# Revisiting "the repugnant other" in the era of Trump

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Anthropology has long challenged etic characterizations of the contradictory other, highlighting the logics of putatively backward subjects. Recent punditry on Donald Trump's election echoes this ethnographic imperative, calling on concerned citizens to empathetically listen to the otherized Trump Voter to resolve the alleged contradictions in his worldview. This article calls for a different ethnographic approach to elucidating this confounding political moment. Instead of searching for coherent subjects beneath Red State contradictions, we must explore the ways in which today's caustic politics give a particular shape to the inconsistencies and illogical predilections endemic to the human condition. Drawing from interviews with several Trump supporters and anthropological literature on political subjecthood in Argentina, Indonesia, Micronesia, and Sierra Leone, I highlight three ethnographic insights on contradictions that destabilize the alleged "spectrum" of deliberative political subjects. In so doing, I situate the United States' current political landscape within the broader existential paradoxes salient to human society.

Keywords: Trump, contradiction, political anthropology, the repugnant other

In the months leading up to and in the immediate aftermath of the 2016 US presidential election, numerous media outlets addressed the country's entrenched political divisions by endorsing an anthropological project of sorts: a deeply empathetic form of the ethnographic encounter. In editorials, think pieces, and blogs, the left-leaning[1] punditry called on liberals to dispense with their polemical hubris, get outside their Blue State bubbles, and attempt to situate themselves in the world of the white working class other—to try to understand the nebulous Trump Voter. Instead of dismissing this other as racist, xenophobic, and misogynist, these outlets implored nonsupporters to listen to him, to imagine what it's like to struggle in his Rust Belt or Appalachian habitus.

While a *Time* article on Donald Trump voters echoed ethnographic scholarship in explicitly lamenting the "dehumanization of the Other" (Dorfman 2016), columnists and bloggers took it upon themselves to talk to, understand, and document this debased subject—their efforts culminating in pieces like "Listening to Trump voters" (Blankenhorn 2016) or "I listened to a Trump voter" (Hill 2016). Arguing that "the rage many white working-class people feel . . . is rooted in the sense that . . . they are being misunderstood," an opinion piece in the *New York Times* called on the left to "reach out to Trump voters in a spirit of empathy" (Lerner 2016). *Yes! Magazine* implored its progressive readership to "as[k] yourself, 'What is it like to be a Trump supporter?' . . . not with a patronizing condescension, but for real, looking underneath the caricature of misogynist and bigot to find the real person" (Eisenstein 2016). The *Washington Post* advocated for "empathy" toward Trump voters by highlighting ethnographic work on the politics of "rural conservative" laypeople in the Deep South by a Berkeley sociologist whose project was grounded in her "interest in people very different from myself" and a desire "to really see if I could make friends with people, really get close" (Itkowitz 2016).

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1. While this article aims to destabilize the normative heuristic of "the political spectrum," I use the words "left," "right," "progressive," "liberal," and "conservative" in the emic sense to refer to the ways in which contemporary political subjects identify themselves, characterize their institutions and locales, and interpellate others—not to reify these as a priori categories.

Needless to say, this batch of mainstream writing is not an appeal for laypeople to engage in scholarly ethnographic research. But much like the most vaunted anthropological scholarship, it attempts to shed light on the edifying rewards of pursuing one's curiosity through the ethnographic encounter—the sense that, as Margaret Mead put it, "the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep" (1928: 1). In these editorials, think pieces, and blogs we witness a burgeoning Trump-era truth among numerous liberal pundits: patient curiosity regarding those who have often been dismissed as backward and backwoods is a useful tool—the basis of a politics that ultimately works in our own interest. In this way, this discourse embodies what Marshall Sahlins calls "the common anthropological conceit"—the instrumentalist logic that "the ultimate value of studying other cultures [is] the use we [can] make of them to reconstruct our own" (1984).

This utilitarian approach to ethnography depends not merely upon an other onto whom we can fix our anthropological gaze, but also, more crucially, upon a bounded, coherent subject whose worldview we can grasp and demarcate. The directive to listen to the Trump Voter comes from the theoretical possibility that the Trump Voter can be understood—that if we situate ourselves in his shoes his ideas will begin to make sense no matter how much we may abhor them. Yet as we know from seminal social theory (e.g., Butler 1990; Bhabha 1994; Du Bois 1994; Freud 2010) and no shortage of anthropologists (e.g., Povinelli 2006; Graeber 2015), subjects are often arational, cognitively fractured, ontologically heterogeneous, and ideologically incoherent, making any search for a knowable Middle American other a difficult endeavor at best. Furthermore, as Susan Harding (1991) argues, modernist efforts to "correct" the stereotype of the "backward" fundamentalist often ossify this "repugnant other" as a clear-cut ontological category (albeit one that deserves "our" sympathy), while maintaining the sociopolitical spectrum that simplistically posits this other in contradistinction to the high-minded modernist.

I want to suggest, then, that as anthropologists no less impacted by this confounding political moment than the liberal punditry championing the empathetic ethnographic encounter, our task is to offer other approaches for engaging and learning with those whose politics confound us. How can we encourage the sort of anthropological curiosity and empathy that appear to be in vogue among a subset of the American media while also working to transgress the trope of the coherent informant? If,

as Harding (1991) argues, the "us" and "them" framework for social inquiry fails to account for the diversity of actors whose politics can't be neatly situated in a binary spectrum of political ideology, can we abdicate this heuristic while also learning from those who don't share our politics? Could one ethnographically approach this bizarre political moment in ways that deepen our efforts to elucidate human complexity instead of relying exclusively on familiar markers of positionality (e.g., income brackets) to pin down the irrational Red State populist? These questions are not just of relevance to the discipline of anthropology. The ascendance of an ignorant, pugnacious, egomaniacal, autocratic reality TV star to the US presidency demands a grappling with the incoherence and absurdity of this moment—to not simply rely upon well-established heuristics of subjectivity or normative political analyses to grasp why a sizable portion of the citizenry cast their ballots for said reality star.

This article will suggest that an ethnographic engagement with the unprecedented political shifts transforming the United States requires that we cease trying to make rational sense out of individual voters' political decisions in the voting booth. Instead I call for what John Comaroff describes as "the deployment of the contradiction, the counterintuitive, the paradox, the rupture as a source of methodological revelation" (2010: 531). I contend that an anthropology that operates "as the science of contradictions" (Berliner et al. 2016) can illuminate the putatively illogical actions of subjects in our present political moment while situating this moment in the broader existential paradoxes salient to human society. Although anthropology has long challenged etic characterizations of the contradictory other (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937), I contend that we must also leave conceptual space for contradictions if we are to reconcile the irrationality of our politics. Instead of narrowly uncovering the emic logics that obviate charges of contradiction, ethnography can uncover particular instantiations of David Graeber's contention that "contradictions are not incidental but constitutive" (2015: 10) of our social institutions, deepening our engagement with the paradoxical foundations of our present-day head-scratching politics.

