Constituency of Rage:
Strange gods, 'realishness,' and the rise of the Hysterical Right

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ABSTRACT

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Peter-James Nicoll

The advent of the Tea Party movement shortly after the inauguration of Barack Obama signaled the beginning of the Republican Party's rapid shift to the far right. By exploiting the Tea Party as a 'constituency of rage,' and anti-Obama sentiment in general, the Republicans undertook a deliberate project of legislative obstruction for purely political and ideological reasons, resulting in an unprecedented gridlock in Congress. That a major political party should undergo such a dramatic and far-reaching change in only four years is remarkable. Meanwhile, a certain collective hysteria became more and more evident on the Right, together with a rejection of facts, science, and even reality. This paper establishes a conceptual model and an accompanying social mechanics to provide a new critical perspective through which such changes can be analyzed and understood. This model uses an extended relativistic physics analogy of 'sociopolitical spacetime' in order to unify hysteria with the influence of 'strange gods' in the political media (such as Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and Rush Limbaugh), the convergence of which creates 'warps' in which Tea Partiers and Republicans experience a collective phenomenon of 'realishness'—the ontological and phenomenological analogue to Stephen Colbert's 'truthiness.' Finally, I provide my own assessment of the state of right-wing politics in the Obama era, and what this suggests for the future of social conservatism in the twenty-first century.

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Never believe it's not so.

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INTRODUCTION

Sowing rogue

Allow me to begin by way of an illustration.

It was November 4, 2008, and history had been made in Barack Obama's election. The first African-American presidential candidate had just won 365 Electoral College votes to John McCain's 173, and 52.9 percent of the popular vote to McCain's 45.7 percent. It was a decisive victory with a clear mandate for Obama's campaign promises of hope and change.

McCain was delivering a gracious concession speech to a crowd at the Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix, Arizona. After thanking his wife and family, he turned to his running mate and said, "I am also, of course, very thankful to Governor Sarah Palin, one of the best campaigners I've ever seen… and an impressive new voice in our party for reform and the principles that have always been our greatest strength… We can all look forward with great interest to her future service to Alaska, the Republican Party, and our country" (CSPAN, 2008).

Palin looked nervous—but the crowd went wild, applauding, cheering, whistling. She nodded, then forced a smile, said a meek "thank you." The crowd began chanting *Sarah! Sarah! Sarah!* Her smile broadened and she even managed a giggle when McCain mentioned her husband, Todd, and "their five beautiful children."

In retrospect, it was fitting that McCain should turn to his right to acknowledge Palin—the concession of an honourable Republican stalwart and long-serving Senator to a vastly unqualified neophyte of with views much further to the right—for this moment was both a synecdoche and a harbinger for all that was to come. The Republican establishment, in defeat, was so weakened that strange, new, dramatic, even histrionic, forces would find

openings into the heart of the party, moving from the periphery—even from the far-right itself—into the center, into *power*.

To wit, it was only later revealed that Palin had been hell-bent on delivering her own concession speech—which simply is *not done* by vice-presidential candidates—and this in spite of "an all-out civil war on election night in Phoenix" during which she "turned her back on top campaign staffers and fought behind the scenes to deliver a concession speech that had been written for her in advance. John McCain and his senior aides blocked her from doing so, leading to a dramatic showdown between the candidates and their staffs" (Conroy & Walshe, 2009). And yet she was still undeterred: "McCain's aides literally turned the lights out on Palin when she retook the stage later that night to take pictures with her family, fearing she would give the concession speech after all."

What we see here is the first indication of what would transpire over the four years of Obama's first term. The crowd in Phoenix seemed to be dismissing McCain in their immediate embrace of Palin, just as a new constituency would soon reject old-school Republican politicians in favour of new, loud, and angry politicians from the far—even extreme—Right. Moreover, Palin's lack of qualifications or knowledge of domestic and foreign affairs (as revealed in her disastrous interviews with Charlie Gibson and Katie Couric during the campaign) didn't seem to matter. She was that certain special *someone* who embodied rugged conservative resilience and resentment, which McCain did not. Just as Democrats had found their superstar in Barack Obama, Republicans would quickly find theirs in Palin. And unlike Obama, she was 'one of us,' a 'real' American who had spoken of the 'real' America during the campaign. A self-styled 'maverick,' she could bring some good old common sense to Washington and finally clean the place up. She would lead the legions of 'real' Americans in taking their country back. *Save us, Sarah!*

Barack Obama's first inauguration on January 20, 2009 was attended by an estimated 1.8 million people (Ruane & Davis, 2009). "Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real, they are serious, and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this America: They will be met" (*New York Times,* 2009). He continued,

> On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord. On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics… And because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve.

Was the spirit of hope and change that day so genuine that America *could* choose "hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord"? Was this spirit so inspiring that "an end to the petty grievances" would finally come to pass? At the time, this sort of optimistic naïveté was sincere zeitgeist and so widespread (even internationally) that it both reinforced and excused itself. Perhaps this was it: perhaps change *had* come to America, as Obama had asserted in his acceptance speech on election night.

Change was most certainly afoot. Republicans, even though they had lost the presidency and the Democrats had held onto their majorities in the House and the Senate, weren't about to give up so easily. Even as GOP soul-searching was underway in the political news media, a plan was being hatched. While the new President and First Lady danced at the Inaugural Ball, a secret meeting was taking place. As *Huffington Post* journalist Sam Stein reported in 2012, "top Republican lawmakers and strategists were conjuring up ways to submarine [Obama's] presidency at a private dinner in Washington… For several hours in the Caucus Room (a high-end D.C. establishment)… they plotted out ways to not just win back political power, but also to put the brakes on Obama's legislative platform" (Stein,

2012b); this is detailed in Robert Draper's book *Do Not Ask What Good We Do: Inside the U.S. House of Representatives* (2012). "'If you act like you're the minority, you're going to stay in the minority,' Draper quotes [Republican Congressman Kevin] McCarthy as saying. 'We've gotta challenge them on every single bill and challenge them on every single campaign'… 'You will remember this day,' Draper reports former House Speaker Newt Gingrich as saying on the way out. 'You'll remember this as the day the seeds of 2012 were sown'" (Stein, 2012a).

