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Capitalism and Dirty Talk: Donald Trump's Crowd-funded Discourse and the Demise of Political Community

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This essay seeks to come to terms with the new political and ethical paradox proposed by the use of language of Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States. While some of his statements have been denounced as slander and many others as lies, such rational understanding of Trump's discourse has had but little effect on his supporters and, indeed, has not kept him from winning the presidency. The essay resorts to a linguistic analysis of a philosophical tradition about lies established by Immanuel Kant and reexamines it through the work of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault. Thus, the essay exposes the linguistic novelty of Trump's discourse in what may be called the "history of the lie" and the ethical and political impact on the political community. The essay concludes, with the help of Michel Serres, that Trump's discourse coalesces with malfeasant forces at the heart of late capitalist discourse that appropriates the world by defiling it.

Keywords: Donald Trump, lying, ethics, political community, capitalism, speech acts, ecology.

> So that's life, then: things as they are,
> This buzzing of the blue guitar.
> Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

> Be prepared. You have to understand Trump to stand calmly up to him
> and those running with him all over the country.
> – George Lakoff

In *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Immanuel Kant claims that a lie is the exclusive property of the person who utters or writes it. For Kant, a lie defines the person who proffers it, and, like that person's pain or death, that speech act cannot be shared by the community. Conversely, Kant suggests that truth is a common good shared by all. Truth belongs to all and founds the very sense of ethical and political community. Lies are personal and idiosyncratic and rest outside the democratic metaphysics of common sense that establishes the community and in which "common sense appears not as a psychological given but as the subjective condition of all 'communicability'" (Deleuze 21). Lies, rather, are harangues thrown at the crowd. While lies are practically indistinguishable, from a linguistic point of view, from a truthful statement, they are distinguishable in that the latter is shared by the community while the former aims at exciting the personalities of the individuals forming a crowd.

This essay examines the changes made to our understanding of language and politics by the language of the 45th president of the United States of America, Donald Trump. Performative speech acts form the basis of social life, and Trump's language nullifies this sociality, rendering community no longer a community, but simply a "crowd." In his reading of Kant, Deleuze insists that "knowledge implies a common sense, without which it would not be communicable and could not claim universality" (22). Trump's language and its performance are a contemporary and disquieting development in what Jacques Derrida has called "The History of the Lie," and this development, which linguist George Lakoff calls Trump's "Big Lies," is a clear and present danger to the representational power of language that forms the core of modern representative democracies. It has been difficult to pin down Trump's lies because they undermine what Deleuze calls after Kant a claim of universality, and because, politically, crowds and communities can have the same electoral leverage. Thus, Trump may be the emergence of a threat to democracy – a political system entirely predicated on the symbolic forms of language – something that thinkers such as Walter Benjamin or Hannah Arendt prophetically warned us against when they were confronted with totalitarian power.

By outlining the connections between the performative language of the president and his policies, this essay further proposes that the change introduced by Trump's language is related to the alignment of his language with the aggressive capitalist ethos that shaped him as a public figure before he became a politician. It is a privatizing language of appropriation that consists in not sharing. Far from being a "Machia-

vellian necessary evil" related to the exercise of power, Trump's language reveals a new linguistic and political position in which he – as well his crowds of followers – refuse to contribute to the language of community and ultimately to the universality of the common good. For this part the essay relies on the theoretical work of French philosopher Michel Serres, especially his essay *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?* in which he discusses the relation between capitalist appropriation – the branding – and the defiling of the world. My essay also draws on Michel Foucault's late work of 1982-83 on "Discourse and Truth." Here, I focus on Foucault's reflection on *parrhesia*, that Greek concept, Foucault writes, "which is ordinarily translated into English by 'free speech' (French *franc-parler* and German by *Freimütigkeit*). *Parrhesiazomai* is to use *parrhesia*, and the *parrhesiastes* is the one who uses *parrhesia*, i.e., is the one who speaks the truth." In this essay, I read Serres and Foucault to see if President Trump's claim to be saying "things as they are" might be considered as a case of *parrhesia*, and if not, it will be necessary to see what change it introduces in the discourse of representational democracies and what differentiates his discourse from the *parrhesia* that characterizes, Foucault tells us, the language we hold in common in a democratic *Politeia*.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, as well as since his inauguration as the 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump's language has repeatedly attracted attention, either for the way it has smeared individuals or groups of individuals – thus seeking to detach them from the national community –, or for his lies. *New York Times* columnists David Leonhardt and Stuart A. Thompson write, "Many Americans have become accustomed to President Trump's lies. But as regular as they have become, the country should not allow itself to become numb to them." Although it is common to accuse politicians of lying, a form of reserve is usually observed by the media; this is not the case with Trump for whom the words "lie" or "liar" have become a standard way of describing his speech. There is indeed a numbing effect at work – so, he is a liar; what are you going to do about it?[1]