I first recount a brief ethnographic encounter with a Trump supporter from Wisconsin that unexpectedly materialized in the course of my fieldwork in New York. Here I call attention to the fascinating contradictions and inconsistencies in the ideas she shared with me, not to pathologize them but to suggest that they gesture to more insidious modes of nonsensicality endemic to all

subjects. Drawing from subsequent semistructured interviews with six Trump supporters and anthropological literature on disparate political institutions in Indonesia, Micronesia, Argentina, and Sierra Leone, I then offer three ethnographic insights on contradiction to contextualize and problematize my ethnographic encounters with the "repugnant other" in the era of Trump and to inform other ethnographic efforts in this vein. These insights also draw from scholarship on the paradoxical nature of hegemony, the inconsistencies of "moral selfhood" (Simon 2009), and Erving Goffman's frontstage/backstage behavioral heuristic to help us make sense not only of the United States' political malaise but also of the paradoxes characteristic of human modes of governance. In mobilizing a diverse and by no means ideologically consistent body of social theory and ethnography to explore Trump's supporters, this article offers not a cohesive methodological framework for confronting political contradiction but rather a patchwork of provocations for situating our seemingly exceptional political moment in a broader anthropological project—one that paradoxically embraces contradiction as a site of clarity. In this way, my analysis suggests that the Trump era presents a sobering opportunity to look beyond the dysfunction, violence, and oppression stitched into this country's political fabric by reorienting our attention to the inconsistencies and illogics of society writ large.

## Encountering the Trump Voter

I felt a tap on my back, paused my harried walk, and turned around to find an older white woman beaming at me. "Excuse me sir, you dropped something." She pointed a few feet behind her where my headphones sat on the New York City sidewalk I'd been bounding down only a moment ago. I thanked her profusely but before I could retrieve the item she shuffled toward it and got it for me. "I'm from the Midwest; we like helping people out," she explained with a warm smile. "Oh yeah, whereabouts?" I asked, knowing that I didn't have time for chitchat—I was running to a fieldwork meeting—but feeling as though I had no choice; her affect seemed to suggest that she required small talk as compensation for her good deed. As we walked at a leisurely pace that she also characterized as "Midwestern," she explained that she was visiting her son from Madison, Wisconsin, asked me what I do, and, upon receiving my answer, cheerfully mentioned that her husband is a tenured professor at the University of Wisconsin.

The conversation quickly took a turn toward the political as I couldn't help but mention Wisconsin Governor Walker's proposed cuts to the UW system, a position she surely opposed as a professor's spouse. But much to my surprise she explained that she "love[s] Scott Walker" before calmly defending his austere policies in response to my incredulity. Admittedly, she didn't fit my profile of an extremist Republican. She was clearly well informed, and as a white woman eagerly talking to a Black man she had just bumped into on the street, she didn't seem to be a raging bigot.

"Wait, you don't support Trump, do you?" I asked, managing to be surprised even though all the clues were clearly there when she affirmed that she had in fact voted for the president. Suddenly seeing a racist reactionary before me, I had little interest in an empathetic ethnographic encounter. I quickly went from inquisitive anthropologist to arrogant liberal, regurgitating all of the "real facts" I could think of to castigate Trump, rhetorically asking how she could support such a despicable figure. Yet her affable affect didn't subside, and she happily responded. I, in turn, ratcheted down the rhetoric and followed the liberal admonishments in editorials, blogs, and think pieces to at least *listen*. After ten fascinating minutes of politically charged discourse, I explained to Candace that I had to leave for my meeting. But she was insistent that we continue our conversation and proposed that we meet for lunch the next day. With my anthropologist hat on I agreed, promising myself that I wasn't going to engage in a debate over Donald Trump. And truly I had a will to know—to understand the elusive politics I'd read so much speculation about—unable to tame my oh-so anthropological fascination with the Red State Other I'd finally encountered in the flesh.

That brief discussion on the street and our two-hour lunch the next day collectively comprised one of the most bizarre conversations I've ever taken part in. When I initially raised the matter of Trump, she predictably spouted traditional Republican talking points in her defense, affirming the importance of hard work and excoriating people who don't work hard and who abuse the social safety net. But as the conversation progressed, her ideas quickly drifted in radically different directions. She started describing Denmark's robust social safety net in far more detail than what I imagined a Trump supporter was capable of. I was certain, though, that this was just a precursor to an indictment of "European style socialism." To my surprise, she proceeded to cavalierly explain that she's a "social democrat" and that she supports a 60 per-

cent tax rate. Needless to say, this didn't sound like a Republican, let alone a Trump Voter. She said that she loves the democrat-socialist Bernie Sanders, that she went to one of his Wisconsin rallies, and that she surely would have voted for him if he were the Democratic nominee. She praised Social Security not merely for helping the elderly (like herself), but also for supporting children in need. She explained that she'd been orphaned at the age of four and benefitted from the program her whole life. "I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for the social safety net! It's really important that we have it and make it stronger." She advocated for single-payer healthcare and said that Obamacare needed to be expanded and strengthened. She called for taxes on the rich to expand education. While she's a devout member of a "conservative Christian church," she seemed totally unfazed when I mentioned my boyfriend and she sung the virtues of me being in a loving relationship. When I sheepishly raised matters of institutional racism and structural white supremacy, particularly police brutality, she agreed with my positions and never offered any caveats about white or blue lives mattering too. At one point, she castigated American corporatism: "The problem we face is that the people in Washington don't run this country; business runs this country."

Naturally I was mystified. Candace had many normative markers of a "left-leaning" American, was clearly educated and well-informed, and lived as a retiree after a successful career in education with a university professor in a Red State's liberal enclave; how on earth could she support Trump? I asked her different iterations of this question countless times, and usually it yielded meandering, equivocal ruminations on her experiences teaching kids and on acid rain in the 1980s and on anything else not directly related to the president.

Finally, deep into our conversation, she addressed the matter head-on. "During the campaign, he was treated really unfairly," she said. She lamented the "unfair" barrage of criticism and jokes directed at Candidate Trump from late night talk show hosts, *Saturday Night Live*, *The View*, and the mainstream news networks. She knew that the media always critiques presidential candidates and she knew, too, that there were plenty of things to critique Trump for but the degree to which he was lambasted was "unfair." "Hillary" didn't get it nearly as bad as he did. And that unfairness, in her judgment, was part and parcel of a liberal smugness she disdained—this sense that many people in Madison have that they're better than everyone else, that they know more than anybody, that

disagreeing with them is heresy. When she described her "liberal" friends and neighbors her facial features morphed from light and amicable to aggrieved and vindictive; I could see her disdain for these people's righteousness in the stone-cold V that suddenly refigured her brow. And while they could arrogantly dismiss you in public, none of these people and none of the media had the power to control you in the privacy of the voting booth, she contended. "I voted for him as push back," she added, repeating this refrain several times. "Push back," that is, against the smugness and arrogance and "unfairness" of the media and her neighbors.

