and idealized notion[s] of gender" (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingraham 2016: 81). And as he relishes what he takes to be their sexual humiliation, Trump signals that the esteem he has squeezed from them is now available to his followers.

Trump's excitation tactics also resonate with the widespread practice of trolling, that is, with online engagement "whose real intention is to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict" (Hardaker 2010). Trolls "flame" their enemies by "lulzing" them, that is, by

mocking their misfortunes, particularly when those enemies are minorities. Trump's use of Twitter (@realDonaldTrump) to debase others is incessant. In 2019, *The New York Times* published the definitive collection of these tweets to date, "The 598 People, Places, and Things Donald Trump Has Insulted on Twitter: A Complete List." Trump is not only an online troll; he's the lowest form of one, a "RIP Troll," i.e. one who stalks memorial pages to target the friends and families of the deceased (Coleman 2012). Recall that after Republican Senator John McCain died in 2019, there was a sort of pause in the nation's partisan rancor as Democrats and Republicans commemorated McCain's heroism in the Vietnam War. (As a POW, McCain had refused release until his fellow prisoners were freed.) Trump, having previously cast a pall over McCain's record ("I like people who don't get captured"), took the occasion of the Senator's death to double down on his prior disparagement: "I was never a big fan of John McCain and I never will be" (Woodward and Yen 2020).

Taken together, Trump's bigoted cruelty, stoking of fringe captivity narratives, and his sacrilegious disrespect for the nation's honored dead comprise a tactic of dislodging affective values (composure, morale, self-esteem) from their locus within the upper (Establishment) spheres of a normative moral gradient. Such a tactic is the logical first step to value's downward movement.

When we call Donald Trump corrupt, we risk affirming that he has indeed loosened our control over these affective and communicative values. And the more we repeat the charge, the more we risk performing the very exasperation that serves as a sign of our lost composure. This exasperated affect is all the more likely because corruption is simply too vague and prosaic a term to do justice to the depth and panoply of Trump's transgressions. Returning to it can

therefore signal our failure to trace the contours of his depravity more closely. It comes to signify our lost eloquence, similar to when the author and CNN host Reza Aslan “lost control” and called Trump a “piece of shit” after he banned entry to the U.S. by people from several majority-Muslim countries (Tani 2017). The inarticulateness of our frustrated repetition suggests that our elite educations have come to naught, that we’re distraught, that we’ve been “triggered” by our social media enemies, that we’ve lost our grip, that we (and our value) have been – in the parlance of today’s agonistic social media—“owned.”

### **Transduction of Values and Inversion of Gradients**

Trump wagers that his enemies’ derangement will make his supporters feel like they can appropriate the valued things over which their frenzied opponents have lost control. This would be fairly straightforward if Trump’s policies actually channeled elite wealth to his working-class base, but generally they don’t (witness his regressive 2017 tax cuts). Trump mainly offers his constituents a compensatory set of symbolic-affective values. Such is the nature of right-wing cultural politics, but Trump also offers his base access to allegedly hidden knowledge that, as he likes to say, “people don’t realize,” e.g. “People don’t realize, if you go back to the Civil War the Republicans really did the thing. Lincoln was a Republican” (Benen 2018). Other knowledge he shares amounts to easily detectable lies. During his term in office, President Trump averaged some 23 falsified claims a day and had racked up 20,000 lies by July 9, 2020 (Kessler et al. 2020). Examples include both his purveyance of fake news, such as Barak Obama’s foreign birth, and his allegations of “fake news” (his go-to label for all unflattering facts about his administration). When it comes to deception, Trump surely lies on a scale unheard of among politicians. But to focus on his lies is to miss their function as transducers of inconvenient facts

into worldview-confirming truths. This transduction of truth (and other values) contributes to the excitation tactic mentioned above, but it also comprises a second, distinct tactic that follows logically from excitation. By changing the meaning of truth, a value once controlled by his Establishment rivals, Trump renders this value consumable and weaponizable by his supporters.

