

## Deep Stories of the Demonized: Empathy and Trump Evangelicals

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When Joy kindly invited me to participate in this forum in the summer of 2016, she mentioned her interest in how I use performance analysis to study religious practices and groups. Specifically, she noted my efforts to write critically about conservative evangelicals without demonizing them. In my scholarship (Fletcher 2013), I engage ideological difference, religious conservatism, and social change. Specifically, I study conservative evangelical Christians in the United States, a group to whom I am theologically and politically opposed.<sup>1</sup> Faced with demographic and cultural shifts that displace them from their former status as the moral majority, US American evangelicals mobilize a robust array of techniques—many amenable to performance analysis—to win converts in a world increasingly indifferent or hostile to their message. I highlight two particular elements I admire in evangelical outreach practices: their acknowledgment of the reality and complexity of deep differences of belief and their efforts to reach across that difference. The dialectic of opposition and outreach has come to inform my own political convictions. Writing now in December 2016, I am having difficulty keeping a balance between those poles. Like so many in the US after November's presidential election, I am reeling. Stuck in a moment, struggling to think beyond the now, I find it hard not to demonize those who helped usher in a Trump regime.

I typically address my work about evangelicals to the progressive left, a heterogeneous but coherent enough *we/us* label whose reach, I submit, captures the basic political orientations of most performance scholars and artists working in the Anglosphere. I have challenged this *us*, arguing that we have much to learn about and from evangelicals and their activist performances. I have urged my ideological cohorts to look past the in-group/out-group polarizations that so often move us to flatten evangelicals into enemy caricatures. I argue for seeing evangelicals as more nuanced and complicated than their worst or most public representatives. In doing so, I strive to practise what David Román terms critical generosity, a stance that emphasizes finding nuance, complexity, and the assumption of good faith in my subjects (Román 1998, xxvi–xxviii; Fletcher 2010, 110). In this piece, I use the terms *empathy*, *understanding*, and *critical generosity* as rough synonyms, naming the practice of rigorous and non-reductive curiosity about and research on the lifeworld of those outside of or opposed to my own. Critical generosity, however, does not imply indifference. My critical generosity operates alongside a conviction about the rightness of my side, the side of radical democratic visions, of critical race perspectives, of feminist and queer activisms, and of anti-capitalist and postcolonial critiques. I consider my own stances on these issues as not just different but better than those of the political and theological “them” I write about.

But more than just thinking my side is right, in the months leading up to what I thought was sure to be Hillary Clinton's election to the presidency, I also felt that we were slowly but surely *winning*. I imagined the arc of history bending toward my-our version of justice. The utopian future I valued was *our* future, and it was imminent. Trump's popularity (I never seriously considered that he might win), I felt, amounted to little more than the noisy death-throes of a waning white-supremacist patriarchy. Hope-drunk, I regularly posed a question to friends and colleagues in the months leading up to November 2016: *What do we progressives do the day after Trump loses?* That is, how shall

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progressives learn to live with our neighbours (acquaintances, friends, and family members) who voted for Trump—and vice versa? The time had come, I assumed, where we could start imagining the day after victory. We could contemplate the project of coexistence with the losers of our moral revolution, those whom history was leaving behind.

That thinking strikes me as so naïve, so wrongheaded. Donald Trump won, a man born into wealth, a man whose only lifelong service has been to further enrich himself, a man cheered by groups who openly advocate a whites-only state, a man who boasted about the ease with which he can objectify and assault women, a man who traffics in rank mendacity and revels in bad faith. The forty-fifth President of the United States of America promises to be an avatar of bigotry, misogyny, racism, nationalism, environmental depredation, and crony capitalism. Granted, he owes his win to the intricacies of the Electoral College, not to a numerical majority. Nevertheless, over sixty million fellow citizens of mine voted for him. Trump is what they wanted; Trump is what we're all getting. God help us all.