At this point in the conversation, I had to let go of the anthropologist cool and do my own pushing back against this convoluted rationale. I raised the litany of mean-spirited, violent, incompetent things that Trump has done and said both as a candidate and as the president, imploring Candace to at least renounce her decision to vote for him, attempting to appeal to her sense of reason. "I'm just explaining my thinking at the time [of the election]," she countered. "I personally have been embarrassed by Trump. . . . I'm not trying to say he's a good person or that he's the best person to be president, and he's gonna be impeached soon anyway." "I was so mad at the unfairness," she added, "I have a bias against unfairness because I had such an unfair life," she said, referring to the death of her parents when she was four.

Was the media's "unfair" treatment of Trump really the only reason she voted for him? For all of her social-democratic leanings, she was by no means ideologically coherent, and contradictions, illegibility, and inconsistencies reigned supreme in her explication of her politics. While affirming her support for the safety net, she expressed an interest in libertarianism and said that she wants to learn more about it. She actively and consciously denounced extreme Republican politics while affirming her support for the legislative champions of those politics, notably Speaker of the House Paul Ryan. And contrary to liberal diagnoses of the Republican voter, *she was well aware that the politicians that she supported directly championed policies that she disdained,* including but not limited to the privatization of social security, the abolition of Obamacare, and rollbacks on environmental protection, among many other things. At the same time, she bemoaned the incrementalism of the Democratic Party, she cited that incrementalism as one reason why she was reluctant to support Democrats, and she called for a more radically progressive politics than what the party had to offer. She also cited a book by conservative

white supremacist Charles Murray in explaining her support for Trump; however, she did so to make a point about the geographic concentration of political power, not about race, and with the caveat that she'd only read this book because her "very conservative" brother recommended it, further explaining that she did not share her brother's politics. The confluence of statements she shared with me made little sense; egregious discrepancies occluded anything resembling a coherent worldview. After two hours of trying to understand the Trump Voter, I was left with far more questions than answers.

## Contradictions and political subjecthood

My relatively brief conversation with Candace demonstrates what any anthropologist would tell you: an ethnographic encounter to destabilize stereotypes cannot simply entail listening to the other, contrary to the advice of the aforementioned editorials and think pieces. Since at least Evans-Pritchard's (1937) seminal elucidation of the Zande's witchcraft practices, anthropologists have long debunked shallow etic contentions that others are unreasonable or insensible through deep ethnographic fieldwork—not simply semistructured interviews—illustrating the emic logic that cannot be gleaned from listening to a mere statement of one's beliefs. Furthermore, as Michael Lambek argues, "most utterances (voiced phrases)" that may sound contradictory are "not in the form of propositions" and are therefore instead "producing results or consequences related to but not the same as logical contradictions" (Berliner et al. 2016: 7). Embedded fieldwork with Candace would likely reveal no shortage of practices, relations, dispositions, and other utterances that, in their totality, would allow us to make sense of the patchwork of stated positions she offered to me.

With that said, I want to suggest that Candace's inconsistent and contradictory statements speak to an insidious reality unattended to by our civic discourse on politics: subjects are always to a degree incoherent—lacking a unified, consistent worldview or stable identity (Butler 1990). Furthermore, as William Murphy (1990) shows, subjects' contradictory political dispositions shape the overarching political structure that they are situated in (a proposition we will explore below). This suggests that the sort of contradictory political consciousness that Candace displayed is somewhat indicative of or correlated to the broader political upheavals that we are witnessing in the era of Trump. Perhaps, then, our task is less to make sense of the political positions of the 62 million

or so people who voted for Trump and more to attempt to learn from their lack of sense—their fragmented and incoherent worldviews. Of course, this exercise is no less applicable to Hillary Clinton voters or any anti-Trump actor for that matter; when we recognize the inconsistencies of liberal political subjects as David Berliner (2016) does, or, more generally, the oppositional inclinations endemic to all subjects (Freud 2010), we are impelled to disabuse ourselves of the notion of the rational, self-interested political actor no matter their political leanings. But elucidating the particular inconsistencies of Trump's supporters is all the more urgent given the profound political transformations these inconsistencies contributed to—transformations that, nonetheless, may be more consistent with the United States' historical and ongoing political turmoil than our civic discourse suggests (Rosa and Bonilla 2017). As such, an ethnographic encounter with Trump supporters focused less on their political rationale and more on their contradictions and inconsistencies can contextualize this political moment by illuminating the incoherence of all human subjects and the chaotic or insensible forms of governance we produce across cultural contexts.

While ethnographic scholarship has offered nuanced and intimate portraits of the politics of working-class white people populating the Rust Belt and "flyover states" that Trump won (see, for example, Dudley 2002; Walley 2013), an ethnographic encounter with these subjects focused particularly on contradictions can productively draw from the broad anthropological tradition of contextualizing inconsistencies and paradoxes. In this spirit, I conducted additional semistructured interviews with six Trump supporters, most of whom hail from "flyover states." While this additional data does not obviate my point above about the importance of deep ethnographic research, it supplements my discussion with Candace by further exposing how the contradictions endemic to all liberal democratic subjects take shape in the political era of Trump. My respondents live in the Deep South, the Southwest, the Midwest, New England, and my home town of New York City, but I don't claim that this is a "representative sample size" of Trump supporters. To the contrary, in exploring a range of Trump supporters' perspectives I aim to challenge the suggestion that any subset of voters can stand metonymically for a "type" of political subjectivity. Following Harding (1991), my intention here is to disabuse myself and others of the notion of a coherent and categorical *repugnant other*, while destabilizing the political margins that such an other

allegedly occupies. Accordingly, I aim to expose the heterogeneity of Trump supporters while parsing out salient trends in their verbal accounts to point to the ways in which subjects across a range of normative identity categories (such as gays, Christians, immigrants, and military personnel) comparably give form to political subjectivities through contradictory discourses and practices.

Toward this end, I will now highlight three ethnographic insights from anthropological literature that can deepen our understanding of how the unique contours of this political moment intersect with various contradictions endemic to subjecthood to create particular political proclivities often simplistically attributed to "the" Trump Voter. I will draw from my encounter with Candace and my supplemental interviews to contextualize these insights. While these insights are ripe for a deeper ethnographic project on the United States' particular political upheaval, I want to suggest that they could also enable us to link this political moment with other ostensibly disparate moments of social turmoil and, more generally, with the workings of human societies across time and space.

*Ethnographic Insight 1: Political subjects are produced at the intersections of inconsistent, incommensurable, and contradictory discourses and practices.*

The civic discourse on the Trump Voter situates him in a field of markers of positionality that allegedly demystifies his political leanings. He is white, underemployed, lacking in education, and living in a rural, economically depressed "flyover" state; he's predisposed to a candidate like Trump, a provocative celebrity adept at manipulating his economic insecurity, capitalizing on his limited understanding of policy, and playing on his racial animus.