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[1] Many commentators have exposed Trump's lies by comparing his statements or what he promised he would do with what he actually did. According to *PolitiFact*, only 17 percent of the president's statements are either "True" or "Mostly True"; the figure goes up to 32 percent if one cares to add "Half True" statements, which leaves the president with 68 percent of statements that range from "False" to what the fact-checking site calls "Pants on Fire." It has to be noted that this is a significant improvement, since a similar survey conducted a year before suggested that 76 percent of Donald Trump's statements were not true – that they were lies. This may sound surprising, as one of the arguments of Donald Trump's supporters is that he is a man who says "things as they

Trump's slanders and lies had already attracted attention during the 2016 presidential campaign, but were often attributed to the heat of the race. His lies became more prominent when they could be traced to the president of the United Sates and were dubbed "alternative facts." This started a few hours after Trump was sworn in on Abraham Lincoln's Bible – and his own.[2] It is significant that the phrase "alternative facts" was coined by Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway on American national television channel NBC, for as Derrida writes, "the media, [which are] the place of gathering, production and archiving of public speech, occupy a determining place in any analysis of political lies and falsification in the space of the *res publica*" (53). Conway used the carefully crafted phrase during a *Meet the Press* interview on 22 January 2017. She sought to defend the assertions of then White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer about the attendance at Donald Trump's inauguration as president of the United States. When asked during the interview with anchor Chuck Todd to explain why Spicer had "utter[ed] a provable falsehood" about the size of the attendance at the inauguration, Conway stated that Spicer had provided *"alternative facts."* Todd responded, "Look, alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods" (Blake). Todd's retort to the president's counselor was modeled on the Kantian premise of the democratic common good and on the conception that within the accord among the faculties truth equated with the undeniable. On the other hand, Conway's more strategic than sincere point was that there was room for personal doubt and that if there was doubt, at least personal doubt, she and other people in the crowd should be allowed to freely say so. She argued furthermore that whatever the performance of the president's affirmation may have been, it was not his intention to deceive anyone, and she further suggested that if anyone was deceived it did not really matter, for nobody would suffer from these personal "alternative facts." Conway thus posed two important questions about the lie, which are firstly its intentionality and secondly its pejorative effects.

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are," but from this assessment it would seem that Donald Trump says things as they are *not* ("Search Results for 'Trump'").

[2] U.S. presidents are usually sworn in over – literally – a stack of Bibles. Thus, Barack Obama "solemnly [swore] that [he would] faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States" on Lincoln's Bible and Martin Luther King's so-called "travelling Bible." Trump also used Lincoln's Bible, but the second Bible was his own. Although there are conflicting ways of reading the symbolism of the pledge, it is noteworthy to see the bifurcation in Trump's case: on the one hand, he aligns himself with history and on the other he introduces his own Word at the moment of swearing to "preserve, protect and defend" the Constitution.

Photos which appeared in U.S. media and around the world showed that the attendance was *smaller* in 2017 than they had been in 2009 for President Obama's inaugural, Sean Spicer's peremptory statement that "this [had been] the largest audience to ever witness an inaugural, period!" notwithstanding ("Spicer" 0:47). The words of the president voiced by his proxies have been difficult to pin down as *lies*, even though there was a jarring difference between his performative speech in the media and a "reference to values of reality, truth and falsehood that are supposedly independent from any performative decision" (Derrida 27). Todd called the question of the inauguration attendance "a small thing," but this lie uttered by his Press Secretary on the first day of his presidency became Trump's linguistic signature as president.

The exchange that happened live and has since then been disseminated almost indefinitely on the internet and the social media has posed the question of the media and of the linguistic, political, ethical and juridical consequences of the president's language. The allegations of the president appeared to be untruthful, but "for structural reasons, it [is] always . . . impossible to prove, in the strict sense, that someone has lied even if one can prove that he or she did not tell the truth" (Derrida 34). There is a vast difference between truth and ascertainable reality, but the real point is that even when the untruthfulness of an allegation can be demonstrated, this demonstration does not necessarily translate into performative political effects.

As experience with the 45th U.S. president has shown, "One will never be able to prove anything that overturns such an allegation, and we must draw the consequences of this. *They are formidable and without limit*" (Derrida 34; emphasis added). It is necessary to ponder what Derrida calls the "formidable" and (potentially) "limitless" consequences of the linguistic, political and ethical predicament we face with Trump's lies for which it is extremely difficult to hold him accountable. The consequences of these lies for the nation and for the rest of the world where the words of the president have inaugural performative effects are indeed formidable.