This reality complicates critical generosity toward my political opponents, particularly conservative evangelicals. Exit polls indicate that 81 percent of white self-identified evangelicals voted for Trump, making them one of his strongest, staunchest bases of support.<sup>2</sup> This group apparently found it possible to ignore just how little a conjugally unfaithful, smugly avaricious, biblically ignorant candidate such as Trump resembles any recognizable version of a faithful Christian. Neither did the vocal opposition to him from several evangelical leaders dissuade rank-and-file white evangelicals (Derrick 2016; Shellnutt 2016; Green 2016). Offered the spectacle of a xenophobia-spreading, sexual-assault-bragging, disability-mocking, falsehood-tweeting Republican, white evangelicals voted much as they ever have (Smith and Martínez 2016).

For many progressives who are or who work with evangelicals, the 81% figure was the last straw. In the hours and days and weeks after Trump's victory, a number of tweets, blog posts, and articles appeared along the lines of "Dear John" letters to evangelicalism (see, for instance, Miller 2016). "White evangelicals," tweeted Yolanda Pierce (2016), a professor at Princeton Seminary, "you've decisively proven that you love your whiteness more than you love your black & brown brothers & sisters in Christ." Progressive evangelical disillusionment echoes a broader progressive backlash against calls to understand, reach out to, or otherwise empathize with Trump voters. This response began earlier in the campaign. One *Washington Post* piece (Ikowitz 2016) published the week before election day drew particular ire. In "What is This Election Missing? Empathy for Trump Voters," journalist Colby Itkowitz interviews Arlie Russel Hochschild, a sociologist studying conservative whites in Louisiana. Affirming (when asked) that a lack of empathy was part of the problem of polarization, Hochschild urged progressives "to get out of their corner and reach out" to those beyond their cultural enclaves.

The clickbait-y title circulated widely, provoking immediate, sharp criticism from the online left. "Empathy' for Donald Trump voters isn't just misguided," writes journalist Tom McKay (2016), "it's wrong." "Good rule of thumb," reads a Josh Marshall tweet, "empathy comes after calls for genocide/ethnic cleansing have been abandoned" (quoted in Baragona 2016). Such pushback intensified after the election. Many critics pointed out the racial and gendered dimensions of calls to understand. "We ask women (white and non-white) and men of color to exercise empathy," notes Miguel Clark Mallet (2016), "as if the ability to empathize with and understand white men has not been part of the survival toolkit of the oppressed in the United States for hundreds of years." *Slate* editor Jamelle Bouie (2016) fires back at post-election pleas to consider Trump voters as something

other than racist or sexist. Reviewing Trump’s rhetoric as well as the marked uptick in anti-minority violence after election day, Bouie spares nothing:

To face those facts *and then demand empathy for the people who made them a reality*—who backed racist demagoguery, whatever their reasons—is to declare Trump’s victims less worthy of attention than his enablers. To insist Trump’s backers are good people is to treat their inner lives with more weight than the actual lives on the line under a Trump administration. At best, it’s myopic and solipsistic. At worst, it’s morally grotesque. (emphasis in original)

There is no such thing, Bouie declares in his article’s title, as a “good” Trump voter.

Bouie’s argument is more complicated than its hyperbolic title suggests. He does not call for polarization; rather, he insists that we recognize the polarizations that already exist by virtue of Trump voters’ choices. Far from showing disrespect to Trump voters, Bouie takes their electoral choices seriously. He treats his political opponents as fully legitimate players on the democratic field, political equals invested with agency and responsibility for their decisions. As equals, Trump voters can and must be held accountable for the real impacts their vote has on the rest of us (especially women, Muslims, and people of colour). Bouie objects to “understanding” not only because it diverts attention from material threats against people other than white men but also because it excuses the reality of Trump voters’ political actions. Against what he sees as infantilizing, they-didn’t-really-mean-it apologia, Bouie demands mature accountability from Trump voters, expecting them to face up to the effects of their decisions.