While it would be inaccurate to characterize Candace as the paradigmatic Trump Voter, her positionality and views offer us a glimpse into the problems with such a coherent demographic-oriented metanarrative. First off, she is but one of millions of educated, upper-middle class people living in well-to-do communities who voted for the president; she is neither a stereotypically poor, isolated, and uneducated Trump Voter, nor a rare outlier among Trump Voters. She also resembles her fellow white women voters, the majority of whom supported Trump in spite of his misogynist track record—an aspect of the president that Candace disdains much like all of the other Trump Voters I spoke to. Finally, as a self-proclaimed proponent of "Christian values," she consciously and explicitly frames her subjectivity in con-

tradistinction to Trump's immoral charades and crass showmanship. These markers of identity give us no substantial insight into how she could support a candidate of his makeup. The demographics and positionalities of several of my interview respondents are similarly unenlightening in this respect. One is a gay porn actor, another is a European immigrant in New York City, and yet another is, like Candace, a highly educated professional woman. If we tried to determine their political leanings by relying on normative analyses of identity we would never imagine that they would support a candidate like Trump. Put simply, the positionality of the Trump Voter can only reveal so much.

This impasse presents fertile ground for exploring the ways in which political subjects take shape through semiotic phenomena that lack the coherence or consistency of demographics. Ethnographic scholarship is instructive in this regard, as contemporary anthropological literature suggests that political subjecthood emerges not from clear markers of positionality but at the intersections of inconsistent, incommensurable, and contradictory discourses and practices.

Gregory Simon's (2009) ethnographic work on Islamic prayer and the "contradictions of moral selfhood" in Indonesia is particularly relevant here. Simon explores the contradictory religious discourses and practices through which members of an ethnic group in West Kalimantan (the Minangkabau people) mark and perform their subjectivities. He argues that (1) Minangkabau subjects conceptualize themselves as autonomous individuals transgressing the constraints of society, yet they also take pride in being burdened by social constraints, defining their sense of self according to their submission to restrictive norms; (2) prayer is the medium through which they simultaneously enact such a fierce individualism *and* submit to society; and (3) subjects valorize prayer as the basis of an authentic moral selfhood, yet they often claim to be unable to pray, regularly abstaining from the practice that defines them as proper subjects. Put simply, subjects shape themselves at times through the transgression of shared social values and at times through submission to those values, at times by partaking in normative practices and at times by abstaining from these practices.

Simon contends that these contradictory discourses and practices evince the broader tensions between individuated agency and social embeddedness—tensions that are foundational to the human condition. As he explains, the "dual orientations toward integration and autonomy

in Minangkabau selfhood are elaborations of a basic existential paradox in the experience of the human self: The self is undeniably constituted by its integration with the world yet undeniably autonomous as well" (Simon 2009: 265). Furthermore, the religious practices through which his interlocutors "structure . . . [their subjectivities] around contradiction" (2009: 270) and give form to this paradox are grounded in the broader political context and power relations that these subjects take shape in; their contradictory orientations to prayer reveal and emerge from the historical tensions between European colonialism, precolonial structures of governance, and competing cultural traditions that merged and clashed through colonial violence.

Crucially, Simon argues that prayer is *not* seen as a means of overcoming the competing pressures of this oppressive political history or of overcoming the tensions between individual autonomy and social integration that this history foregrounds. Instead, prayer is a means "of managing, expressing, and even celebrating these conflicting dimensions of the experience of self . . . *never completely reconciling them*" (2009: 265; emphasis added). In other words, Simon rejects other scholars' arguments that the discourses and practices through which subjects define themselves enable them to resolve broader political inconsistencies, arguing instead that "selves, subjectivities, and the politics that flow from them may be constituted through efforts to grapple with *irresolvable tensions*" (2009: 270; emphasis added).

Drawing from this analysis, we can begin to approach the Trump Voter (and any voter, for that matter) not as a coherent political subject whose vote indexes their demographically marked positionality but instead as an agent shaped by structural contradictions (such as the simultaneity of unprecedented corporate profits on the one hand, and depressed wages and widespread underemployment on the other) that give specific form to and inform personal experiences with the ubiquitous tensions between individuated action and social embeddedness. In this light, a vote for Trump can be seen not necessarily as an attempt to reconcile such structural contradictions but instead as an index of how those contradictions give a particular shape to broader "irresolvable tensions" between subjects' self-conceptualizations as autonomous agents and, conversely, as citizens of a political public.

Candace attested to these irresolvable tensions when she affirmed the sanctity of certain shared moral norms such as respect for women, political civility, and an altruistic ideology undergirding the social safety net, while also affirming her support for a political candidate precisely because he failed to adhere to these shared norms in the overarching opinion of the political public she belongs to. As a political subject, Candace is driven by a will to assert her individual autonomy and to "push back" against a prevailing moral consensus, yet she also conceptualizes her politics according to such a consensus—a contradiction that she expressed no interest in resolving. Further drawing from Simon's analysis, we can postulate that this sense of irresolution brings into relief the inconsistent values of the broader political structure Candace is situated in; in her own vacillation between autonomous subjecthood and shared values we can locate comparable contradictions on the societal level, such as the valorization of collective democratic action and the concomitant reward for individuated success in a neoliberal nation-state. In other words, Candace gives shape to her political subjectivity by engaging with contradictory discourses and practices that do not suggest she has an interest in reconciling the ideological tensions endemic to her polity.

Joseph, a gay porn actor, similarly voted for Trump not to throw his support behind a candidate who represents his views but instead to explicitly embrace and call attention to such ideological tensions. Joseph supports a radical redistributionist political agenda and a queer liberation ideology at odds with the Republican platform, but he was compelled to vote for Trump as a retaliation against the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and what he viewed as its corrupt politics and neoliberal ideology embodied, in his mind, by its candidate, Hillary Clinton. While he finds Trump's views reprehensible—the antithesis of what he believes in and stands for—in voting for Trump he sought to expose the chasm between his political ideals and the country's political reality, as he perceives it. Far from an endorsement of his candidate of choice, his vote was an effort to embrace and not reconcile this chasm in the absence of what he calls "authentic democracy," laying bare the contradictions between the political self he envisions himself to be and the political circumstances he begrudgingly navigates.