Arguably, there is, as Derrida argues, a "prevalent concept of the lie in our culture" (33) that has a long and vexed history that pre-dates Trump's election. However, Trump's presidency may have marked a new "phase" in the history of the lie and its performative effects. Trump may be an instance of a "mutation in the history of the lie" (40), a possibility to which Hannah Arendt drew attention in "Truth and Politics," a 1967 article which she published in the wake of the controversy caused by her reporting on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Arendt who

knew the workings of Nazi anti-Semitic slander and the effects of the lies of Nazi propaganda emphasizes the role of the media in "the relatively recent phenomenon of *mass manipulation of fact and opinion* as it has become evident in the rewriting of history, in image-making, and in actual government policy" (12; emphasis added). One can only be struck by the accuracy of Arendt's statement and recognize the accelerating effect of the mass media in a history that was pointing according to her to an "absolute lie." "The process of the modern lie is no longer," Arendt writes, "a dissimulation that comes along to veil the truth; rather, *it is the destruction of reality or of the original archive*" (quoted in Derrida 42). Arendt speaks about the physical destruction or manipulation of the archive that often occurred under Nazism or Stalinism. In a scene that is uncannily reminiscent of Trump's inaugural ceremony and the photographic controversy that ensued, Milan Kundera introduces this mediatization of the political lie in his novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*:

> In February 1948, communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to harangue the hundreds of thousands of citizens massed in the Old Town Square. That was a great turning point in the history of Bohemia. A fateful moment of the kind that occurs only once or twice in a millennium. Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing next to him. It was snowing and cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. Bursting with solicitude, Clementis took off his fur cap and set it on Gottwald's head.
>
> The propaganda section made hundreds of thousands of copies of the photograph taken on the balcony where Gottwald, in a fur hat and surrounded by his comrades, spoke to the people. On that balcony the history of Communist Bohemia began. Every child knew that photograph, from seeing it on posters and in schoolbooks and museums.
>
> Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head. (3-4)

In Kundera's scene the spectral presence of the lie haunts history, and as in the case of the size of the attendance at Trump's inaugural, the scene is both comic and tragic. The scene also foreshadows the new phase in the history of the lie that Trump embodies and where the problem is no longer, as in Kundera and Arendt, the mere destruction of the archive, but rather that of the disappearance of a horizon of truth or a universal claim against which the archive can be read.

The problem of the lie is both linguistic and ethical, and as Kundera suggests, it is also historical, for ultimately the modified and thereby nullified archive will become what we will refer to as "history." From the ethical point of view, Trump's lack of truthfulness betrays the "performative promise or oath and that constitutes the element, the medium of all language" (Derrida 60) and that makes any speech act possible. Indeed, every speech act – whether we introduce ourselves, say what our favorite color is, promise to meet someone at a given time and place, or pledge to defend the constitution – contains this implicit oath that carries information, but even more importantly reaffirms language as a possible communicative performance. Although we may not always feel fully committed to that oath and to what Derrida calls (after Rousseau) the "sacral horizon" of truth (39), we need to remind ourselves that there would be no possible language, let alone politics or ethics without that implicit oath. That implicit oath is what separates the political community from the crowd of fans and supporters.

From a linguistic point of view, a lie is also an intransitive speech act in which someone *says*, *utters*, or *promises* with no object attached to these transitive verbs. On the other hand, "A lie . . . also aims to create an event, to produce an effect of belief where there is nothing to state or at least where nothing is exhausted in a statement," Derrida proposes (37). Trump's almost obsessive use of the phrase "believe me" confirms that his speech acts are performative events where his personal testimonial replaces any kind of referential truth and where what he seeks to achieve is not the conveyance of facts, but rather an effect of personal persuasion in his listeners. This is also what explains Trump's preference for Twitter over any other mode of address: not only does Twitter enable him to frequently reiterate his performative testimonial, but the brevity of the messages and their paratactic structure also keep him from having to worry about the grammatical and semantic coherence of what he is Tweeting. The only thing that matters is the speech performance itself.

From a linguistic point of view too, Trump relies on a series of deeply imbedded metaphors in American culture and on the performance of their constant reiteration. While Trump is often seen as an ignoramus – something he may actually be – he intuitively taps into these simplified metaphors. One of them, identified by linguist George Lakoff, consists in referring to the U.S. "metaphorically in family terms" ("Understanding" 2). In Trump's parlance, the U.S. is a home, an *oïkos*: the administration of the home – that is literally its *economy* – and the moral code of the house is placed under the strict authority of the authoritarian *pater familias*. By extension, the symbolic patriarchal figure is

also the father and origin of *logos*, that is, the origin of truth that suppresses any reference outside himself. "In the Strict Father family," Lakoff writes, "father knows best. He knows right from wrong and has ultimate authority to make sure his children and his spouse do what *he says*, which is taken as what is right" ("Understanding" 2; emphasis added). Trump performatively poses as the source of what is right (and wrong) and can thus remodel "truth," even though we can demonstrate he is lying. This demonstration does not impress his supporters who believe the incarnated source and origin of logos and not what universal evidence shows.