In this sense, Bouie’s stance resonates with philosopher Carl Schmitt’s ([1927] 1995) arguments about the concept of the political. Schmitt defines the political as a matter of distinction and contention between friends and enemies (26). Contention—deep, irreconcilable antagonism between parties who pose existential threats to one another—is the *sine qua non* of the political. Schmitt criticizes appeals to third-party mediating criteria like rationality (a matter of misunderstanding) or morality (a matter of emotional maturity) to resolve such disagreements. Political disagreements, he holds, proceed from fundamentally incompatible visions of how the world is and how it ought to be, visions that are neither ignorable (in an “agree to disagree” manner) nor reducible to matters of intellectual understanding or ethical goodness. In my work, I draw heavily on Mouffe’s (2000) revision of Schmitt in *The Democratic Paradox* and elsewhere. Like Schmitt, Mouffe insists that liberal democracy depends on deep disagreements, or agonisms (2000, 102–3). The structures and outcomes of such agonisms cannot be determined via appeals to neutral rational or ethical criteria; primarily the definitions and operations of such criteria are themselves the object of political contention (129–30). The hard reality of such a view is that political contests result in winners and losers. Compromises that tamp down or magic away disagreements, for Mouffe, are inherently inimical to the liberal democratic enterprise (32).

Crucially, however, agonistic victories and losses are never absolute, never final. Vanquished opponents are neither annihilated nor exiled. They remain part of the liberal democratic field, capable of participating in different struggles and even potentially able to re-stage the struggle they just lost. As a result, neither victories nor defeats can be taken for granted. In the lead-up to the elections, I forgot that the essence of hegemonic struggles is contingency. And, as I allowed myself to forget in my blithe dismissals of Trump’s chances for victory, contingency can bend the arc of history away from my preferred ends. As Stanley Fish (2007) explains, democracy “is not attached to any pre-given political or ideological ends, but allows ends to be chosen by the majority vote.”

Therefore “democracy is the only form of government that, at least theoretically, contemplates its own demise with equanimity.” That is, nothing automatically blocks a democratically elected government from eroding or repealing the rights and protections that distinguish a democracy from a theocracy or monarchy. “Some would say,” Fish observes parenthetically, “that this [erosion of rights] is exactly what has been happening in the last six years”—that is, during the George W. Bush administration.

I remember those years, of course. They were dark times for progressives, an era of coercive jingoism, neoliberal hubris, sanctioned torture, and increased surveillance. I recall, particularly after Bush’s 2004 re-election, a now-familiar sense of shock, disillusionment, and disappointment in my fellow citizens for supporting a regime I considered undeniably imperialistic, anti-intellectual, and cruel. It has been oddly stabilizing for me lately to go back and read reactions from Romney-supporting conservative Christians after the 2012 re-election of Barack Obama. I don’t do so for *schadenfreude*, the ha-ha-you-lost thrill at my opponents’ misfortune. I mean that so many postmortem pieces on the right in 2012 sound practically the same emotional notes as those I’m reading from progressives in 2016. “It makes me wonder who my fellow citizens are,” says one disappointed Romney supporter the day after Obama’s victory. “I feel like I’ve lost touch with what the identity of America is right now” (quoted in York 2012). “This time it’s different,” asserts Catholic pundit Carl Scott (2012). Like Bouie writing four years later, Scott considers and rejects calls for conservatives to let go of their hurt, fear, and anger to turn toward the work of reconciliation. The time for empathy has passed. Romney supporters, Scott says, had been sustained by a bubble of belief in a shared presumption of mutual decency and common sense. “Obama was so obviously bad,” Scott tells Romney supporters, “that you couldn’t believe that enough of your fellow citizens wouldn’t see it and act upon it.” That belief-bubble, built on a respect shading into fraternal love for fellow citizens, popped in 2012. “The duties of love become more rigorous,” he counsels. “Gentleness now enters the room with a grim face and an urgent tone.” Scott, like Bouie, pushes a Schmittian realism about the substance of political contention and the real consequences of elections.