The Republican drive to destroy Obama was thus set in motion on Day One, and as we have since witnessed, they would go to any length and pay any price in their fierce, obsessive, and arguably hysterical determination to carry this out. What we have seen, though, is the 'any' in terms of lengths and prices really would come to mean 'any.' The Republicans would move the goalposts so far to the right that policies and legislation considered irresponsible, counterproductive, outlandish, or even disastrous would become the new normal. While it can be argued that the Republicans were already headed that way, the reach, depth, and tenor of this new normal seemed to occur so suddenly and so quickly that there *must* have been a precipitating factor, a tipping point, and this was unequivocally the election of the first black president. There is no credible way to skirt or muddy this; it is transparent and immediately evident even to the most casual observer of U.S. politics. There is a BOE (before Obama era) and an OE (Obama era).

I first became interested in U.S. politics shortly before the 2008 election, and began following political news and commentary on television and online. It captivated me; in it I saw characters and antagonists, narrative arcs and tropes, crises and (non)resolutions, and plenty of humour. Shortly after the election, I was reading comments on a *Huffington Post* article and came across a commenter with the user name 'dissentisnowracism.' I interpreted

that as a sour grapes complaint that anyone who disagreed with Obama would now automatically be labeled a racist. To be sure, this is a fair enough concern. But then I thought: what if it would turn out to be the other way around? What if 'racismisnowdissent'? What if racism toward Obama, whether overt, liminal, or latent, could now be couched, manifested, and expressed as dissent, thereby becoming part of ostensibly healthy political discourse? And what if these sentiments became mainstream, part of this new normal?

It didn't take long for my hunch to be confirmed. Only a few months into Obama's presidency a strange new protest movement appeared seemingly out of nowhere, vehemently opposed to Obama's policies, declaring that they would take their country back. Many of their protest signs were clearly racist, incendiary, alluding to revolution and even armed insurrection. The movement grew rapidly, their rhetoric amplified and broadcast by a sympathetic cable news outlet, one of whose on-air personalities stepped up to lead them. They acquired political capital and soon began electing like-minded Republicans to the House and the Senate, thereby installing themselves in government. Theirs was a *constituency of rage*. To me, their overall characteristic was one of sociopolitical hysteria driven largely by scare tactics and misinformation from their leader and others in the political news media, and they seemed to exist and operate in some sort of alternate reality. What was happening? I endeavoured to find out, and see if I could make some sociological sense of it.

My methodology, if any, was simple: I immersed myself in U.S. politics throughout Barack Obama's first term, watching the grand metanarrative and its component stories unfold, listening to and reading informed commentary, taking notes, and cobbling together some ideas of what was really going on. I did my 'fieldwork,' as it were, quite comfortably on the couch in front of the TV, or at the computer. I worked out some of my critical analyses in graduate course papers. By way of a few theorists, together with my own ideas, I began to

form a preliminary conceptual model of how the various actors, agents, institutions, and social forces might act on each other to enable such a dramatic shift in the sociopolitical landscape in such a short time and with such a strong and strange tenor. In this thesis I will present this model and its components, apply and elaborate upon these in a critical analysis of sociopolitical events over the course of Obama's first term, and analyze what the whole of this *means* not only in terms of the current direction of the Republican party and the fate of conservatism, but also what it uncovers about the fundamental self of America.

In Chapter One I will introduce and unpack the component parts of my conceptual model—hysteria, strange gods, realishness, and sociopolitical spacetime—and then demonstrate how these work within the mechanics of the model.

In Chapter Two I will demonstrate the model and its components in a critical analysis of the rise of the Tea Party, focusing on the debate over Barack Obama's health care reform, and Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin as figureheads and leaders of the movement.

In Chapter Three I will continue this analysis, focusing here on the installation of the Tea Party into government in the 2010 midterm elections, the 2012 Republican presidential primaries, and the 2012 Romney campaign.

In Chapter Four I will return to the conceptual model, beginning with an analysis of the immediate aftermath of the 2012 election, before proceeding to a broader discussion of the current state of the Republican Party and the potential future implications for the politics of social conservatism.

I will conclude with my own reflections on what all of the foregoing reveals about the ongoing project of American selfhood.

CHAPTER ONE

Primer

At the outset of this project, my focus was squarely on the Tea Party. As I mentioned in the introduction, the idea of racism and racial resentment couched as ostensibly healthy political discourse resonated with me. It seemed logical to me that those opposed to Barack Obama merely for his being black, whether these sentiments were expressed outwardly or lingered below the surface as a subliminal malaise, could channel this anger through protesting anything and everything having to do with Obama. The rise of the Tea Party a few months later didn't surprise me; what did surprise me was the immediately evident level of vitriol and the brazen expression of racist sentiment, for example, on Tea Party protest signs. The anger didn't seem to be building up: it was *already there,* as seen during the 2008 presidential campaign, but now it was being outwardly expressed. I was also struck by the volume and tenor of Tea Party rhetoric; again, I didn't perceive a progression (or, more aptly, a degeneration) to this level. Rather, it seemed as if we were joining an already well-stoked angry mob *in media res;* the only things missing were pitchforks and torches. (The rise of such a backlash movement in and of itself was unsurprising, considering that the Tea Party is one of a succession of right-wing movements; then again, the sheer magnitude and amplitude of 'over-the-top-ness' and 'beyond-the-pale-ness' both expressed and embodied by Tea Partiers appeared unprecedented.) The first word that all of this evoked in me was *hysteria.* There seemed to be not only underlying resentful sentiments among Tea Partiers but an underlying psychosocial pathology as well; the fact that this appeared to be a collective phenomenon with a definite *psychological* component together with the usual sociological components suggested a variation upon the well-known phenomena of

mass hysteria and mass delusion. (I will define and discuss these and their roles in my analytical model in this chapter.)