My other interlocutors more legibly resemble the alleged "typical" Trump Voter in their professions (e.g., Peter is a construction worker), stated beliefs (e.g., Janice is a self-identified "capitalist" and a "fiscal conservative"), and intersectional positionality (e.g., Andrea is a working-class white Evangelical; James is a white military man), but they also view their vote for Trump as the product of irresolvable contradictions and not as a snapshot of their

political proclivities. Andrea, James, Janice, and Peter are highly critical of what they view as the president's impulsive behavior, inappropriate language, unconventional ideas, and excessive contentiousness but they view these traits as part and parcel of his antiestablishment approach to politics that they appreciate and celebrate. After lambasting Trump for his sexist comments and questioning his border wall proposal, Andrea also explained, "I'm a huge fan of 'say what you mean' and 'mean what you say' and for better or for worse you get this from him, he's very transparent, that's why I support him." Furthermore, in her opinion, his "disgusting" swagger and "inappropriate" conduct can't be extricated from what makes him an effective leader. "I don't agree with the fact he doesn't respect other people, although I appreciate his bluntness," she said, adding, "Do I never want to shake Donald Trump's hand? Yes. But at the end of the day I got the sense [from his bluntness] that he was gonna get things done and that's what I was looking for." In other words, his coarse and unconventional traits draw her ire but they are also foundational to her support for him. While she regularly affirms her commitment to normative civic values, she also supports the president precisely because of the way he flouts those values, succumbing to this contradiction.

That said, some of my interlocutors do attempt to resolve these sorts of tensions, notably Janice, a small-business owner and a proud Southerner. Janice critiqued the repugnant other stereotype of the Trump Voter by asserting, "I'm very pro–female rights, I think for myself, I care about people, I care about immigrants, I'm educated," and by expressing her disgust with Trump's brash conduct, explaining that his various misogynist and xenophobic statements "made it difficult to vote for him." Ultimately, she voted for the candidate that she thought would support "fiscally conservative" values and help small businesses, but she also rationalized this decision in various other ways to seemingly ease the tensions between her "pro-female" and "pro-immigrant" views on the one hand and her misogynist, xenophobic candidate of choice on the other. "None of us are perfect," she explained, "and a lot of the things he said weren't aligned with what he's actually done in his career. He's always promoted females and gave opportunities to females." Furthermore, "I think that Trump is a lot more socially liberal than people think. He was a Democrat three years ago. I don't think he's done a good job of articulating that." As such, she wishes that the media didn't make Trump Voters out to be heartless monsters; while their

candidate may be crude, he's more aligned with normative social values than people give him credit for. In projecting feminist and "socially liberal" views onto Trump, Janice attempts to attenuate the unease that his presidency evokes in her. As Karen Horney (1939) and other neo-Freudians argue, this sort of projection is a defense mechanism to tend to the gap between an individual's desires or behaviors and the social norms they feel they should be adhering to. Identifying the role of defense mechanisms in the formation of political subjectivity further exposes the ways we experience the tensions between individuated political agency and membership in a cohesive citizenry, revealing the contradictory impulses animating life as a liberal-democratic subject.

An ethnographic unpacking of our politics that not only looks diagnostically at how positionality shapes actors' efforts to exercise political agency but also explores the ways in which those efforts mediate their own internal and irresolvable contradictions can deepen our understanding of humans' bizarre political proclivities. Such a project would approach normative markers of positionality (such as socioeconomic demographics) not as the primary determinant of a subject's politics but instead as a key component of a broader web of contradictory discourses and practices through which the subject becomes legible. Elizabeth Keating's (2000) ethnographic work on political positionality in Pohnpei, Micronesia, is illuminating toward this end. Largely centering her analysis on ceremonial feasts, Keating contends that subjects in Pohnpei construct and perform their positionality in a hierarchical polity through multiple conflicting and often contradictory "sign systems" including food sharing, spatial relations, verbal language, and bodies (2000: 303). These different semiotic media give form to inconsistent markers of their subjecthood; whereas verbal language may suggest that a subject has a firm position within the political hierarchy, that same subject's spatial relations with other subjects may suggest that they are instead positioned at an oppositional point in the political hierarchy. For instance, lower-positioned subjects publicly mark themselves as privileged and powerful through a set of corporeal semiotic acts while higher-positioned subjects show hierarchical deference to those lower-positioned subjects through complementary semiotic acts evincing contradictions in the practices through which subjects situate themselves politically.

By troubling the coherence of markers of positionality, Keating's analysis calls on us to attend to the inconsistencies that delimit political subjectivity. Instead of exclu-

sively correlating normative markers of a subject's positionality with her political views and votes, we must also explore how that positionality is not reducible to such markers—how it is instead grounded in and produced by a multiplicity of contradictory discourses and practices, some of which may appear unrelated to the formal realm of politics, like a subject's quotidian subsistence rituals. As Keating shows, the ways in which political subjects demarcate themselves through, for instance, their orientation to their physical environment, their corporeal comportment, their shared rituals of nourishment, or their relations with other actors up and down their polity's hierarchy can point to the multiple and often inconsistent semiotic phenomena through which they become legible in the political realm.

This multiplicity does not obviate demographic-oriented analysis; a subject's class, race, and gender remain salient points for making sense of their political behavior. But if we draw from Keating's analysis, such demographics appear to simply be components of a broader semiotic field delimiting a subject's positionality—components that often appear inconsistent with other markers of subjecthood such as intersubjective relations, musical preferences, or workplace comportment.

Joseph offers insight into how such inconsistent markers of subjecthood intersect to shape political agency. Joseph is, on the one hand, a highly informed and active member of a democratic citizenry who abides by a civic duty to vote, and, on the other, a downloaded simulacrum of gay desire in the fantastical online world of porn. Instead of modestly casting his ballot, he unapologetically used this online world—the space that demarcates his very existence—to publicize his paradoxical support for Trump, relying upon his larger-than-life status as a sex symbol to call attention to the absurdity of our democratic system. In other words, the sensationalistic mode of performance that is part and parcel of online porn informed his democratic action as much as his reflexive citizenship. His civic values and socialist politics are simply components of a broader semiotic field through which he exercises political agency—a field that directly includes simulated sexual fantasy. While Joseph's public persona may not be common, his political performance points to the ways in which the putatively sober realm of participatory politics often operates at the whims of cultural phenomena frequently posited as discrete from lawmaking or deliberative democracy—phenomena through which we partially come to exist as liberal subjects. As Keating suggests, by tracing multiple disparate

semiotic bases of subjecthood, we can better grasp how actors actually situate themselves in and thereby reproduce the political structure that governs them. How do they experience and perform their positionality in light of the inconsistencies that define it, and how, in turn, do they navigate such contradictions through their political practices (such as voting)?

*Ethnographic Insight 2: Political subjects consciously work to disrupt hegemony while paradoxically reinforcing it.*

While Trump's ascendance has, in many respects, upended the political status quo, it has more so exposed the ephemeral nature of hegemonic institutions. Never static, hegemony is "an ongoing accomplishment" continuously reproducing social structures (Carroll 2006: 11) often through the absorption and co-optation of counterhegemonic forces (Cox 1983). Statist appropriations of countercultural discourses and practices (such as LGBT rights) exemplify this "dialectic of hegemony and counter-hegemony" (Persaud 2001: 65), but we can locate it too in Trump's incorporation of reactionary and fringe conservative politics into mainstream structures of governance. As a hegemonic actor, he works to solidify his own power and reproduce established political hierarchies by championing ideologies and orientations (such as protectionism and alt-right trolling) that have often countered the status quo he insidiously protects.