Let me be clear: I do not think one can equate Trump’s campaign or Trump’s promised presidency with Obama’s, Bush’s, or even (hypothetically) Romney’s. The explicit threats Trump and his followers have made (such as excluding Muslims, “locking up” his electoral rival, “revisiting” libel laws to prosecute journalists) pose a clear and immediate threat incomparable to any of Obama’s acts. Few politicians in my memory seem as close to pressing our democracy’s auto-destruct button as Trump does. And I concur with Bouie’s warning not to equate the “inner lives” of conservatives with the “actual lives on the line” under Trump. That said, Bouie’s and my thoughts about the legitimacy of conservative feelings matter not at all to conservatives except insofar as they confirm to them a narrative of preemptive progressive dismissal of any and all non-progressive views. The comparison I’m drawing between Scott’s and Bouie’s reactions relates to *affect*, not *fact*.<sup>3</sup> The decisive factor for friend/enemy distinctions, Schmitt maintains, concerns the *perception* of threat from another group, not the reality of threat as measured by some objective observer (Rae 2015, 262).

For this reason, I remain an advocate for studying one’s political enemies and for doing so with critical generosity. “As a historian and ethnographer,” writes Timothy Burke (2016), “I’ve often had to understand people that I personally or politically dislike. . . . Not because I’m a saint . . . but because *I have the skill to do it* and because if I use that skill I gain productive knowledge about the world, how it came to be, and what it might mean to change it.” I do not read Burke as mandating empathy at all times or for all people. It would be obnoxious to insist that the most vulnerable

should chat nicely with those who would incarcerate them, beat them, shoot them, suppress their votes, control their bodies, police their sex lives, or expel them forcibly from the country. But it is not a betrayal of progressive solidarity to recognize that there may be those who can safely reach out to and attempt to understand neighbours who support candidates, parties, or programs that we progressives view as direct threats.

Such knowledge is Arlie Russell Hochschild's goal in her ethnography, which (despite the much-retweeted *Post* story) aims not at scolding progressives for empathy deficits but at understanding what she calls the "deep stories"—the framing narratives—of conservative whites in Lake Charles, Louisiana (Hochschild 2016, 16, 135). Over the course of five years of qualitative interviews, she finds that her subjects' deep story involves an overwhelming affect—reinforced at just about every level of her subjects' lives—of being left out, ignored, denigrated, and downtrodden by liberal elites in favour of other (non-white) groups. Though not all of her subjects are comfortable with Trump, he at least (in their view) gives voice to this sense of powerlessness and frustration. Now, the deep story these people cherish is in many respects flat wrong, and harmfully so (for instance, in its suspicion that racial and ethnic others unfairly steal resources). Trump is in my view the last person likely to remedy the more legitimate, material causes of their powerlessness or frustration. Moreover, I affirm, with Bouie and others, that at least some of this deep story Hochschild locates stems from whites' losing relative (and unjust) privilege as the country diversifies.

It is not inaccurate to identify such reactions to the relative loss of white privilege as *racism*. But such a description should function as a jumping-off point for further scholarly and political investigation; it is not a mic-drop conclusion. Racism—like sexism, classism, ethnocentrism or any other -ism—is not a homogenous phenomenon that explains itself. Nor is it a demon we exorcise from possessed people by uttering its true name in their presence. If Hochschild's subjects cared about my thoughts about the misguided origins and racist effects of their deep stories, then they and I would likely not be in political contention in the first place.

To be clear, empathy and critical generosity are no better at instantly banishing bigotry, no more effective at changing enemies' deep stories, than explicit, demonizing opposition is. Empathy isn't magic. It doesn't open an escape hatch from political agonism. Political contests aim for victory over enemies. In the short term, this may mean winning an election, passing a law, or receiving a favourable Supreme Court ruling. In the long term—a matter of decades or generations—victory might mean realizing a world in which all your adversaries are converted, subdued, or deceased. The political struggle is over, and activism around that particular cause ceases to be necessary.