This mass delusion became apparent in the Tea Party's protests against Obama's health care reform bill, which, according to opposing lobbyists and Sarah Palin, would institute "death panels" of nameless, emotionless bureaucrats who would review patient files and decide who would get health care and who would be left to die. This was thoroughly debunked in the news media, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, but the Tea Party and other conservatives continued to believe it. Other Obama conspiracy theories included his plan for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to establish a corps of Brownshirts (Finley, 2012) while simultaneously building concentration camps for the coming police state (*Popular Mechanics,* 2009). To institute this fascism (wait, wasn't Obama a socialist?), he would first take away everyone's guns in preparation for the invasion of UN black helicopters and tanks. This sort of thing is usually the domain of extreme-right conspiracy theorists such as Alex Jones. But now, these notions were being taken up, repeated, promoted, and importantly, *internalized* by Tea Partiers. At the time, I called it the mainstreaming of delusion, though I have since rethought and refined the idea. The Tea Partiers, and soon conservatives in general (including Republican legislators), seem to not only believe things that they considered true because they *felt* true. They appeared to share a collective *experience* of these ideas, operating and interacting in this shared space. But how did this relate to hysteria? Was this collective experience rooted in hysteria or was it the result of other phenomena, or was it both? And if so, what were the social agents and forces at play?

In spite of the often-heard Tea Party claim of its being leaderless, and in spite of the corporate interests behind the scenes pulling the strings and writing the cheques, the movement did have leaders. Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck were the two who stood out. At

the same time, other figures such as Rush Limbaugh seemed to provide leadership through their rhetoric. The attention paid to these leaders, especially Palin and Beck, appeared to be more like the adulation, reverence, worship, and even unquestioning *obedience* of religious figures such as prophets, priests, charismatic evangelical preachers, or cult leaders. In researching Glenn Beck, I came across an article likening him to what Franklin Roosevelt, in the Depression era, referred to as 'strange gods': public figures endowed with just the right characteristics to draw people in during periods of pronounced societal malaise. Indeed, Beck and Palin were strange gods, and I endeavoured to find out how and why. But how did strange gods figure into the linked phenomena of collective hysteria and experience of realishness? To be sure, their rhetoric certainly contributed to truthy ideas, but I sensed there might be more going on than that, and that this exploration would uncover a stronger sociological link and agency between all three.

In order to analyze the Tea Party and the Hysterical Right and, potentially, other social or political movements, I needed a conceptual model that would depict the interaction of the actors, structures, and social forces involved.

The following is a presentation of this model and a description and explanation of its constituting elements. While I discuss these elements in an order that attempts to unpack them sequentially, I must occasionally refer to terms not yet defined. I have made an effort to do this so that the terms can be understood to some degree in the context of the discussion.

Hysteria

When I describe the behaviour and rhetoric of Tea Partiers at rallies, this conforms more to the colloquial meaning of hysteria, here a worked-up collectively effervescent

crowd; when I discuss the underlying collective psychosocial pathology that I argue has become visible on the Right, I draw on the psychoanalytic sense of the word. I make the link between the psychoanalytic and the psychosocial *as collectively expressed and experienced* in group behaviour by way of the concept of mass hysteria, also referred to as mass psychogenic illness.

First, let us consider the colloquial, and of course ignoring the vulgarized use of 'hysterical' to mean markedly humourous. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the figurative sense of hysteria as "Morbidly excited condition; unhealthy emotion or excitement" ("hysteria, *n.*" 2013). The second entry for "hysteria" (which I assume is the colloquial) given in *Merriam-Webster* is "behavior exhibiting overwhelming or unmanageable fear or emotional excess <political *hysteria*>" ("hysteria," 2013). (It is a bit uncanny that the latter definition provides the example of political hysteria, given my topic.) Indeed, Tea Partiers at rallies or, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, at town hall meetings, display an acute excitement and overwhelming emotional excess as if they were responding to an immediate threat directly facing them, one that had to be shouted down right away—like a casting out of the devil. A video of a Tea Party march on Washington (NewLeftMedia, 2009a), whose interviews I will cite in Chapter Two, begins with the Tea Partiers walking in the street, holding a sea of protest signs. "FREEDOM!" one man cries. "Freedom!" the crowd echoes. "FREEDOM!" "Freedom!"—and so on. You would think these people were fighting to be released from bondage, or were bravely dissenting a fascist police state, or protesting an abridgement of fundamental Constitutional rights. But this was no bridge in Selma. There were no police or state troopers or National Guard beating them back, or launching tear gas grenades, or turning fire hoses on them. These Tea Partiers were freely marching through the streets, exercising their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and peaceful assembly in

order to petition the government for a redress of grievances—and yet one merely listening to audio of the crowd's shouting might think this was an uprising of the oppressed and marginalized. The visual image of the protest, however, tells another story: these were older, seemingly well-off, and overwhelmingly white people—precisely the constituency of the *most* privileged in American society. Somehow, though, these people believed they were no longer free, or would soon have their freedoms eroded, and as such had to fight for it. This is the fear as in the *Merriam-Webster* definition of hysteria expressed in an "excited condition" of "emotional excess."

Consider a woman at the same march, screaming "Boycott Hollywood! And all the Commies! McCarthy and John Wayne were *right!*" (NewLeftMedia, 2010a). (I italicize "right" because on this word her screaming takes on an even more shrill tone.) Commies in Hollywood? McCarthy? This was the first and last time I'd ever heard about a Tea Party boycott of Hollywood. Was this the 1950s? Or had the communist threat persisted to the present day? No, it must be Barack Obama, then: he brought communism (wasn't it fascism?) back as part of his secret agenda. Whatever the case, this woman clearly believed that communists in the film industry were somehow in cahoots with Obama in order to strip Americans of their constitutional rights… or something to that effect.