Trump's detractors, on the other hand, are numbed and defeated by this performative rolling fire of lies, for it does not suffice to demonstrate that something is inaccurate; Trump produces a *logos* whose reactivation in the media does not only modify the archive, but also produces its own ever-changing archive: "The more Trump's views are discussed in the media, the more they are activated and the stronger they get, both in the minds of hardcore conservatives and in the minds of moderate progressives" (Lakoff, "Understanding" 6). During the 2016 campaign, what Hillary Clinton was saying was true – "*and it was irrelevant*," Lakoff writes ("Understanding" 6; emphasis added). Indeed, her discourse was predicated on explicating her experience and on the complex exposition of policies while Trump had crowds chant, "Lock her up." In front of the crowds that he or one of his proxies was arousing, Trump was simply posing as the phallic symbol of moral authority and the embodiment of U.S. libidinal fantasies. While Clinton was inadvertently reactivating Trump's "Big Lies" (Lakoff, "Understanding" 8) by seeking to debunk them, Trump's language relied then, as it does now, on anaphora and the repetition of phrases that align the moral superiority of the father figure with the myth of winning:

> We're gonna start *winning* again. We're gonna *win* at every level: we're gonna *win* economically, we're gonna *win* with the economy, we're gonna *win* with the military, we're gonna *win* with healthcare and for our veterans, we're gonna *win* on every single facet, we're gonna *win* so much you may even get tired of *winning* and you'll say please, please Mr. President, It's too much *winning*! We can't take it anymore! ("Donald Trump")[3]

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[3] Trump is also remarkable from the point of view of the delivery. The use of "gonna" is a marker of what Columbia University linguist John McWhorter calls Trump's "unadorned" language, or his language "without deodorant." Also remarkable is the amount of attention that Trump's language has been gradually gaining. There have been countless comments (and jokes!) on the president's use of language and linguists such as McWhorter (sic) are becoming regular pundits on liberal channels such as MSNBC.

While Clinton was appealing (admittedly rather clumsily) to "grand principles deriving from the Enlightenment [whose] central idea was universal reason, the notion that there is only one form of rationality and that that is what makes us human" (Lakoff, *Political Mind* 21), Trump uses the performative presence of his body (language) and the performative iteration of his speech acts that are reverberated ad infinitum by the media and social networks to debase any sense of origin and historical universality in his words.

Trump's grammar also is indicative of a simplification of the world that we believed to be reserved to the realm of allegory or caricature. In his celebrated Western movie *Stagecoach* (1939), John Ford has the villain of the movie, a banker named Gatewood, spew out a rhetoric reminiscent of the Trump harangues. Almost eighty years before Trump promised to "Drain the Swamp" of Washington, Ford's Gatewood is a proleptic allegory of American history:

> I don't know what the government has come down to. Instead of protecting businessmen it punctures noose into business. . . . America for Americans! The government must not interfere with business. Reduce taxes. They're even talking about having bank examiners now, as if we bankers didn't know how to run our own banks. . . . What this country needs is a businessman for president. (Ford 34:24-34:38)

Ford's movie – which is centrally about the construction of language and community – might sound almost prophetic, but it also makes us realize that Trump's rhetoric taps into deeply rooted national fantasies of Franklinian eighteenth-century capitalist meritocracy and of the destiny of a chosen people as defined by the American Jeremiad of the seventeenth century.

Trump's (failed) promise during the campaign was to run the nation like a successful business, a business that would function like a general store or a local bank at the time of the frontier. In the tirade in Ford's movie, as in Trump's diatribes, business and politics are understood within the grammatical framework of direct causation, which is "easy to understand, and appears to be represented in the grammars of all languages around the world" (Lakoff, "Understanding"). As Lakoff points out, "many of Trump's policy proposals are framed in terms of direct causation" ("Understanding" 5). Simple causes call for simple effects.

Trump unabashedly transposes the everyday street lingo to the language of politics where one expects another tone and another register ("Language Expert"; "Donald Trump").

Are there too many immigrants in the U.S.? Deport all aliens who entered the country illegally, even though millions of them are living in the country and make its economy run and have children who serve in the U.S. military. Do too many Mexicans (characterized as "drug dealers and rapists") cross the border? Build a wall. A Muslim may be connected with an act of terrorism? Ban all Muslims from entering the country. Similarly, in this kind of direct causation thinking, if global warming were true, it would not be cold: "This very expensive GLOBAL WARMING bullshit has got to stop. Our planet is freezing, record low temps, and our GW scientists are stuck in ice" (@realDonaldTrump, 1 January 2014, 4:39 PM).

But global warming, international diplomacy, or world economics do not function according to direct causation. They rather function according to systemic causation, one that "is more complex and is not represented in the grammar of any language" (Lakoff, "Understanding" 5). Thus, when Trump accused Clinton of being weak because she refused to "name" "radical Islamic terrorism," he created a word and world grammar in which the paratactic structure of the phrase equates the three terms that it contains, while the process of naming provides things with a grammatical identity: "just saying 'radical Islamic terrorists' allows you to pick them out, get at them, and annihilate them" ("Understanding" 8). The complex connections between education, foreign policy, racial conflict and capitalist hegemony which are at work in the question of "terrorism" have no grammar that makes it possible to express them in one declarative sentence, a motto or the 140 characters of a tweet.