In activist performance, visions of such victories animate the utopian performatives that Jill Dolan (2005) writes about; they appear in the glimpses of concrete utopias that José Esteban Muñoz (2009) locates. Crucially, however, activist utopian imaginings of victory are ideologically exclusive; they are for the *us*, the friends, alone. Utopia equals the good parts of my present minus the presence and/or influence of my enemies. This formula works for other ideological positions as well. Many of Trump's campaign rallies are readable as utopian performatives, momentary glimpses of (what Trump supporters consider to be) other, better worlds that they strive for, a better world defined by the absence of perceived enemies (like Mexicans, Muslims, or Hillary Clinton). Such victory utopias play vital roles in activist endeavours, providing necessary spaces of recharge and unity among members of a coalition. In such spaces, calls for understanding enemies can be disruptive, counterproductive, and unwelcome, somewhat akin to crying "All lives matter!" at a Black Lives Matter rally or asking "But what about cystic fibrosis?" at an Alzheimer's walk.

But even for Schmitt, the ostensible champion of enmity, political conflicts are finite. No one is always and only an enemy. Indeed, Schmitt cautions against mistaking a political friend/enemy contention as a universal struggle in the name of humanity. Doing so, warns Schmitt, leads to “denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity,” a stance that can justify “the most extreme inhumanity” (54). For many progressives, part of the nausea of this post-election moment involves seeing double. We know various friends, neighbours, co-workers, and family members simultaneously as both good people of faith and hope and also as people who supported (or even chose not to resist) a demonic campaign. The latter image overlays my every encounter with them. I do not see how any amount of empathy or critical generosity could make me feel less angry, betrayed, and disappointed at Trump supporters.

But something like empathy might help me to work through my post-election vertigo, switching gears from *political enemy* to something like *parent at family dinner* or *biking buddy* or *person whose performances I write about* when necessary. This “something like empathy” isn’t utopia. Nor does it quite resemble simple tolerance. I am coming instead to view empathy (in both its scholarly and civil contexts) as participating in what thinkers like John Paul Lederach (2016) call “moral imagination,” the practice of finding ways to acknowledge conflict while also thinking past it to new realities (ix).<sup>4</sup>

Unlike utopian performatives, moral imagination assumes the continued (co)existence of those I consider my enemies. It addresses the ontological remainders left by political agonism, the parts of our lives together that persist outside of or in the aftermath of deep disagreements. Moral imagination traffics not in hope but in a form of non-cynical pessimism, a realistic accounting of and pragmatic working with scenarios in which resolution or peace may be decades or generations distant (Lederach 2016, 51–63). Moral imagination is what might allow us to say, in Eboo Patel’s words, “I am able to disagree with you on this set of things, and you will see me on the other side of the picket line on those things. And I will try to defeat your candidate at the polls. And we will find other things to do together” (Tippett, Patel, and Trethewy 2016). Empathy as a feature of moral imagination does not neuter political contention, but it can help to guard against the kind of absolutizing enmity that Schmitt warns of.

Such moral imagination also provides practically the only space for the possibility of conversion. In my research, I discovered that the savvier evangelical proselytizing techniques—the ones more advanced than canned scripts or Bible verses shouted at passersby—involve empathic ventures into the hearts and minds of unbelievers. Such techniques imagine a timeline for conversion longer than a single encounter, recognizing that substantive changes in beliefs tend to unfold gradually and result from meaningful interpersonal relationships. To be sure, lasting conversions are not the norm. They are in evangelical thought a kind of miracle, an act of the Holy Spirit to transform hearts and minds. Similarly, ideological conversions—defections on the order of “them” to “us”—are rarities. But, with evangelicals, I affirm that they do occur. I was myself once a sheltered, conservative evangelical growing up in south Louisiana, not far from Lake Charles. I can see a near version of myself all too easily in the complicated, thoughtful stories that Hochschild encounters. Indeed, there but for the grace of God would I be. Thus but for the grace of God would I believe. In my case, the “grace of God” manifested in the form of numerous encounters with people more progressive than I over many years. These evangelists of a better and more expansive view of humanity chose to treat me not as an enemy but as a friend, a coworker, a cast member, a student. The grace I experienced helped to make me the progressive I am today. My experience, in turn, moves me to extend a degree of grace to others—at least sometimes.