However, the Tea Partiers' behaviour is not beyond understanding (or analysis). If one truly believes his or her freedoms are under attack, this effects a visceral reaction that prompts outward displays of fear via anger, or more appropriately, rage. It seems to me incomplete to leave the analysis there, for it neglects the question of the *nature* of the social space in which the Tea Partiers operate. Believing nonsense such as Obamacare instituting death panels or FEMA building concentration camps is one thing; *living and acting* informed and driven by these beliefs *within a like-minded collective* provides the opportunity to

characterize this peculiar state of group operation. This is 'realishness,' which I will discuss shortly.

As for the psychoanalytic sense of hysteria, the *OED* gives the pathological definition as "[a] functional disturbance of the nervous system, characterized by such disorders as anaesthesia, hyperaesthesia, convulsions, etc., and usually attended with emotional disturbances and enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties" ("hysteria, *n.*" 2013). *Merriam-Webster* defines this as "a psychoneurosis marked by emotional excitability and disturbances of the psychic, sensory, vasomotor, and visceral functions" ("hysteria," 2013). Of course, when discussing this form of hysteria we cannot rely on dictionary definitions alone, for in this psychoanalytic sense it is much more profound and complex, not to mention clearly controversial (as is Freud). Moreover, it is now an obsolete psychiatric condition since superceded by new terminology and updated diagnostic criteria. Still, I will draw upon Freud's own work on hysteria and eschew consideration of debates over his work, since such debates are largely irrelevant to the idea of hysteria I have formed in order to characterize the Tea Party and the Right.

Of particular relevance here is Freud's theory of outside causes as precipitating psychological traumas that in turn manifest themselves physically. Clearly, in my own use of hysteria, it is sensible to leave out physical manifestations of illness; I doubt that Tea Partiers enraged by Barack Obama develop "neuralgia," "vomiting," or "epileptiform convulsions" (Freud, 1912, p. 6). Rather, it is Freud's discussion of the internal psychic elements and processes that lead to hysteria that is of interest here. He maintains that "the causes of many, if not of all, cases of hysteria can be designated as psychic traumas. Every experience which produces the painful affect of fear, anxiety, shame or of psychic pain may act as a psychic

trauma. Whether an experience becomes of traumatic importance naturally depends on the person affected" (p. 7).

The psychic traumas of the Hysterical Right are not merely intensified experiences of existing sentiments, but such conditioning is what primes the psyche for the traumas. Consider race: the data of recent studies (which I will present in Chapter Two) show that Tea Partiers overwhelmingly harbour very high levels of racial resentment, and that Tea Party support is a predictor of racial resentment (Parker, 2010). One can be racially resentful, such as on the issue of affirmative action (Obama has been called the "affirmative action president" throughout the right-wing political media), without being racist in terms of, for example, advocating a return to segregation. However, the election of a black president was clearly a wide-scale trauma for the racially resentful, as well as bona fide racists. After 43 white presidents, suddenly there was a black one—but the president is 'supposed to be' white! Not only that, he had been a community organizer in Chicago, a two-term Illinois state Senator, and had only served two years as U.S. Senator from Illinois when he announced his presidential bid. But John McCain had been in the U.S. Senate since 1997, before which he served in the House for four years, before which he was a prisoner of war held at the Hanoi Hilton where he was brutally tortured for six years. McCain was an American hero who had more than paid his dues to his country. And yet the country elected someone widely considered inexperienced. "Why?" these people ask. The most immediate and accessible answer is "Because he's black."

Then there is the matter of Obama's otherness; and indeed, he is an Other several times over. For example, his first and last names sound African while his middle name—Hussein—evokes the Hussein the U.S. went after twice. On top of that, Obama's father was Muslim, so what does that make him? Consider the widely-seen bumper sticker "Everything

I needed to know about Islam I learned on 9/11." In post 9/11 America, Muslims were no longer simply Others but *demonized* Others. We can also consider Obama's sophistication, elegant speech, calm (even occasionally aloof) demeanour, and life story (for example, his past drug use) as othering him. Was he even a natural-born citizen? (This continues to drive the Birther movement.) The more conspiracy-minded might wonder if he was a Manchurian Candidate. All of these and other 'othernesses' converge, and for the 'real' Americans Sarah Palin spoke of in the 2008 campaign, this led to one conclusion: *he's not one of us.*

This leads to the trauma of recognition of *who* elected the Obama-Other. Who were they? The blacks, the Latinos, the Muslims, the atheists, the gays, the intellectual elite, the bleeding-heart big-city liberals: hardly the picture of 'real' America—at least according to the 'real' Americans of the Hysterical Right. Were they going to take over? What would happen to whites, to Christians, to simple folk? Obama's election and re-election proved that this coalition of Others was indeed a real and strong constituency. "We have to take our country back!" cry the Tea Partiers: take it back from these usurper-Others who had wrested America from the 'real' Americans. (This is essentially white Christian conservative victimhood.)

Clearly, then, the election of Barack Obama, in itself a trauma, led to numerous other traumas that, together with pre-existing sentiments such as racial resentment or Islamophobia, support the notion of a pathology of psychic trauma among conservatives. As such, for all intents and purposes, the psychoanalytic definition of hysteria does indeed apply here.

But if I am to argue that hysteria in the psychoanalytic sense does not necessarily manifest as psychosomatic physical ailments, how and where do the internal traumas manifest visibly? First, we have to abandon the mind–body dualism that Freud and others,

even as they link the two, ironically *reinforce* through their seeming insistence that psychic hysteria is accompanied by physical ailments. Instead, the manifestations can be both phenomenological and psychosocial. Still, if these manifestations are, as I will argue throughout, a perception of and *experience of* a distorted external reality, an external agent that creates and transmits that reality is required. If we were to limit this phenomenon to the psyche alone, we could simply say that one 'disorder' causes the other and/or they are co-morbid. The external agent provides what the psyche seeks: a beacon of ostensible sanity, and a source of comfort, guidance, direction, and motivation. This, along with traumas, prime the psyche to accept and internalize whatever the external agent provides as panacea. The key here is this: when this external agent—the political media, a candidate for office, or a 'strange god'—provides misinformation, delusional notions, and a picture of a distorted reality *all the while providing the comfort the individual seeks,* this information becomes embedded in the psyche as truth and, by extension, reality. This, in turn, leads to phenomenological and psychosocial manifestations that can become hysterical (in the more colloquial sense) in nature.