When Trump pronounces that all critical reports from the media are “fake news” and offers his own “alternative facts” to counter them, he models for his supporters a new relationship to the truth. He suggests that instead of feeling disarmed or outgunned by a rival’s command of inconvenient facts, one can simply click one’s heals together and wish their facts into fictions and one’s own fictions into facts. Trump makes truth-value transferable from his rivals to his supporters (and himself) by changing the meaning of truth itself, a move that, if he can pull it off, serves to evidence Trump’s world-making capacity.

As the neuroscientist-philosopher Sam Harris observes, Trump’s “lying is not a bug; it’s a feature. It’s a naked declaration of power wherein he doesn’t have to observe your expectations about what is logical or coherent or responsive to facts” (ABC News 2018). Harris might have added that Trump’s lies nonetheless observe the expectations of his supporters by affirming both their sense of what’s real (if hidden) in the world and their expectations of his posture toward it. In an interview with Harris, the Trump supporter and satirist Scott Adams (creator of the Dilbert cartoon) acknowledged that “it is clear to his supporters... that [Trump] says things that do not pass the fact checking.” Why, then, would Adams admire Trump? “Because,” says Adams, “he’s a magician,” a master of persuasion who uses extravagant lies that goad his adversaries into keeping the public focused on his ideas and his person. In this

way, Trump makes hitherto ridiculous ideas seem plausible, e.g. that the 2020 election was stolen by Joe Biden.

Trump's transduction of truth is so enticing because it allows his supporters to enter an epistemic framework similar to the one a child dwells in when playing with her imaginary friend. The child knows the friend isn't physically real, but she plays in what D. W. Winnicott (1971) called an "intermediate area of experiencing," somewhere in between the external reality that is unresponsive to mere wishes and the inner reality controlled by those wishes. As the leadership coach John Baldoni (2016) lamented, "Many fans appreciate Trump for speaking his mind and don't seem bothered when he mixes up the facts." What matters to these fans is not the correspondence between Trump's words and reality "out there," but rather the correspondence between Trump's words and his own psychic interior.

This is where Trump's background as a clownish entertainer serves him so well. As anthropologists Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram point out, the comedic dimension of Trump's violations of verbal taboos "may accomplish ideological work that exceeds even what can be conveyed in the already protected category of verbal humor" (2016: 74). Taboo humor has an interpretive logic that parallels Winnicott's theory of play. Humor "is a mechanism by which we discover what hangs out on the fringes of our consciousness" (Weinstein 2020). But what hangs out there need not have any relation to facts in the world; it could well be an evaluative orientation, a wild conspiracy theory, persecution anxiety. Regardless, the laughs Trump elicits feel confirmatory of such orientations and thus truth-y, if not truthful.

These many transductions of truth corroborate a more general, abstract transduction regularly accomplished by Trump and his supporters: an inversion of the normative moral

gradient itself. The likes of conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh and TV host Sean Hannity have long imparted to white Americans the idea that a secret underlies our venerable institutions, one that implies that our society's moral cline is upside down. Polleta and Callahan (2018) call it the "deep story." In this deep story, "hardworking citizens were struggling to get by while being bilked in taxes by a grasping federal government. They were told to feel sorry for the parade of claimants who were cutting in line for the American Dream and scorned as 'white trash' and 'rednecks' if they did not" (55). When Candidate Hillary Clinton called Trump's supporters "a basket of deplorables," she unwittingly confirmed their deep story. This had the effect of enticing them to appropriate this label in a gesture of cline inversion, one that made the Deplorables matter—matter more, that is, than minority claimants, as suggested by the shirt seen in Figure 1. that parodies the logo of the protest group, Black Lives Matter (BLM).

### **Insert Figure 1**

Figure 1. Manheim, PA - October 1, 2016: A woman wears a Deplorable Lives Matter shirt at the Donald J. Trump campaign political rally in Lancaster County. Photo by George Sheldon (purchased from Shutterstock).

This cline inversion is the revolutionary maneuver that Trump uses to justify his illicit transfer of value to his base. Once the moral cline is flipped, the direction towards which he moves value appears "upstream," hence not as *real* corruption. This is why Trump's favorite metaphor for his own agency is the draining of a swamp. The image implies that the locus of value's accumulation has not been the upper rungs of a moral ladder -- an illusion cast by the deep story. Instead, value has accumulated in a moral basin that, by implication, had been filled

by the run-off from the actual moral high ground. Trump's reworking of the meaning of truth supports this more abstract transduction of the high-ground "Establishment" into the low-ground, and vice-versa.