But the dispersed nature of power (Foucault 1990) impels us to recognize that multiple subjects located at different points in political structures—not simply dominant actors like Trump—take part in and contribute to this dialectic of hegemony. Candace's conscious will to "push back" against (what she perceived to be) a corrupt, myopic, and arrogant status quo by voting for Trump—a man whom she did not particularly like or agree with on multiple fronts and who represents said status quo in multiple ways—exposes the contradictory nature of this dialectic as it often unfolds in people's lived realities. Put simply, subjects often willingly work to disrupt or counter the status quo by undertaking actions that paradoxically contribute to its reproduction.

Maximo Badaro's (2014) ethnographic work on what he calls "paradoxical individuality" illustrates this in ways that are applicable to exploring the contradictions of the Trump Voter. Badaro documents the experiences of women in the Argentinian military in the first years after women were allowed to serve. Traditionally a male-only

institution, the military embodied an unapologetically heterosexist ethos grounded in "a deeply rooted historical narrative that naturalizes the link between men and the armed forces, associating masculinity with physical strength and emotional self-control" (Badaro 2014: 87). The presence of women challenged this status quo, unsettling a statist institution that partially derived its sense of power from a masculinist organizational character that stood in contrast to the femininity that its newest recruits represented in the male soldier imaginary. Yet women were allowed to join the ranks to solidify—not diminish—military hegemony. "In the mid-1990s, the military needed to . . . recover its poor public image, reverse a deep crisis of recruitment, and become more permeable to social and cultural transformations" (2014: 88). The de-gendering of the ranks was intended to work toward these ends, as a stridently patriarchal institution bowed to the progressive social and political forces that had eroded its authority in the years prior. In this way, the incorporation of women into the military disrupted a regime of patriarchal power for the purposes of reproducing it, exemplifying the hegemony/counterhegemony dialectic.

Of course, this transformation was not simply the doing of military leaders; the active participation of women was also crucial here. Were female recruits simply the pawns of the patriarchy, slotting themselves into the roles allotted to them by a regime of power with little interest in their well-being? Or did they seek to dismantle archaic prejudices and unequal power relations by upending the military's masculinist culture? Badaro rejects this dichotomy by attending to the views and practices of women soldiers. Ethnographically documenting the contradictions of his interlocutors, his analysis can help us theorize the role of contradictory political subjects in the hegemony dialectic. Most of his women interlocutors "are not interested in subverting the hegemonic masculine values, images, and practices shaping military life" (2014: 87). Instead, they consciously embody a traditionally female identity *and* a patriarchal military identity—subjectivities "that army members perceive as mutually opposite" (87). In the process, they "enact a paradoxical individuality" (87), eschewing a univocal or ideologically coherent worldview in the interest of navigating the complex power structures that give shape to their gendered realities.

Badaro suggests that this paradoxical individuality affords them institutional authority in masculinist spaces and allows them to liberate themselves from the restraints of feminizing practices that have traditionally circumscribed their agentive capacities while also allowing them to freely participate in such feminizing practices at their discretion and in ways that work toward their self-defined ends. As such, they have no interest in reconciling their constitutive contradictions much like Simon's interlocutors. Badaro suggests that the contradictory coexistence of a female identity and a patriarchal military identity indicates that they are focused on securing power in their personal relations and day-to-day lives more so than in the broader statist political sphere that these identities emerge from and are enmeshed in. In this way, the paradoxes foundational to their positionality "enhance individual projects" and "produce liberating effects" (2014: 89) while also contributing to the broader hegemony dialectic that animates such a contradictory subjectivity. In other words, the contradictions at the heart of their sense of subjecthood afford them power on a personal level while reproducing hegemony on a broader structural level.

This line of analysis can contextualize subjects' purposive actions when they work in service of a hegemonic power that ostensibly stands in opposition to their personal values—especially in the era of Trump. While mainstream news outlets have offered stories about Trump Voters who unwittingly oppose policies that the Trump administration has championed—for instance, the abolition of the federal government's Medicaid expansion—suggesting that these voters do not realize the tension between the politics they endorsed with their vote and the values they uphold, perhaps, following Badaro's fieldwork, some of these subjects consciously accept such contradictions as part of their efforts to negotiate the complex workings of hegemony. Candace, for instance, appeared well-aware of the ways in which the president operates in contradistinction to her politics; much like Badaro's women interlocutors, her support for a hegemonic regime has more to do with her efforts to navigate relations of power that are more proximate and personal than those nested in the formal realm of political governance. In spite of the hegemonic policies her vote propped up (e.g., military spending) and her personal values that contradict her vote, Candace supported Trump to challenge the power and influence of her haughty friends and neighbors who disdained him, exemplifying the ways in which microrelations and personal matters enable subjects to willfully reproduce hegemony even when they consciously oppose it. In other words, a vote for Trump could, in some instances, empower subjects in ways that have nothing to do with

Trump's policies or politics—nothing to do with the formal matters of government.

Peter, a proud Trump supporter, also gives us insight into how political subjects solidify their personal power by simultaneously eroding and reproducing the machinations of hegemony. As an immigrant, Peter confessed that he doesn't entirely agree with the president's immigration proposals and Executive Orders, expressed heartfelt sympathy for many of the immigrants who are suddenly facing deportation under this administration, and asserted that pro–immigration policies have historically been integral to the country's power, prosperity, and stability. In espousing this patriotic pro–immigration narrative and in positing his life trajectory as evidence of this narrative's veracity, Peter supports and consciously implicates himself in the maintenance of American geopolitical hegemony. Yet, "as a taxpayer, I don't think it's ok for someone to come here to reap the benefits as a citizen," he argued, reifying his status as a naturalized American in contradistinction to that of a powerless immigrant. For this reason, he reluctantly supports Trump's immigration proposals in spite of the fact that they would make it harder for people like him to become Americans as he did, and in spite of the fact that they undermine the policies that propelled a hegemonic "nation of immigrants," its power rooted in the proverbial melting pot. By aligning himself with policies that erode a central foundation of American geopolitical hegemony, Peter ironically seeks to solidify his status as an American citizen entitled to "reap the benefits" of this hegemony. Put differently, Peter's power as an American subject is rooted in hegemonic immigration policies that he consciously undermines (by supporting the president) to ossify that very power.

This paradox is most evident in his views on chain migration. While he's a beneficiary of chain migration and supports it in principle, he also approves of Trump's aspirations to abolish it on the grounds that doing so will protect American citizens from terrorists. We see here tensions between his proclivities as an immigrant afforded certain rights by a hegemonic world power and his proclivities as a citizen who seeks to maintain that power by rolling back those rights—tensions he intentionally called attention to during our conversation. For Peter, the existential discord salient to life as an immigrant/citizen steers him to wittingly embrace policies that don't align with his conscious inclinations, and to counter a core component of a geopolitical hegemony that he ultimately hopes to uphold. The contradictions between his

political, cultural, and existential status as an immigrant on the one hand, and as a naturalized citizen on the other, situate him uneasily in the hegemony/counterhegemony dialectic.