As for hysteria in terms of mass psychogenic illness, many such cases have been documented and analyzed. Nuns seemed particularly prone to this; there were outbreaks in convents throughout Europe every few years from at least the 15th century on (Bartholomew & Wessely, 2002, p. 301). Their collective predisposition was no doubt constituted mainly of their religious belief in spirits and demons. Schoolchildren, particularly girls, also seemed especially prone to psychogenic outbreaks (p. 301). But pinning down the predisposing causes of mass psychogenic illness has been difficult; as Bartholomew and Wessely write, "[Scientists'] conflicting and inconclusive findings are not surprising because episodes involve *social realities and the consequences of beliefs*. Investigators of modern-day outbreaks of

mass sociogenic illness in school or job settings have used standardized personality tests to identify social, psychological and even physical characteristics… There is no consistent pattern" (p. 303; my emphasis). That these episodes involve "social realities and the consequences of beliefs" is of utmost importance to my argument that the Tea Party and the subsequent shift of the Republicans to the far right stem from exactly these realities and beliefs; but of course their social realities in this case are often realish, and their beliefs truthy in origin. That my concept of realishness as a phenomenon that can only exist in a collective establishes the link between the clinical and sociological senses of hysteria.

Finally, as to whether this hysteria spectrum can truly manifest itself sociopolitically, we need look no further than the Red Scares that followed both World Wars. Writing on the earlier scare of 1919 to 1920, Robert K. Murray (1955) discusses the war as precipitating not only the hysteria but providing for the emergence of sociopolitical groups that seem eerily familiar to what we see today on several levels.

> In 1919 America's soul was in danger. It was in danger not merely because of the nation's refusal to accept its moral responsibilities, or solve intelligently its economic problems, or shun the pitfalls of unbridled self-interest. Primarily it was in danger because the nation was deserting its most honored principles of freedom—principles which had made it great and which had given it birth.
>
> Nowhere was this fact more obvious than in the social scene of 1919. The war was largely to blame. During the conflict the demand for absolute loyalty had permeated every nook and cranny of the social structure. Independent agencies, such as the National Security League and the American Defense Society, together with the government-sponsored American Protective League, had converted thousands of otherwise reasonable and sane Americans into super-patriots and self-styled spy-chasers by spreading rabid propaganda which maximized the dangers of wartime sabotage and sedition. Supposedly these agencies represented the nation's first line of defense against wartime subversive activity. But by the close of the war they actually had become the repository of elements which were much more interested in strengthening a sympathy for economic and political conservatism than in underwriting a healthy patriotism. Under the guidance of their leaders, these organizations often used "Americanism" merely to blacken the reputation and character of persons and groups whose opinions they hated and feared. (pp. 11–12)

With minor substitutions here and there, this passage could have been written about the Tea Party and the Hysterical Right. As such, there should be no question as to the capacity of hysteria to manifest itself squarely in the sociopolitical realm (or, in my conceptualization, sociopolitical spacetime). If we accept that dramatic and rapid sociopolitical change can indeed induce psychic trauma, then the manifestation of such trauma on a national scale (as supported by Murray above) means that sociopolitical hysteria exists on a continuum, or more precisely, a spectrum from the micro (internal psychic trauma; the personal) to the meso (outward manifestations of hysteria in a collective, such as local Tea Party chapters) to the macro (national Tea Party groups and Republican politicians).

Strange gods

A strange god is quite simply a person who possesses a unique charisma, some degree of prestige (earned or not), the rhetorical power to inform, inspire, and motivate, and a certain agency within the mass media that allows him or her to use these qualities to reach the people. Their overall agency is created by the synergistic confluence of these and other characteristics. I refer to this agency as sociopolitical alchemy rather than synergy, for alchemy evokes magic and the supernatural, but here, this alchemy *does* create gold. If we think of religion, we could say that the strange gods are messianic in nature insofar as they are, as I said above, beacons that provide guidance, comfort, direction, and motivation. The strange gods, then, are therefore the agents that complete the recursive circuit of sociopolitical hysteria. They are necessary agents in the conceptual model I will present later.

To be sure, the strange god is not a new concept; it is merely the term I have chosen from an article on former Fox News commentator and Tea Party leader Glenn Beck that compares him to Father Charles Coughlin, a Depression-era Catholic priest whose fiery

radio sermons were immensely popular. Coughlin, writes Douglas McCollam (2010), "was without question the most powerful broadcasting force America has ever known…

> Working from his home parish at the Shrine of the Little Flower in suburban Detroit, the 'Radio Priest' built an audience estimated as high as forty million listeners for his Sunday broadcasts—at a time when America's population was less than half of what it is today. At the apex of his popularity, he received around 10,000 letters a day and employed a staff of more than a hundred clerks and four private secretaries just to answer his mail…
>
> And like his latter-day successors [e.g. Glenn Beck], Coughlin's influence extended far beyond the confines of the studio. (p. 55)

At first pro-FDR, Coughlin soon became a rabid critic. McCollam writes, "Franklin D. Roosevelt observed that, under normal circumstances, many of his more outlandish detractors would not have gained traction with the public. 'However, these are not normal times,' said Roosevelt. 'People are jumpy and very ready to *run after strange gods.*'" (p. 55; my emphasis). The article details how Coughlin's "identifying with the concerns and anxieties of his audience," (p. 56) his rhetoric itself, his use of radio "to divide and atomize society" (p. 56), and his shift to the political realm have resurfaced in Beck. Of note is that both of these strange gods appeal to the "concerns and anxieties" of their audiences, which I discuss above. These figures are necessary in the construction and reinforcement of sociopolitical hysteria. I will explain the strange gods' agency in my model later on.