Both the transduction of truths and the inversion of moral gradients require, as the Dilbert cartoonist claims, a sort of magician's knack for turning a wand into a handkerchief, a suspension of disbelief. For his adversaries, Trump's prestidigitation amounts to a second-rate night-club shtick. But his supporters ascribe to him real world-making agency. This may be why Trump's followers in the evangelical community often recast his behavior through biblical allegories that vouchsafe the divine origin of Trump's supernatural power. For example, in his self-published book on Trump Derangement Syndrome (2018), Pastor John Fraser likens Trump to a modern-day Jehu, a king of Ancient Israel who drove his chariot "fearlessly towards his enemies ... and overturned the unholy things in Israel" just as Trump overturns the "radical liberal ways" of an America that "has fallen into all kinds of ungodly life-styles" that they purvey through "lies and deception" (pp. 5, 7, 71, and see Goldstein and Hall 2017 on surrealism and nostalgia). Fraser's assertion that Trump fulfills biblical prophecy engages in its own logic of transduction: If Trump is really a biblical hero, then his "boldness" (Fraser's term for Trump's aggression and norm-breaking) only appears immoral to the godless. True Christians, on the other hand, are like "spiritual receivers" who can detect the real virtue that is otherwise invisible to our "natural eyes... [just as] there are many radio waves in your presence, but we cannot see them with our physical eyes" (Fraser 2018: 63, 21). Thus, Trump and Trumpism would seem then to render three forms of transduction mutually affirming: lies into truth, high into low, and evil into good.

These mutually affirming oppositions suggest the influence of a neo-Pentecostal view of politics as a Manichean Holy War in which no middle exists between Good and Evil; however, this Manichean template has escaped the halls of denominational religion. The abovementioned “QAnon” group narrates a semi-secularized version of this Holy War led by Trump against the liberal, devil-worshipping pedophiles. Their reasoning exhibits what Lepsetler calls “apophenia... the experience of perceiving connections between random or unrelated objects” that gives rise to a tireless drawing of connections, filling in the blanks, regarding the blanks themselves as meaningful, and confabulating explanations for this meaningfulness that cohere with their premises (2016: 3,4). Apophenia and Manicheanism go together: Absolute evil is, by definition, polymorphic, insofar as it is the unifying substrate underlying all disparate, manifest ills. The same is true for goodness. As Trump’s allies allege: If Trump rambles in senescent incoherence, it is only because his words are merely the manifest form of a deeper, righteous intelligence that expresses itself in codes legible only to those in the know (Slotta 2019: 403). This suggests that Trump doesn’t activate his transductions singlehandedly; he relies on a coterie of supporters to ascribe to him this alchemical power, to refashion his every blunder into an act of righteous guile.

Because this Manichean template leaves no neutral space from which a valid allegation of Trump’s corruption can be launched, such an allegation subjects itself to the very alchemical agency that transduces the rebuke into “Fake News.” It invites the inversion of the ostensibly normative moral gradient, ushering the accuser (like “Crooked Hillary”) to the swamp basin, and thus ushering in Trump’s divine reversal of fortunes. Trump cannot be harmed by an opponent who speaks from a perch that he and his followers can recast as a pig-trough.

### **Shunting: The Self as a Conduit of Value**

The third tactic that Trump employs to activate his value-transferring agency concerns the boundary work that he does as he positions himself between the morally differentiated spheres that separate his allies and rivals. Trump fashions his persona into a shunt—an anomalous channel that allows for the movement of fluids from one part of the body to another—between differently graded moral spheres. Consider that there would be no Trump without Trump rallies, without the semiotic work done by his physical presence. It is the necessity of Trump's presence that points to his more abstract effort to make himself into the sole conduit through which value (squeezed from the elite) can flow toward, and thus ultimately arrive at, his political base.

As Hall et al. (2016) note, Trump's physical body is a key element of his appeal; his gestures (e.g. his pistol fingers) are part and parcel of his brand and spectacle. Trump says that he would not execute the deserted soldier even as he makes the rifle gesture at the soldier's pantomimed presence. He doesn't need to say anything cruel about the "nice reporter" with a congenital joint disorder who critiqued him; he simply apes the reporter's paroxysmal speech and hand movement. Such gestures not only allow Trump to avoid more quotable bigotry; they impart the meta-message that one needs to be co-present with him to understand what he's saying.