Trump's paratactic or incoherent structures thus correspond to a simplified grammar of the world. He caters to the fears of crowds in order to have them rally around him as the reassuring phallic totem of the tribe. Having the crowds chant "Lock Her Up," "Build that Wall" or "*He* will do it" is reminiscent of some of the darkest moments of Western history in which *what* the leader said matters less than his embodiment of the words he speaks. Lakoff insists that "Enlightenment reason does not account for real political behavior" and "emotion is both central and legitimate in the political arena" (*Political Mind* 21). While we might be tempted to dismiss the incoherence of the language or the absence of truthfulness of Trump's language as the indication of his stupidity and incompetence, we need to recognize that the aura of the leader and its performative action on the crowd are not to be underestimated as we should not underestimate how this influence debilitates the sense of political community.

While Trump is not a second Hitler, he is reminiscent of a latter-day version of Herman Melville's Captain Ahab, a man driven by monomaniac obsessions and posturing as the origin of truth. In *Moby-Dick*, when Captain Ahab arouses his crew – a crowd in which he undermines communal solidarity – against the white whale, his arch-enemy, he has the crew chant, "Death to Moby-Dick" (970; ch. 36). Ishmael, the narrator, comments on how he too is swept off his senses and becomes part of the chanting crowd: "But [Ahab] drilled deep down, and blasted all my reason out of me! I think I see his impious end; but feel that I must help him to it" (973; ch. 38). Ishmael comes to the realization that he has been under the influence of Ahab's language that has activated primordial fears and desires in him:

> I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge. (983; ch. 41)

In *The American Renaissance*, a book published a few weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the U.S. engaging in WW II, F. O. Matthiessen commented on Melville's Captain Ahab and Hawthorne's puritan minister Chillingworth, the dark male figures that people the "American Renaissance." Such figures might appear to be unreasonable fictional characters or mere allegories, "but," Matthiessen writes, "living the age of Hitler, even the least religious can know and be terrified by what it means for a man to be possessed" (307).

While the shouts of the crowds at Trump's rallies are reminiscent of "possession," it is important to note that Trump is *no* Ahab or Chillingworth in their mystical and metaphysical dimensions. Trump is really a pure opportunist, a confidence-man. Melville portrayed such a character in his eponymous novel, a character impossible to pin down in referential discourse. Of course, Melville's confidence-man is a Dyonisiac and celebratory figure of anti-Platonic discourse, but like any discursive figure, the confidence-man has its dark side. Thus, at the end of the novel, which takes place aboard a ship, an old man asks the confidence-man to give him a life-preserver (a life-jacket). The confidence-man gives him a chamber-pot and assures him that it is "so perfect – sounds so very hollow" (1111). Even though the old man "scrutinize[s] it pretty closely" and is repelled by the bad "smell," he entrusts his life to this

object that will certainly not save his life but doom him. One can only be struck by the analogy here: Trump's crowds of supporters are confronted with Trump's malfeasance, the bad smell of his lies, and yet they are willing to entrust him their lives.

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Not unlike Derrida who speaks of the "formidable" and "limitless" consequences of the impossibility to nail down the reasonable and truthful limits of the language of someone like Trump, Lakoff argues that Trump "change[s] the brains of millions of Americans" in what he sees as "a form of mind control" ("Understanding" 8). "When you're the president, you have to think about what we call 'truth conditions in linguistics," another linguist, John McWhorter, declared in an interview, adding that, "Oratorically, [Trump] is the beginning of something new." Trump's novelty is not only in his performative aura on crowds and the annihilation of truth, but also the alignment of his discourse with the post-capitalist violence of contemporary U.S. culture.

Cornel West has spoken of Trump's era as the advent of a "neofascist" era, "an American-style form of fascism" ("Cornel West on Donald Trump"), while philosopher Sheldon Wolin has echoed Arendt and referred to contemporary America as "inverted totalitarianism," a state whose functioning is no longer in the hands of the *demos*, but rather in those of entrepreneurial plutocrats that manipulate discourse for their own interest:

> Inverted totalitarianism works differently. It reflects the belief that the world can be changed to accord with a limited range of objectives, such as ensuring that its own energy needs will be met, that "free markets" will be established, that military supremacy will be maintained, and that "friendly regimes" will be in place in those parts of the world considered vital to its own security and economic needs. (Wolin 46-47)

This shift is important, for Trump is not an "occasional liar," or someone who occasionally disguises the truth as a sort of necessary Machiavellian evil. Arendt writes:

> Only the *occasional liar* will find it possible to stick to a particular falsehood with unwavering consistency; those who adjust images and stories to ever-changing circumstances will find themselves floating on the wide-open horizon of potentiality, drifting from one possibility to the next, *unable to hold*

on to any one of their own fabrications. Far from achieving an adequate substitute for reality and factuality they have transformed facts and events back into the potentiality out of which they originally appeared. (15; emphasis added)

It is probably impossible to submit Donald Trump to the stringent imperative of *unconditional truth* which Kant develops in *The Doctrine of Right*, and which is known as the "doctrine of the murderer at the door." Admittedly, few presidents or even citizens of the United States, or of any other country in the world, those whom Arendt calls "occasional liars" would successfully stand that test. On the other hand, it is necessary to examine Trump's language to show how it correlates with the development of latter-day capitalism.