Realishness

Among my first impressions of the Tea Party was that these people seemed a bit off. There was an inscrutable quality not so much to what they said but *how* they said it: a mixture of fear, anger, conviction, and resolve. But much of what they were saying was so patently false and often ridiculous that I began to question their sanity; put more fairly, I began to wonder why and how so many people had apparently become conspiracy theorists (or at least believers) so quickly and on such a massive scale. The easiest answer was that they

believed the untruths and twisted information being doled out by Fox News and the other usual media suspects. Still, belief on its own didn't seem to account for what began more and more to seem like a widespread collective delusional state that went beyond belief into the sociopolitical realm as a self-reinforcing collective phenomenological *experience* of reality. No amount of debunking could convince the Tea Partiers that, for example, Barack Obama was born in Hawaii and not Kenya, that the notion of death panels was an outright lie (Drobnic Holan, 2009), that the 'czars' Obama appointed were simply advisors and not Russian kings, that he had in fact *lowered* taxes shortly after taking office, or that he planned to create an army of Brownshirts. (Of course, not all Tea Partiers believed each of these things; these are but examples.) That truth and facts in general often seemed to not register with Tea Partiers' beliefs *as a collective* suggested to me that this phenomenon was manifested not so much at the order of individual and collective belief, but rather at the order of reality itself. It appeared that truth couldn't penetrate what appeared to be a closed ontological and phenomenological system in which the Tea Party existed and operated. What, then, do we call such a system? What are its defining characteristics? How does it form?

The notion of the Tea Party existing in some alternate reality, or reality bubble, or at least in some state in which reality is fluid, began to surface in discussions in the liberal political news media that were critical of the Tea Party movement. (As Stephen Colbert said in his roast of President Bush at the 2006 White House Correspondents' Dinner, "reality has a well-known liberal bias" [quoted in Kurtzman, 2006].) One simple and exasperated question was the catalyst for my consideration of reality, and not just truth, in my critical analysis of the Hysterical Right: on the October 8, 2010 edition of MSNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews,* in a discussion of outlandish statements made by Tea Party–backed Senate candidates Sharron Angle and Christine O'Donnell, Matthews asked, "does reality matter at

all anymore?" (NBC News, 2010). He didn't say 'facts' or 'truth'—he said 'reality.' But 'alternate reality' or 'reality bubble' or 'bizarro world' or other such terms for the phenomenon that was becoming evident to me and, clearly, to those in the political news media, never seemed satisfactory. 'Alternate reality' and 'bizarro world' suggested a reality *apart from* 'objective,' 'real' reality; 'reality bubble' alluded to an operational closure of this phenomenon, which is more or less accurate, but does not *characterize* the 'reality' that the bubble enclosed. I began contemplating the possibility of the Tea Party's 'reality' as existing in a continuum of the *experience* of reality—or, more accurately, *realities*. This experience of reality needed a better term. Once again, Stephen Colbert's astute considerations of truth and reality surfaced and provided the key.

In 2005 Colbert coined and popularized the term 'truthiness' to mean "truth that comes from the gut, not books" and "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true" as defined in *Merriam-Webster*'s article naming it the 2006 'word of the year.' The American Dialect Society had earlier named it word of the year for 2005 ("Word of the Year 2006," 2006). Colbert further elaborated on the concept, saying, "Truthiness is 'What I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.' It's not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that *I* feel it to be true. There's not only an emotional quality, but there's a selfish quality" (Rabin, 2006; emphasis in original):

> Truthiness is tearing apart our country, and I don't mean the argument over who came up with the word. I don't know whether it's a new thing, but it's certainly a current thing, in that it doesn't seem to matter what facts are. It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It's certainty… I really feel a dichotomy in the American populace. What is important? What you want to be true, or what *is* true? (Rabin, 2006)

Indeed, the 2012 presidential campaign would be called the first "post-truth" campaign (see, for example, MacGillis, 2012; Fallows, 2012; Krugman, 2011; Parmar, 2012), and as I will

argue in Chapter Three, Mitt Romney's campaign was not only post-truth but post-*reality*. That I make a distinction between truth and reality is central to my argument.

The possibility of this distinction surfaces when we ask what happens to the truthy once it is received, internalized, and embedded in the psyche as part of the understanding of 'what is' and, subsequently, 'where I exist.' If truthiness is epistemological in nature insofar as it is a quality of truth and knowledge, I posit the existence of an ontological analogue that qualifies reality as informed by truthiness, thereby completing the circuit. From this comes the phenomenological manifestation of existence and operation within this reality that is then reinforced by a collective that exists and acts likewise within this same circuit. This combination of ontological analogue and phenomenological manifestation I call 'realishness.' (As the adjective of truthiness is truthy, the adjective of realishness is realish.) The previous lack of such terms is implicit in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) dilemma of where and when to put quotation marks around 'reality' and 'knowledge' (p. 14), writing:

> One could say that the sociological understanding of 'reality' and 'knowledge' falls somewhere between that of the man in the street and that of the philosopher… He [the man] takes his 'reality' and his 'knowledge' for granted. The sociologist cannot do this, if only for his systematic awareness of the fact that men in the street take quite different 'realities' for granted as between one society and another. The sociologist is forced by the very logic of his discipline to ask, if nothing else, whether the difference between the two 'realities' may not be understood in relation to the differences between the two societies. The philosopher, on the other hand, is professionally obligated to take nothing for granted, and to obtain maximal clarity as to the ultimate status of what the man in the street believes to be 'reality' and 'knowledge'. Put differently, the philosopher is driven to decide where the quotation marks are in order and where they may be safely omitted, that is, to differentiate between valid and invalid assertions about the world. *This the sociologist cannot possibly do.* Logically, if not stylistically, he is stuck with the quotation marks. (p. 14; my emphasis)

The terms truthiness and realishness thus resolve the issue of quotation marks. Moreover, the application of these concepts in the analytical model that I will present allows the

sociologist to indeed acquire some measure of confidence and integrity in the differentiation between truth and truthiness, reality and realishness.