In addition to his gestures, Trump's dramaturgical antics figure his audience and various Establishment authorities as co-present in the same diagrammatic space. At a 2019 rally in Minnesota, Trump denigrated the FBI's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election

by launching into a parodic enactment of a sexual encounter between FBI agent Peter Strzok and FBI attorney Lisa Page: “Lisa! Lisa! Oh God, I love you, Lisa! And if she (Clinton) doesn’t win... We’ll get that son of a bitch out!” (The Independent 2019). Similarly, when addressing CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference) in March of 2019, Trump named the democratic proposal for state investment in clean energy and then slipped into a dramaturgical register to enact a scenario of electrical scarcity that would supposedly follow: “The Green New Deal, right? (Trump looks upwards) ‘Darling is the wind blowing today? I’d like to watch television darling?’” (Guardian News 2019). Such humor transports Trump’s audience to his enemies’ intimate inner sanctums wherein he then dramatizes speculative scenarios of their embarrassing shortcomings. He shifts his gaze (and voice) from one imagined character to another, and then looks to the audience, breaking the fourth wall in a sort of Vaudevillian style, to queue the laughter. In this way, Trump makes his body into a political weapon (Goldstein, Hall and Ingram 2020; Hodges 2020), as well as an instrument of mediation that gives his audience access to the workings of power, lining them up at the windows wherefrom they can peer in and, through him, vicariously intervene.<sup>3</sup>

These antics reiterate Trump’s perennial subtext, that he is indispensable to the cause: “Nobody knows the system better than me. Which is why I alone can fix it” (The Tribune 2016). His message is that the value that elites have wrongly kept from his followers can only be theirs “again” if it first passes through Trump himself. I would speculate that it is because Trump has convinced so many that he is the necessary conduit for this value that his followers excuse his ill-gotten material gains (e.g. his violations of the Constitution’s Foreign Emoluments Clause) in office. As the shunt linking them to the elites, Trump’s personal enrichment logically

precedes, and thus portends, his supporters' windfall. They believe they are in line to receive at least some of what he steals once it passes through him and out the other end. Such is the appeal of Trump's garishness: "He's a poor man's idea of a rich man" (The Establishment 2017). His faux rags-to-riches story predicts the poor man's promised future—a future that they can receive once it trickles down through Trump.

In light of this forecasted windfall, Trump must avoid the appearance of holding back value from his followers, of occluding the channel that is his very person. He manages this risk through an aesthetics of frictionless immediacy. His "unfiltered" disinhibition points to the openness and lubrication of the Trump-conduit. This may explain why he does not like to read from a teleprompter. Confinement to a script—the hemming in of words—could suggest a sort of withholding. This same logic may also account for Trump's refusal to wear a protective mask throughout most of the Coronavirus pandemic. Wearing one could suggest that Trump was secretly inhibited by Establishment health worries, and the mask itself would block or slow his truthy words, a literal filter. Similarly, this could be why Trump ceded to the governors the decision to shutter commerce during the pandemic; he has to avoid any optics of blocking the emission points of (economic) value.

The final key to Trump's self-fashioned shunting is his shamelessness. For the likes of the good Pastor Fraser, Trump's shameless boldness signals his knowledge that he's doing God's work when he runs roughshod over those liberals who "are actually hindering blessings to flow[sic] down onto the American people" (2018: 96). It's not just that his shamelessness implies that Trump believes he's in the right; it's that shamelessness is the affective corollary of frictionless-ness. Shame, after all, gives us second thoughts about our behavior, causing us to

hesitate. Trump will not allow any critique or cautionary note slow him down, knowing that an optics of hesitation might suggest that he operates within the very Establishment echelon he vilifies rather than along its borders.

