A Common Groundlessness: Trans Aesthetics, Ontological Pluralism, and Imaginary Warfare in the Contemporary United States

Susan Stryker

A feasible path existed for popular-vote-loser Donald Trump to overturn the recent U.S. presidential election results. He could sow misinformation about non-existent fraud and then persuade partisan state legislatures to select pro-Trump slates of electors to the Electoral College in defiance of the voters’ will, thereby throwing the outcome of the election to Congress and provoking a constitutional crisis whose outcome would be a political free-for-all verging on civil war. This was not possible due to some bug in a creaky and antiquated U.S. system of government; it was due to a deliberate feature. The anti-democratic animus that the Constitution encodes into the arcane rituals of the Electoral College, which could have allowed a Trumpian autogolpe given a sufficiently Machiavellian political will to bring one about, was intentionally designed by slaveholding Founding Fathers bent on preserving the basis of their political and economic power at the outset of their novel and somewhat anxious experiment with republican forms of government. The Electoral College, the equal representation of each state in the Senate regardless of population, and the now-rescinded three-fifths clause all conspired to give slave-holding planter elites disproportionate influence in the composition of the new government.

This structural bias was in turn rooted in the racial imaginaries that still inform Whiteness in the wake of the nation’s history as a settler-colonial slaving society. For centuries, being able to claim Whiteness has been the consolation prize for the bulk of the non-elite non-Black and non-Indigenous masses, who have largely settled for racial privilege and the often-illusory promise of geographical and class mobility for themselves, rather than throwing down and throwing in with the rest of
the oppressed to build a just and sustainable social order for all. It takes a lot of psychical work on the part of the White citizenry, as well as discriminatory state apparatuses and practices of extrajudicial violence, to ward off the threatening return of all that is repressed and suppressed in order for White people to enjoy lives lived on stolen land, undergirded by the legacies of stolen labor, while maintaining a sense of entitlement and innocence. Before race becomes the *caesura*, as Foucault called it, that divides the population and maldistributes life-chances, it is a fantasy that guides where the lines are drawn, the cuts are made, and the decisions are taken on questions of life and death among the “imagined community” of the nation and those it excludes from the body politic.

The common wisdom of the current day is that amidst unprecedented political polarization we in the United States have somehow lost the common sense of a shared reality—that we can, in fact, no longer agree on what is fact and what is not in this era of Birtherism and *QAnon*, of climate change and pandemic denialism, of cable news siloes, deep fake videos, and AI-driven social media disinformation campaigns. But to believe there is some consensus reality that we have lost and must regain is to believe in yet another fiction. “We” have never been “we,” let alone one, in the land of *e pluribus unum*.

This ontological pluralism is arguably the rule of human life, not the exception, given the incommensurable secular, religious, and sectarian worldviews espoused by the seven billion *homo sapiens* now living on planet Earth and all of our ancestors. Sometimes people have found ways to share space with others who do not share their fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality—we could call that cosmopolitanism—but at least as often this ontological pluralism has bred a struggle where one person’s truth flows from the barrel of a gun pointed at the head of someone rooted in another Real. Invasion, conquest, genocide, enslavement, territorial expansion, and empire are but theaters of operation in the overarching reality war in which a Eurocentric ontological grid has worked to ground itself in the material world at the expense of Indigenous American, African, Asian, and Pacific cosmologies, cultures, and political economies.

Trans and non-binary gender-identity claims have become hot-button issues amidst the current social polarizations so evident in our recent presidential election since at least 2014—and arguably long before that—when *Time* magazine put Laverne Cox on its cover and proclaimed the United States to be at a “transgender tipping point.” The perennial subterranean imaginary warfare of phantasmatic racial struggle that had already surfaced in the reactionary opposition to Barack Obama’s political ascendency became even more inflamed and acute when directed at trans Women of Color, with then-unprecedented spikes in the level of fatal violence. A harbinger of things to come arrived late in 2015, when right-wing opponents of minority rights overturned HERO—the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance, an expansive piece of municipal leg-
islation creating more than a dozen categories of minority status to be protected from discrimination—by reductively framing it as a “bathroom bill” that would allow male sex predators claiming to be women to stalk the public ladies’ room. Trans issues became a pervasive issue in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries, with Ted Cruz and Mike Huckabee waving trans rights as bloody shirt to exemplify the spluttering ludicrousness that four more years of a Democrat regime would visit upon the populace.

The existence of trans people has been weaponized in the current political climate not only because we are “problem” bodies and populations that jam the biopolitical gears of the administrative state and trouble its smooth functioning. Our existence also asserts a counter-hegemonic sense of reality. The cis-centric world too often imagines us as denying the facticity of our specifically sexed biological reproductive capacities whenever we begin to tell new stories about what our bodies—indeed, any body—can mean. It does not see the manifestation of transness as a refutation of the biocentric ordering principles for fixing social hierarchy into the flesh that are perhaps the most pernicious and pervasive extant consequence of the transatlantic chattel slave trade. It does not see transness as a promise that flesh can come to signify otherwise and anew.

Rather, we are reduced to caricatures. Hapless, hoodwinked poster-children for an emperor-with-no-clothes narrative about a delusory “gender ideology” that falsely teaches us that men can be women and women men (just ‘cuz we wannabe!). Or worse: a preternaturally powerful trans lobby bent on harming women and girls. Worse still: part of a plot by a Jewish billionaire (or extraterrestrial lizard people, if you’re more partial to Alex Jones’s reality than Viktor Orban’s) out to destroy Christian civilization by convincing us to sterilize ourselves so that right-thinking White worshippers of a blue-eyed Jesus can be replaced by the dysgenic hordes. Transphobia really does boil down, at the end of the day, to just another variant of the racialist fantasies that underpin modern ethnonationalism, in the United States and elsewhere (no American exceptionalism here).

Sometimes, of course, in one of the other dominant realities, we transfolx get to play the role of a newly discovered minority on the frontier of neoliberal social inclusion—or even a woke vanguard of the coming revolution. As foundational Transgender Studies scholar Sandy Stone noted long ago, the trans body is a “meaning machine for the production of ideal type” (294), one assigned the cultural function of confessing contested truths about the inner mysteries of identity, and, as such, an epistemological battlefield. But mostly we are simply this: people who have discovered, for the sake of our own survival, that deep change is truly possible, and that it emerges at the interstice of subjective and societal transformation. We know in our bones that we can become other, individually and collectively. Our radical potential—to the extent that it actually exists—lies in the witness we bear that such
deep transformation is a capacity within us all. This is the dark gift we bear. Accepting it will change you.

The question remains: what do we wish to become, with whom?

The path beyond the current impasse of our politics will not be secured simply by Trump exiting the White House. The path will not run through better policies and practices in a Biden administration. It will not be illuminated by rational debate based on evidence and data, nor will it turn on free and fair elections to come. Because the current impasse of our politics is rooted in an intractable ontological pluralism, it will end only when the grid of one reality is imposed upon another, or else a new reality is forged. The path beyond the current impasse of our politics requires the conjuration of “imagined communities” that do not yet exist but which our actions can make real. I testify as trans that such change can come. In the absence of common ground we must sink into a common groundlessness and arise together as something new. It is that or war.

Works Cited