Luhmann (2000) writes that "we can speak of the reality of the mass media… in the sense of *what appears to them*, or *through them to others*, to be reality" (p. 4; emphasis in original). This idea can be transposed to the collective phenomenon of realishness: it is what appears to the actors, or through the actors to other actors, to be reality. This is why realishness requires a collectivity, for the experience must be shared in order to appear real. Again referring to the mass media, Luhmann asks, "how can we (as sociologists, for example) describe the reality of [the mass media's] construction of reality?" (p. 7). We can ask the same question of the Hysterical Right's construction of reality, though my model presents one possible way in which this happens.

My definition of realishness is a collective ontological and phenomenological state in which cognition, perception, and operation are informed and directed to a significant degree through the reception and internalization of truthy narratives.

Social spacetime

In sociology we frequently speak of spaces: physical, virtual, symbolic, and so on. Massey (1992) elaborates on theorists' literal and metaphorical uses of the spatial:

> [F]rom a wide variety of sources come proclamations of the significance of the spatial in these times: 'It is space not time that hides consequences from us' (Berger); 'The difference that space makes' (Sayer); 'That new spatiality implicit in the postmodern' (Jameson); 'It is space rather than time which is the distinctively significant dimension of contemporary capitalism' (Urry); and 'All the social sciences must make room for an increasingly geographical conception of mankind' (Braudel). Even Foucault is now increasingly cited for his occasional reflections on the importance of the spatial. His 1967 Berlin lectures contain the unequivocal: 'The anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.' In other contexts the importance of the spatial, and of associated concepts, is more metaphorical. In debates around identity the terminology of space,

> location, positionality and place figures prominently. Homi Bhabha, in discussions of cultural identity, argues for a notion of a 'third space'. Jameson, faced with what he sees as the global confusions of postmodern times, 'the disorientation of saturated space', calls for an exercise in 'cognitive mapping'. And Laclau, in his own very different reflections on the 'new revolution of our time', uses the terms 'temporal' and 'spatial' as the major differentiators between ways of conceptualizing systems of social relations. (pp. 65–66)

I present this citation both in order to convey that the sociological meanings and theories of space and the spatial vary significantly, as well as to set the stage for my own (re)presentation of space, which I will refer to as spacetime. Existing sociological scholarship on space, especially those analyses that resemble or contain elements of spacetime in my model, have informed not only my conception of spacetime but have also contributed to the mechanics of the model.

Determining and qualifying a suitable concept of space was necessary: I speak of strange gods, a continuum of hysteria, and realishness, but have so far only alluded to how these act on each other because the final element needed in order to situate all of these, and demonstrate their agencies and mechanics, was this conceptualization of space. Massey writes, "all social (and indeed physical) phenomena/activities/relations have a spatial form and a relative spatial location… 'Space' is created out of the vast intricacies, the incredible complexities, of the interlocking and the non-interlocking, and the networks of relations at every scale from local to global" (p. 80). I chose the term 'social spacetime' to enable for the unification of the spatial, the temporal, and the social, as well as to indicate spacetime (and as such the model itself) as a direct analogy to relativistic physics, in which spacetime allows for the same types of mechanics that occur in my model. In physics, spacetime is defined as "a system of one temporal and three spatial coordinates by which any physical object or event can be located" ("space-time," 2013). Transposing this to sociology, social spacetime is the *system* (not merely space, nor field, nor sphere) by and in which social actors/agents and

events can be situated for the purposes of critical analysis of their interactions. The inclusion of the temporal as a dimension of social spacetime allows for the situation of *events* and their unfolding as in the definition of physical spacetime. Massey writes, "temporal movement is also spatial; the moving elements have spatial relations to each other. And the 'spatial' interconnections which flash across can only be constituted temporally as well. Instead of linear process counterposed to flat surface (which anyway reduces space from three to two dimensions), it is necessary to insist on the irrefutable four-dimensionality (indeed, n-dimensionality) of things. Space is not static, nor time spaceless" (p. 80).

Moreover, considering social spacetime as a system, rather than merely a space in which to visualize social elements, allows us to transpose the mechanics of physical spacetime to the social. Social spacetime, then, is not only an arena but an agent with its own forces and characteristics that is an integral part of the model; without this system, the model cannot exist, for it would have no governing mechanics. Again, this echoes Massey's assertion that "we need to conceptualize space as constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global" (p. 80).

Domingues (1995) posits social spacetime as constituted by mechanics, acknowledging sociological work on space and time, and the temporality of social systems. He proposes "a concept of social systems *qua* systems of action" (p. 234) in which social systems are seen as "*collective subjectivities* (classes, groups, organizations, cities, civilizations and so on), such that their intertwinement and reciprocal causal influence may be theorized as they conform to a social *space-time dimension.* This formulation implies that actors and interactive collectives are reflexive, that they share borders of variable definition and that

they are strongly linked to nature" (pp. 233–234; emphasis in original). He further elaborates on these mechanics:

> A further aspect of space-time emerges in social life: *the concept of the social space-time dimension accounts for social systems' spans and rhythms of unfolding—change and reproduction—and interaction.* The extent to which social systems are *demarcated* and *endowed* with *co-ordination* and *intentionality* is variable and also contingent according to each situation in which they are enmeshed. In addition, they find themselves within encompassing social systems of which they are the units (or cut across them), contributing to the formation of their space-time dimension. They are often built up by other social systems, which contribute, in turn, to the make-up of their space-time constitution. (pp. 236–237; emphases in original)

This most certainly applies to my concept of social spacetime, especially the variability of the intentionality of social systems, and that variability is contingent to the situation, situation here meaning where and when social systems are situated, rather than a description of a condition.