For Judith Butler (2019), Trump's shamelessness was what fundamentally sustained him during the impeachment hearings that ultimately failed to oust him from office for his attempts to solicit Ukrainian help in investigating Biden's son. Here, Butler perceives a paradox: In flouting the law, Trump proves how dependent his appeal is on the law itself, because “[i]mmunity from the law has become the very definition of [his] power.” For Butler, the shame that “passes through him” has become the secret to Trump’s immunity: “If he is not shamed by the accusations against him... the law will have no power over him.” Shamelessness implies that the gods are false and require no propitiation, that true sacredness must reside elsewhere, not with received principles of the Republic but with Trump himself—as is suggested by Ms. Coulter’s latest book title: *In Trump We Trust: E Pluribus Awesome*.

If, as the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann (2016) writes, “Trump’s appeal has something to do with the religious imagination,” that ‘something’ might lie in his substitution of himself for those sacred symbols that unite the nation. Indeed, to be a shunt for value is, by necessity, to be a sacred structure, an operator of otherworldly power. Yet, here Trump knows that he has to tread carefully so as not to offend his own political base, the segment of the country that most fervently links the flag to Christianity. After teargassing peaceful BLM demonstrators in Lafayette Park, Trump posed for a photo while holding the bible aloft at the nearby St. John’s church. Trump intuited that he could trample on the sacred principle of civil disobedience if he could successfully pit that principle against the vague trappings of Christian piety. When Trump

does pay homage to symbols of secular republicanism, he does so with his characteristic double-voicing so as to upstage these symbols. He didn't salute the flag on stage at CPAC, he hugged it with a comic irreverence one step shy of frottage. Trump thus preempted any claim that his presidency desecrated the nation's sacred principles by insisting that his very body was synonymous with those principles.

This behavior is so constant that Trump ceases to be culpable for any one act of sacrilege. As Sam Harris observes, "(t)he irony is: if Trump had been merely half as bad, he would seem worse" (2016). That irony is not just a function of there being "so many awful moments that the media couldn't focus on them for long enough" (*ibid*). It's more that the quantity of "awful moments" assumes a quality of its own. If a single act of sacrilege presupposes the workings of the sacred, a deluge of such acts obviates our worries of sacrilege altogether. Such an onslaught amounts to a "transgression of transgression" itself, a move that terminates the implicitly sacralizing role that our episodic transgressions once played (Taussig 1998: 360-361). When passed through Trump, our sacred secrets lose their hold on us and we lose our ability to revere them. We are left with only Trump himself, or rather the spiritual void he creates: "a charged space of negative holiness," a graveyard of broken idols (*ibid*.). This is the liminal (and luminal) space that Trump—the shunt—hollows out, the passage through which he promises value will flow.

The problem with calling Donald Trump corrupt, then, is that the utterance verifies his location along the boundary between those who possess value and the dispossessed who desire it. It reaffirms his role as a conduit of value across spheres that, before Trump, had been closed to one another (or whose communication had been managed by elites). To vouchsafe his

status as a channel between these spheres is to lend credence to Trump's world-destroying (and thus world-remaking) capacity. Minimally, calling Trump corrupt acknowledges that he indeed makes contact with value and transfers it at will.

## Conclusion

Here I have offered an interpretation of Donald Trump's peculiar brand of corruption alongside a warning for fellow travelers to stop calling him corrupt. My approach to corruption as a second-order representation of misconduct highlights the metaphysics with which that term is freighted. "Corruption" makes sense of bad behavior by figuring it as the sacrilegious tampering with those spheres that segregate value among the most deserving. To utter the charge of corruption is, therefore, to reaffirm the sanctity of the beleaguered moral gradient, a position that easily slips into an affirmation of normative social hierarchies. As a result, the one who stands accused of corruption can don the trappings of the people's champion by affirming that they are indeed elevating and valorizing those who are otherwise tread upon. Their corruption takes the form of an affective assault on those higher ups, an attempt to plunder their morale through such tactics as excitation, transduction, and shunting. I worry that the efficacy of these tactics is affirmed by the repetition of the corruption accusation.