When we recognize that subjects are at times conscious of the contradictions that are constitutive of their politics, we can decenter ethnographic analyses that aim to reconcile these contradictions and instead tend to the paradoxical nature of subjects' negotiations with hegemony. Such a move can more fruitfully elucidate our bizarre political moment.

*Ethnographic Insight 3: Subjects simultaneously operate at different and often competing political stages.*

The incredulity around Trump's election is partially grounded in the presupposition that the formal political sphere is the primary mechanism through which subjects in a liberal democracy exercise political agency, affirm their political values, and enact their political agenda. Along these lines, a vote for Trump appears to be an endorsement of white nationalism, economic protectionism, misogyny, militarization, and many other despicable or parochial things. If a subject really votes for the candidate who best represents their politics, values, and principles, sixty-two million votes for a pugnacious, incompetent, bigoted reality TV star evince a widespread faith in a depraved political agenda. An anthropology of contradictions, however, can illuminate the limitations of this analysis and steer us in other directions. Ethnographic work suggests that subjects' personal political behavior is often intentionally at odds with the shared political values they publicly endorse.

Murphy's (1990) work on "the appearance of consensus" in political discourse aptly illustrates this. Murphy draws from his ethnographic research on public political meetings and secretive political maneuverings in a Mende village in Sierra Leone to argue that political subjects work together to create a strong sense of political consensus and to affirm a shared faith in political norms, while at the same time acting privately and furtively to undermine this consensus and to violate these norms. Crucially, these oppositional practices are largely coconstitutive in two ways. First, subjects publicly express their deep support for "a public normative order—such as the norm of consensus—as a means for concealing illicit strategies that are contradictory to that order" (Murphy 1990: 35). At the same time, subjects furtively violate political norms in a way that intentionally creates the political conditions for them to publicly invoke such norms so as to strengthen

their position. (To briefly illustrate this point, imagine a "law and order" politician secretly orchestrating an act of well-publicized lawlessness so he can publicly make the case that his polity needs law and order and thereby his political authority.) In other words: (1) public affirmations of legitimate political norms enable subjects to furtively transgress those norms; and (2) furtive transgressions of those norms enable political subjects to strengthen their political power by strategically affirming those norms. Murphy situates these findings in "Goffman's (1959, 1974) dramaturgical model of society," which contrasts the "frontstage . . . where social behavior is publicly displayed for the scrutiny of an 'audience'" with the "backstage . . . where social behavior is removed from public scrutiny" (Murphy 1990: 26) to call attention to the dialectical nature of public and private political endeavors—the coconstitution of a society's "front" and "back" regions. As hegemonic political actors affirm shared norms on the "frontstage" of society and dialectically undermine those norms on "the backstage," this framework exposes "the simultaneity of contradictory values" (1990: 29) in the Mende political system.

In this way, it can illuminate democratic practices in Western nation-states where political activity often operates on the "frontstage" of civic discourse—especially mainstream media—and the "backstage" of the private voting booth. Before ethnographically expanding on this proposition, though, I must note that the politics of consensus that Murphy describes in Sierra Leone is largely incongruent with the divisive, hyperpartisan political environment of the United States where dissent, protest, and overt hostility have long been prevalent and are increasingly the norm, and where people unapologetically wear their voting preferences on their car bumpers and front lawns. However, even amid this undisguised dissensus, a veneer of shared values still regulates political life, designating certain forms of public discourse as acceptable—demarcating the "frontstage" in Erving Goffman's schema—while relegating contrary political practices to the private realm—the "backstage." Generally speaking, discourses reifying "American values" and the "American way" have long been used to foment a "politics of consensus," with the effect of obfuscating forms of dissent and division that have always been salient to the US body politic (Wall 2007). While "values" is of course a nebulous term (Graeber 2002), we can begin to detect the ways in which collective norms create a frontstage of political life in contradistinction to

backstage subversiveness when we consider the infamous "Bradley Effect." The Bradley Effect refers to the 1982 California gubernatorial race, where an overwhelming majority of voters told pollsters that they would vote for Black Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley, even though he ended up losing the race (Stout and Kline 2008). The Bradley Effect hypothesis contends that many of these voters were unwilling to vote for Bradley because he was Black, but didn't want to publicly expose this unwillingness because they knew it is socially unacceptable and contrary to the values of equality and inclusivity—values that, in different forms, have been central to what Michael Warner calls the "idea of a public" undergirding the American (and liberal-democratic) political order (2002: 12). In this way, the pollsters, the broader public discourse they inform, and the civic values they affirm operate as a "frontstage" of political life. But in the privacy of the voting booth, these bigoted voters did not need to perform an adherence to such values. While the voting booth does not shroud political agency for many unapologetic partisans and opinionated citizens, the Bradley Effect suggests that it can serve this "backstage" function—a notion further corroborated by the "Shy Tory" hypothesis, which contends that many citizens feel social pressure to publicly embrace a political agenda that affirms widespread rights and equality, but will privately vote for candidates who unapologetically reject or challenge these politics. This backstage is perhaps best conceptualized in one of Trump's (and Nixon's) campaign aphorisms, the "Silent Majority."

When applied to contemporary US politics, Murphy's evocation of Goffman's frontstage/backstage heuristic is less a means of demarcating discrete "public" and "private" spaces and more a means of identifying the dynamic interplay between a subject's public political performances and their contrary private predilections. Candace's more reluctant disclosures to me attest to this frontstage/backstage dynamic. While she was upfront in disclosing that she voted for Trump, she was remarkably coy when I pressed her on why she did so, refusing for well over an hour to dis-align herself with the frontstage of Madison's "liberal" public discourse. Finally, after much prodding, she confessed that she and her fellow Madison Trump supporters were loath to publicly disagree with or challenge their Democratic friends and neighbors, allowing for a veneer of political consensus grounded partially in the fact that they all really did share certain moral principles if not candidates of choice. As these friends and neighbors echoed the mainstream me-

dia's indictment of Trump's misogynist, racist, and incendiary politics, Candace stayed quiet, not daring to publicly counter the accepted narrative that her candidate was out of touch with society's fundamental "values," as these are values she subscribes to. She, in fact, buttressed this narrative in her own disavowal of Trump's behavior when it deviated too drastically from these values. But, she insisted, her friends and neighbors had no control over what she did in the privacy of a polling station, as her personal and hidden political practices "pushed back" against the reigning consensus. In this way, Candace used the privacy of the backstage to undermine the shared values she supports on the frontstage.