I recognize that conservative evangelicals who support Trump—or Trump supporters generally—have by their actions affirmed a leader who espouses nothing like the kind of moral imagination or grace I outline above. Trump inspires polarized reactions from progressives because his utopias—his visions of the ought-to-be—violate the presumption of the legitimacy of ideological opposition necessary for agonistic democracy to work at all. Trump embodies the threat of the nonpolitical, other-annihilating totality. I cannot blame those who focus the entirety of their activist efforts on resisting that threat. No one is required to be a progressive evangelist, critical empathizer, or moral imaginer. Yet, my own work and the work of scholars like Hochschild convinces me that many of those who enabled Trump’s victory operate from very different bases than do the most vocal, alt-right avatars of Trump’s utopia. Their deep stories, while in many respects factually flawed, also indicate areas of possible intervention and coalitional effort. Some of those people may even be potential converts. But all of those possibilities require risky ventures beyond the oppositional utopia-spaces of us/them activism and into the uncertain realms of the moral imagination.

## Notes

1. As I allude to later, the term *evangelical* is essentially contested, meaning different things to different people. I (Fletcher 2013) explain my use in detail in chapter 2. Briefly, I frame US evangelicalism as the legacy movement of a mid-twentieth-century reform effort within US Protestant fundamentalism. Like fundamentalists, evangelicals affirm the inerrant authority of the Christian Bible, the historical reality and theological centrality of Christ’s death on the cross, and the necessity of a conscious act of commitment (conversion) to a life of Christian faithfulness. Unlike classical fundamentalists, however, evangelicals also argue for the need to spread the gospel and make converts of unbelievers. Though absolute distinctions do not exist, evangelicals (such as the Southern Baptist Convention or various Pentecostal denominations) generally stand apart from Catholic or Orthodox churches and from “mainline” Protestant churches (such as United Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Episcopalians). Depending on how one defines the identity, evangelicals make up anywhere from less than 10 percent to more than 30 percent of the US population (see Kurtzleben 2015).
2. The exit polls’ 81 percent figure is contestable due partly to the slippery status of “evangelicalism” as a subcategory of Protestant Christianity (see note 1) and partly to the vagaries of measuring religious demography by survey or poll. The exit polls (operated by Edison Research) rely on interviewees’ self-identification as “born-again or evangelical,” but these terms have a wide range of meanings. Organizations preferred by many evangelical denominations such as Lifeway Research and the Barna Group rely on belief-based definitions of evangelical identity (generally: the authority of scripture, the atonement of sin through Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, the need for personal conversion, and the imperative to spread the gospel). These groups then pose a series of questions about beliefs and the frequency of church attendance to identify and gauge the strength of evangelical identity. For background on this debate, see Kurtzleben 2015 and Fletcher 2013, chapter 2. Nevertheless, the majority of news stories by and about evangelicals and the election cite the exit polls’ 81 percent figure. For a representative dissent by evangelicals, see Carter 2016, who in addition to the points made above notes that news organizations tend to conflate “evangelical” and “white evangelical,” obscuring the votes of non-white evangelicals.
3. Lest I seem like a stereotypical postmodernist, I aver that matters of fact matter a great deal. It poses a grave threat to our political process that so many Trump supporters seem to have swallowed not merely biased stories but *wholly, explicitly manufactured calumnies* about Clinton, about Islam, about immigration, about global warming, about trans people, and about people of colour. The struggle to establish better public and popular mechanisms of epistemic assessment, making common sense a bit sharper about the differences between “aligns with reality” and “doesn’t align with reality,” is a vital project. It is, however, not identical to the struggle to acquire an understanding of the affective realities of political opponents.

4. Lederach's full definition reads, "To imagine responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the challenges of the real world, are by their nature capable of rising above descriptive patterns and giving birth to that which does not yet exist" (199). I should note that the phrase "moral imagination" has been used by many people over the years to describe very different ideas, including the project of disciplining imaginations to make them conform to a particular moral standard. I, along with Lederach, reject that definition. For overviews of different uses of the term, see Fesmire 2003, 61–64 and Lederach 2005, 25–29.

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