This argument reflects my own ambivalence on the question of Trump's corruption. On the one hand, I experience his corruption as so multimodal that I've had to elaborate a second-order, gradient-based model of corruption to understand how his various breaches of our norms logically cohere. In the process, I confess that I've grown further convinced of the enormity and systematicity of Trump's corruption. My argument therefore induces the very

compulsion to repeat the corruption allegation that I fear will backfire. Perhaps, then, I would do better to give voice to this charge in the hope that it can serve as an organizing principle for more concrete, legally actionable indictments of embezzlement, fraud, bribery, tax evasion, obstruction or the like. Still, whether we adopt such legal categories in our critiques of Trump, I think we'd do better to parse his many offenses instead of grouping them under the broad accusatory label of corruption.

To offer a final explanation for this position, let me turn to a more literary (or anyway cinematic) analogy: In the 1938 film, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, the royal and abusive Normans hold a banquet where they discuss the outlaw whose banditry has caused them to lose many a gold piece to the starving Saxons. Then, in walks “the outlaw” through the front doors with a deer draped over his shoulders—poached in capital offense against the King’s sacred forest—quipping with a smile that the Saxons are “overtaxed, overworked and paid off with a knife, a club or rope.” The old cleric and the Maid Marian are stiff and scandalized by the “reckless rogue” who Marian accuses of speaking treason. “Fluenta,” Robin retorts in shameless affirmation, unafraid of the impotent titleholders who outnumber him. Marian swoons, and in that moment of flustered arousal, loses control of her sexual and moral value, which had hitherto been locked away in promise of Norman enjoyment. Robin Hood ultimately captures her heart for himself and for his Saxon followers—not only for their vicarious pleasure but for them to see that Norman value could be theirs, indeed should be theirs by dint of what was really morally true in the world.

Donald Trump is no Robin Hood, but he styles himself as one. And if we call him corrupt, we mimetically retell the story he tells about himself: the story of how his corruption is the

revolutionary antidote to our corruption. We reinforce his supporters' sense that there is an inverted hyperreality to the world, visible only to the spiritual eye of the Evangelical or to the apoplectic ear of the QAnon-er. We pigeon-hole ourselves as an elite too precious and sanctimonious to dine with the deplorable Saxons. Let us not do that.

Let us instead express our hope that Trump receive fair trials for his many offenses.

Then, we can invite his supporters to break bread with us and, there at table, speak nothing of the man and instead seek points of shared meaning. We can propose that both sides have some disagreements they can brook in the name of America's tapestry of life-worlds and some they cannot. (No children in cages!) From there, we might build new sacred levees in the shadow of which our other disputes can play out in greater safety.

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<sup>1</sup> While people can frame many kinds of misbehavior as illicit movement across moral gradients, they do not always do so. In fact, usually people slide in and out of corruption formulations when alleging malfeasance. Take Marx's mature critique of capitalism: While he mostly describes alienation as an abstract form of social domination that wrests control of human history from humans themselves (Postone 1993: 81), he often reframes the problem using the metaphor of vampirism. Here the vampire is the dead (accumulated) labor that has come to control living labor, such that "living labour appears merely as a means to realize objectified, dead labour, to penetrate it with an animating soul while losing its own soul to it" (*The Grundrisse* cited by Neocleous 2003: 680). Marx effectively shifts his causal framing of alienation between a decentered model based on relative surplus value and a focal model concerned with the trespassing of sacred gradients-- the dead creep into the space of the living, penetrate bodies, and rob souls.

<sup>2</sup> As a caveat, I note that the Azande people analyzed by Evans-Pritchard do not regard witches as depraved or ontologically inferior. Instead, they say that witches are common among them, that people can be witches without knowing it, and that witchcraft assaults can be committed unintentionally. Evans-Pritchard's functionalist approach suggests that these moderating features balance the regulation of destructive envy and the avoidance of retributive violence.

<sup>3</sup> Consider his September 2020 trip to Kenosha, Wisconsin in this light. Recall that Black Lives Matter had been protesting the recent police shooting of the unarmed Jacob Blake. Trump stepped into the middle of the protests to enflame them by stating, "I just wanted to come. I really came today to thank law enforcement." He then construed his own supporters as invisibly co-present with him, "You don't see them marching and you don't see them on the streets. But what they want is — they want a great police force" ([Segers 2020](#)). Positioning himself at the imagined boundary between different (and opposing) social spheres, Trump became the spearhead of supporters who could finally puncture the barrier that separates them from the anti-racist protestors and their ostensive patrons, the penumbral liberal elite.