Indeed, Trump's strictly personal language coalesces with "The benignity of inverted totalitarianism as contrasted with the harshness of classic totalitarian regimes [and it] is revealed in the ecumenical character of the one and the xenophobia of the other" (Wolin, *Democracy* 49-50). Trump's "alternative facts" are not only alternative, they are also personal and constitute his exclusive ownership. Trump's language is coextensive with his personal entrepreneurial attitude, which has consisted in creating gated communities with very exclusive membership rights and in erecting buildings that bear his name in very large lettering on them. In all cases, his discourse consists in excluding people from his territory while affirming that territory as an undeniable fact, and affirming that it is his right to brand them and appropriate them. In that respect, Trump affirms his right to say things as they are: this is my building; this is my name; this is my property. Trump's language – his lies – belongs only to him –it is, properly speaking, unshareable.

During his first year as the president of the United States, Trump has sought to transform what used to be his personal economic and (un)ethical economic model into national policy. The Muslim ban, the attempt at dismantling Obamacare, the intention to build the wall with Mexico, and the extension of oil drilling rights and the reversal of the designation of areas as National Monuments – including Mount Katahdin in Maine, so dear to Henry David Thoreau – are coextensive with his language. Trump's language is indicative of the transformation of corporate strategies into U.S. national policies; his language, which, as all agree, is absolutely idiosyncratic, is also indicative of a personalizing and privatizing of politics. As a result, U.S. politics resembles Trump's personal attitude to space and people and consists of radical appropriation of the world.

In *Malfeasance*, Michel Serres proposes that there is a direct connection between pollution, dirtying and the capitalist appropriation of the world. Michel Serres's multi-semantic French title – *Le Mal propre* – puns on several meanings related to ownership and what is *proper*. In English, as in French, the adjective *propre* or "proper" comes from Latin *proprius*, "one's own, particular to itself," from *pro privo*, "for the individual, in particular," from ablative of *privus*, "one's own, individual." The etymology is echoed in both French and English in the word "proper" itself, as in a "proper word" or a "proper way of behaving," and in the adverbs derived from it, as in "to speak properly," or "properly speaking." The meaning of the word also appears in the adjective "appropriate," the related verb "to appropriate," but also in "property" and "propriety." In French, the pun is even more prolific insofar as a "*malpropre*" (in one word) is a disreputable, untrustworthy person, literally someone who is not proper, *not clean*, someone so unclean, in fact, that they dirty everything they touch with their mere presence. They thereby appropriate it and make it their property. The canny English translation of the title carries over some of the metaphors, in particular in the phonemic associations of "malfeasance" and "feces." In English, a *malpropre* is a swine. Serres invokes this meaning, but spells his title in two words: *Le Mal propre*. His title, then, suggests that what is bad, or really evil, is that which we make our *property*, that which we *appropriate*. Proudhon had suggested that "property is theft"; Serres proposes that the appropriation of the world is a malfeasance, something that hurts and defiles the world and causes the demise of a democratic ethos.

This is what Trump's language is: an appropriation of the world and of the people through a defiling of the world and the people. In a 2005 conversation with television host Billy Bush, Trump was caught on a live microphone, describing a failed seduction, saying, "I did try and fucked her, she was married." He added that when he meets beautiful women, he feels entitled to "grab them by the pussy." "You can do anything," he further bragged to Bush.[4] To say it provisionally with Serres, *appropriation* means dirtying; talking dirty about women by referring publicly to their physical appearance, their menstruation or their genitals, to describe Mexicans by generically referring to them as rapists

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[4] Billy Bush, the TV host, is a cousin of George W. and Jeb Bush. The other pun in Serre's title is that of the *Mâle propre*, in other words, Serres has the meaning of "swine" echo with the French word for "male" – what is properly male is dirt (*le propre du male, c'est le sale*). That this whole question of appropriation of the world through defiling it is also gendered is something Trump has made all too blatant (Jacobs et al.).

and drug dealers, is a way of dirtying them and thereby appropriating them.