Murphy's analysis impels us to connect the dots between this sort of public affirmation and private transgression of political norms and consensus in the context of Trump's campaign. Did Trump Voters strategically appeal to shared norms so as to conceptualize or legitimize their support for a prospective lawmaker whose candidacy was grounded in flouting those norms? More generally, did civic-minded articulations of prevailing social norms to counter Trump bolster a campaign committed to transgressing those norms? Inversely, did such transgressions paradoxically work to affirm the sanctity of shared public norms? Do Trump and his supporters intentionally deviate from civic values in ways that enable them to reify those values? In other words, how does a politics committed to dismantling key tenets of the concept of "American values" such as free trade, immigration, and respectful political dialogue work in the interest of magnifying (by reconfiguring) that concept? An ethnographic project focused on illuminating the contradictions of political subjects can shed light on the ways in which affirmations and transgressions of political norms in society's front- and backstages work hand in hand.

This frontstage/backstage framework is especially pertinent to Ian, a decorated military officer and Trump supporter. If the voting booth can function as the ultimate backstage in a liberal democracy for political actors with unpopular views—the private sphere where they can freely exercise political agency without the gaze of their fellow citizens—then Ian performed his political subjectivity almost exclusively on the frontstage of civic life for the better part of his adult years. Publicly positioning himself as an armed service patriot, *not* a partisan civilian, he consistently abstained from voting to demonstrate that military leadership puts country over politics. In this schema, the political subjectivity of a military man takes shape not through private individual choice on the back-

stage of the voting booth but in the collective space of the public imaginary, as civic discourses of "country over politics" foreclose individuated subjectivity. After Trump was elected, however, Ian registered to vote as a Republican and pledged to help reelect the president in 2020. But this shift does *not* indicate that he's now performing as a partisan on the frontstage of civic life. Instead, his newfound commitment to the voting booth is a personal matter, discrete from the patriotic persona he occupies in the public eye. His unexpected retreat to the backstage was rooted in a disturbing cultural revelation: in the last few years he's noticed "a fervent anti-white, antimale, and anticonservative stance" permeating American political life. The frontstage increasingly marginalizes white men like him, as the civic discourse of "white privilege" is used in elite spaces to silence and reject his views and those of people like him, or so he claims. This discourse has sanctioned a "tribalis[t]" backlash in communities of color, who are now empowered to do physical violence unto white people who don't share their political persuasions. As evidence of this trend, he recounted an instance when some "thugs" on the street aggressively approached him and asked if he voted for Trump, prepared to assault him if his answer was affirmative. Because the civic discourse has increasingly marginalized white people (and white male conservatives, in particular), his people have sought security in their own racial "tribalism," (which, Ian notes, is a direct response to the "tribalism" of other races and cultures)—an unfortunate development, in his opinion, as citizens increasingly put "identity first over country." To be sure, he believes that Trump has "100%" contributed to this proliferation of white tribalism, and this is why so many of Trump's supporters abstained from publicly declaring their support for him, in Ian's opinion; the "Silent Majority" exercises agency not in the limelight but on the political backstage. Ian is also highly critical of Trump's "personal character flaws" and "comments about women," but given the fervent anti-white, antimale frontstage of political life and the reality of racial tribalism, he feels he has no choice but to engage in that tribalism—for his own safety and for the safety of his community. For this reason, he has pledged to "pic[k] sides in ways that are not helpful," reluctantly succumbing to the backstage tribalism of the contemporary voting booth, even if Trump is not someone he strongly supports. A vote for Trump, then, is a private backlash to the new "anti-white" mainstream, and it represents, in Ian's view, a degeneration of the shared patriotic norms of civic life through which people

like him pledge to put their country first. In this context, the backstage is a concealed space where citizens intentionally undermine what they affirm on the frontstage (resembling the political maneuverings of the Mende village in Murphy's work), pointing to the ways in which political agency is often exercised contradictorily across divergent spaces.

## Conclusion

We often enlist the microlens of ethnography to identify the continuity of things that may otherwise seem inconsistent—to "make sense" of those whom we impulsively otherize. While this analytical approach is not without its merits, our present political moment demands that we don't simply explain away contradictions or search for continuity in these ways—that we instead explore the depths and reach of contradictions and the ubiquity of inconsistency.

Trump's unlikely ascent presents a prime opportunity to explore the paradoxes and irrationalities that are both a staple of politics and inextricable from human consciousness. As Keir Martin and Jakob Krause-Jensen argue, "it is Trump's open embrace of contradiction that explains much of his appeal. By holding contradictory trends and opinions simultaneously, he presents himself as being capable of embodying seemingly mutually exclusive social trends, such as an intensification of economic competition on the one hand and a radical denunciation of that competition's effects on some of the losers from that process on the other" (2017: online abstract). Voters' affinity for such a contradictory character sheds light on the psychic and ontological inconsistencies characteristic of *any* subject—inconsistencies that remain unattended to by normative understandings of the deliberative democratic citizen. As Lambek puts it, "(in)finitude, irresolution (incompletion), and inconsistency are features of the human condition" (Berliner et al. 2016: 8) and "we do not hold all our ideas in our consciousness all at once" (6). Instead, we ephemerally align ourselves with "multiple orderings of reality" (3), often vacillating between life's immediate concerns and conscious self-reflection in disparate ways that do not adhere to a coherent worldview (5) or, for that matter, a politician's legislative platform. Perhaps, then, Trump is the extreme instantiation of our innermost inconsistencies and, accordingly, his ascent can shed light on the ways in which subjects of all ideological bents attempt to come to terms with contradictions through political charisma.

In this vein, politics may be less an approach to operationalizing a clear set of values and more an approach to grappling with our own incommensurable values. When we consider Candace, an unabashed Trump Voter who also unabashedly supports European-style socialism; Ian, a privileged white man who feels compelled to vote for a bombastic chauvinist he doesn't really support because he fears he's been racially marginalized; Joseph, a radical queer porn actor who voted for the president to illuminate the blurry line between his phantasmatic profession and the political reality that the 2016 election brought to light; or Peter, the pro-immigration European immigrant who nonetheless supports the president's immigration policies, we see not a one-dimensional, thoughtless repugnant other that we can situate on the right side of a political spectrum. Nor do we see a cohesive social group that we can redeem through empathetic expositions on the other's allegedly comprehensive worldviews or logical personal realities. We see, instead, a diversity of actors negotiating the contradictory currents of life, aware, to varying degrees, that their predispositions do not add up to a seamless political ideology. These ambivalent negotiations demonstrate how we are often both attuned to and ignorant of our circumstances at any given moment, as "human action is self-conscious by nature, but it is never entirely so" (Graeber 2002: 59), producing results that we can only partially explain or defend, and contradictory dispositions that can't be plotted on a linear ideological map.

When we locate comparable contradictory dispositions in different political institutions—be it the Argentinian military, Indonesian religious communities, Micronesian food rituals, or rural Mende public meetings—we see that our politics both embodies and mediates the contradictions inherent to the subjects who populate them. As such, our task as anthropologists is not simply to locate the "contradictions between the level of conception and the level of operation" in human societies (Dumont 1992: 238), but also to call attention to how these contradictions emerge from and give form to political subjectivity. Such a task is not particular to the Trump era, but is particularly timely now given the charges of *irrationality* hovering ominously over the White House.

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