Lies defile the world, for, as Derrida argues, "The duty to tell the truth is a sacred imperative" (38). Derrida comments that for Kant "the contrary of a lie is neither truth nor reality, . . . but rather veracity, truthfulness, speaking-the-truth, the will-to-truth ([Kant's] *Warhaftigkeit*) (43). It has often been pointed out that people lie because of vested interests; to put things in a nutshell, money seems to be the name of the game. For Kant, however, lies do not need a reason, and someone does not need to either benefit from them or be impaired by them:

> Hence a lie defined merely as an intentional untruthful declaration [*eine un-wahre Deklaration*] to another man does not require the additional condition that it must do harm to another. . . . For a lie always harms another; if not some other human being, then it necessarily does harm to humanity in general, inasmuch as it *vitiates* the source [*die Quelle*] of right of the law it makes it useless [*die Rechtsquelle unbrauchbar macht*]. (Kant, "On Humanity's Supposed Right to Lie"; quoted in Derrida 44)

What matters for Kant is the breach of the social contract established by performative speech acts: a lie invalidates all other speech acts and nullifies them. In German, the lie makes the source, or spring of the law useless [*unbrauchbar*]; Peggy Kamuf translates that as "*vitiates* the source of right." Indeed, the lie soils the spring or the source from which the community drinks and from where it takes water for its ablutions. Talking dirty about people is a form of pollution that not only defiles the world and the people, but it also marks them as territory and property that can be exploited. Lies and dirty talk mark territory as a form of appropriation:

> Tigers piss on the edge of their lairs. And so do lions and dogs. Like those carnivorous mammals, many animals, our cousins, *mark* their territory with their harsh, stinking urine or with their howling, while others such as finches and nightingales use sweet songs. (Serres 1; emphasis in the original)

Serres makes it clear that the language of territorial and economic appropriation has racist overtones that echo with the vexed U.S. history of slavery and territorial imperialism on the one hand, and sexual assault, or even rape, on the other. Thus, on 2 May 2017, President Trump said in an interview, "I mean, had Andrew Jackson been a little later you wouldn't have had the Civil War. . . . [H]e had a big heart. He was really angry that he saw what was happening with regard to the Civil War, he

said 'There's no reason for this.'" Amy S. Greenberg, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of History at Penn State University, also replied to the president:

> Indeed in 1844 [Andrew Jackson] pushed to have the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, Martin Van Buren, dropped from the ticket after Van Buren opposed annexing Texas out of a belief that it would exacerbate sectional tensions. Jackson preferred James K. Polk, an avid expansionist, and like himself, a slave holder. Had Jackson seen the Civil War coming, would he have deliberately made tensions between the North and South worse? ("Historians")

David S. Reynolds, Distinguished Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, concurred:

> Andrew Jackson, a Tennessee slaveholder who sent thousands of Native Americans to the West on the Trail of Tears, refused to take a moral position on slavery expansion, which in the 1850s led to plans for a U.S.-controlled slave empire to include Cuba and parts of Central and South America. Had Jackson, who died in 1845, been around in the 1850s, doubtless he would have defended slavery's expansion. The only deal Andrew Jackson might have offered the South to prevent the war would have been to allow slavery to persist and spread. (Reynolds)

As we are tragically reminded on a daily basis, every word spoken by the president of the United States has repercussions in the nation and beyond its borders. From that point of view, the president's words are very particular speech acts whose effects – unlike those of the words of an ordinary citizen – have the performative power to affect the lives of people around the world. The words of the U.S. president *mark* the world.

As a private capitalist entrepreneur, Trump has erected buildings with his name in large letters to mark his territory; as the 45th president of the United States, Donald Trump seeks to impose by synecdoche, but this time *in the name of the country*, such dirtying signs onto the world. Serres reminds us that this marking of the world is not only inscribed in animal ethology, but also in entrepreneurial strategies:

> In bygone days, the story goes, the whores of Alexandria used to carve their initials in reverse order on the soles of their sandals. This enabled prospective clients to read the imprints on the sand and discover both the desired person and the direction of her bed. The presidents of great brands promoted by advertisers on city billboards today would no doubt enjoy know-

ing that like good sons they are the direct descendants of those whores. (Serres 1)

As president of the United States, Trump has extended the drilling rights of privately owned oil companies that will appropriate large tracts of the world by marking and defiling it with their pollution. Of course, animals too appropriate their territory with their feces, but they do so "physiologically and locally" (Serres 74); on the other hand, "Homo [sapiens] appropriates the world with his hard refuse" (Serres 74), and when that homo (sapiens) has at his disposal the power of the world's first economy – and the launch codes – one can only shudder at the thought that this is not an empty metaphor.

This is what oil companies do thanks to the performative power of the president's words that, in effect, soil and pollute the world. This contamination – this *pollution* – of the world comes along with the abandonment of the "sacred moral imperative" enunciated by Kant. We come to the realization that Kant's imperative is not only the esoteric ratiocination of a philosopher, but the imperative under which democratic societies function. While we associate the word today with impending ecological disaster, Serres reminds us that "pollution" is a word of "religious and medical origin" that first meant "the desecration of places of worship by some excrement and, later, the staining of the bedsheets by ejaculation, usually resulting from masturbation" (49; my translation). This is the kind of pollution with which the U.S. president's dirty talk defiles the world.

With varying amounts of cynicism, Trump and his supporters have been arguing that *they* are not the liars: on the contrary, they are the ones who denounce the lies of others; they say *things as they are*. In his typically reductive way – which participates in the dirty talk by stripping language of its human characteristics of doubt and nuance – Trump tweeted, for instance, "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive" (@realDonaldTrump, 6 November 2012, 11:15 AM) or, "This very expensive GLOBAL WARMING bullshit has got to stop. Our planet is freezing, record low temps, and our GW scientists are stuck in ice" (@realDonaldTrump, 1 January 2014, 4:39 PM). Trump and his supporters may thus seem to exercise their right to use "free speech," or *parrhesia*, which is expressed in the first amendment to the U.S. constitution. In his late work, Michel Foucault traces the possibility to speak one's mind, even if it disturbs the possibly well-meaning majority, to the very origins of democracy. On the other hand, Foucault also points out,

> The explicit criticism of speakers who utilized *parrhesia* in its negative sense became a commonplace in Greek political thought since the Peloponnesian War; and a debate emerged concerning the relationship of *parrhesia* to democratic institutions. The problem, very roughly put, was the following. Democracy is founded by a *politeia*, a constitution, where the demos, the people, exercise power, and where everyone is equal in front of the law. Such a constitution, however, is condemned to give equal place to all forms of *parrhesia*, even the worst. Because *parrhesia* is given even to the worst citizens, the overwhelming influence of bad, immoral, or ignorant speakers may lead the citizenry into tyranny, or may otherwise endanger the city. Hence *parrhesia* may be dangerous for democracy itself. Thus this problem seems coherent and familiar, but for the Greeks the discovery of this problem, of a necessary antinomy between *parrhesia* – freedom of speech – and democracy, inaugurated a long impassioned debate concerning the precise nature of the dangerous relations which seemed to exist between democracy, logos, freedom, and truth. (Foucault, "Parrhesia")

Written more than thirty years ago, this text seems to be a sort of proleptic allegory of the current situation of the U.S. President Trump has presented himself as the *parrhesiaste* who speaks the truth when nobody else does – the rest being "Fake News." In fact, Trump only acts as a parasite of the democratic system who transforms the *politeia* into a vociferating crowd by vitiating the system and thereby appropriating it.[5]

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[5] Foucault stipulates that there are five features of the *parrhesiastic* act:

> First, the speaker must express his own opinion directly; that is, he must express his opinion without (or by minimizing) rhetorical flourish and make it plain that it is his opinion. Second, *parrhesia* requires that the speaker knows that he speaks the truth and that he speaks the truth because he knows what he says is in fact true. His expressed opinion is verified by his sincerity and courage, which points to the third feature, namely, danger: it is only when someone risks some kind of personal harm that his speech constitutes *parrhesia*. Fourth, the function of *parrhesia* is not merely to state the truth, but to state it as an act of criticizing oneself (for example, an admission) or another. Finally, the *parrhesiastes* speaks the truth as a duty to himself and others, which means he is free to keep silent but respects the truth by imposing upon himself the requirement to speak it as an act of freedom. (Robinson)

It is with Socrates, Foucault says, that the care of the self first manifests itself as *parrhesia*, though not only Socrates; Foucault considers *parrhesiastic* practices throughout the ancient Greek and Roman epochs:

> The essence of Socratic parrhesia is located in his focus on the harmony between the way one lives (Greek: *bios*) and the rational discourse or account (Greek: *logos*) one might or might not possess that would justify the way one lives. Socrates himself lived in a way that was in perfect conformity with his statements about how one ought to live, and those statements themselves were supported by a rigorous rational discourse defending their truth. Because Socrates bound himself in his conduct to his own philosophically explored standards, his interlocutors under-

As in the case of the "source of right" mentioned by Kant, once the water is polluted, the source becomes unavailable for the community. By soiling it – like a child that spits in his soup to make sure nobody will eat it – the dirty talk of the president secures him and his victims (primarily his own supporters) the exclusive right of that source. Arendt insists, "Persuasion and violence can destroy truth, but they cannot replace it" (16); the violence of Trump's language has that destructive power, but it does not have the power to rebuild and cleanse the world it has soiled and shattered.

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stood him to be truly free. Socrates' harmony is the condition of his use of *parrhesia* in identifying and criticizing the lack of harmony in his interlocutors, with the aim of leading them to a life in which they will bind themselves in their own conduct to only those principles that they can put into a rational discourse. Socratic *parrhesia* therefore manifests the care of the self because its intent is ethical, for it urges the interlocutor to pursue knowledge of what is true and conform their conduct to the truth as ethical work. (Robinson)

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