There is one essential quality of social spacetime that I add, again analogous to Einsteinian relativistic physics, and necessary for the model: *spacetime can be warped.*

With these concepts thus defined and unpacked, I will now proceed to the model in which all come together, providing the framework for critical analysis I apply in this thesis. Its components thus defined above, the model itself is very simple. Einstein's theory of general relativity "built upon the traditional idea of gravity based on Isaac Newton's laws, but added fundamentally new concepts like the notion that mass deforms the shape of space-time. This means that objects and even light that move through space near a large mass will travel on a curved path. Furthermore, it means that mass can stretch or shrink time as well" (Chow, 2010). The most accessible illustration of this is that of a bowling ball placed on a stretched sheet of rubber or a trampoline. A marble spun into the curvature in just the right

way will then orbit the bowling ball. In simple terms, curvatures in spacetime created by the mass or energy of objects create gravity.

To be sure, I am not the first to consider the transposition of physics to sociology (as I discuss above), nor am I the first to propose that the mechanics of Einstein's theory of gravity can be transposed to sociology. Bourdieu, in arguing a "scientific construction of social objects," (2005, p. 30) speaks of fields as I do social spacetime, the fields he discusses being those of politics, social sciences, and journalism. A field, he writes, "is a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, these position-takings being aimed at either conserving or transforming the structure and relations of forces that is constitutive of the field" (p. 30). The field "is the site of actions and reactions performed by social agents… [that] react to these relations of forces, to these structures; they construct them, perceive them, form an idea of them, represent them to themselves, and so on."

Elaborating on the role of agents, Bourdieu continues, "[t]o be an agent within a field is to exert effects there which increase with the specific weight that one has. As Einsteinian physics tells us, the more energy [or mass] a body has, the more it distorts the space around it, and a very powerful agent within a field can distort the whole space, cause the whole space to be organized in relation to itself" (p. 43). This recalls the bowling ball on the sheet of rubber; in my model, the bowling ball is the strange god. As I wrote earlier, a strange god has "a unique charisma, some degree of prestige (earned or not), the rhetorical power to inform, inspire, and motivate, and a certain agency within the mass media that allows him or her to use these qualities to reach the people." The cumulative effect of these constitute the strange god's 'mass' in sociopolitical spacetime. (I will now refer exclusively to sociopolitical spacetime since this critical analysis is concerned with the convergence and enmeshing of the

social and the political. This also isolates the reality and realishness of the sociopolitical sphere from the 'rest of' reality as it exists in social spacetime.) The more sociopolitical capital (mass and energy) the strange god gathers, the greater its warping effect on sociopolitical spacetime, and thus the stronger the gravity this creates. This is what then draws in the strange god's 'followers,' collectively acquiring and sharing beliefs as they 'orbit.'

Within this system is where realishness takes hold, based on the truthiness that emanates from the strange god. Bourdieu writes,

> In a discussion between two politicians who bombard each other with statistics, what is at stake is to present one's vision of the social world as being well founded, grounded in objectivity, because it is endowed with real referents, and also grounded in the social order through the confirmation it receives from all those who adopt it for themselves, who adhere to it. In other words, what starts as a speculative idea becomes a "powerful idea," what we call in French an *idée-force,* through its capacity to mobilize people by leading them to adopt for themselves the principle of vision that is proposed. The imposition of a definition of the world is in itself an act of mobilization which tends to confirm or transform power relations. (p. 39)

Leaving aside the "two politicians," it is the strange god who presents a vision of the sociopolitical world as ostensibly "grounded in objectivity" by way of "real[ish] referents." The strange god's *idées-force* are adopted by those in its orbit, which in turn mobilizes them to action. Using the example of Glenn Beck, his "speculative" ideas (grounded in truthiness, not truth) become powerful, and crucially, irrefutable in realishness, for as Bourdieu writes, "[a] true idea can only be countered by a refutation, whereas an idée-force *has to be countered by another idée-force, capable of mobilizing a counter force, a counter manifestation*" (p. 39; my emphasis). It is no longer a matter of fact-checking in order to counter truthiness with truth, because this has been left behind and superceded with ideas that take hold with Tea Partiers. In the absence of a counter force, and encouraged by an uncritical (and even complicit) conservative political entertainment complex, these ideas thrive and become 'real,' leading to the experience of realishness. The real-world examples and analyses I provide in Chapters

Two and Three will illustrate this phenomenon. What 'happens' in realishness—how those thus enthralled think, behave, operate, act on each other, and so on—will be the object of more theoretical-based analysis in Chapter Four.

Now that this concept and its component parts have been adequately defined and unpacked, we can now proceed with a critical analysis based on this model.

CHAPTER TWO

Tea and enmity

> …this program, I promise you, will pass just as surely as the sun will come up tomorrow, and behind it will come other federal programs that will invade every area of freedom as we have known it in this country, until one day, as Norman Thomas said, we will awake to find that we have socialism. And if you don't do it and I don't do it, one of these days you and I are going to spend our sunset years telling our children and our children's children what it once was like in America when men were free.
>
> – Ronald Reagan[*]

When nations do big things and introduce new social programs that affect vast swaths of the population, we can expect some degree of controversy. In a nation preoccupied with freedom and the possible encroachment of foreign ideologies that threaten to usurp liberty, such controversy is not only multiplied but strikes at the heart of the nation's significance, putting in peril the very fabric of society, and all of this whether real or imagined—as reality or as realishness. In America, whose founding principles suggest a collective imaginary of an ever-more-perfect union, it is therefore easy to see how this imagination can turn to fear, enmity, panic, and hysteria. After a war to defeat fascism in Europe, followed by a sustained national hysteria over communism in which individuals perceived as threats were deliberately targeted and openly subjected to personal persecution and professional destruction, to a long Cold War: the possibility of threats from communism, socialism, and other -isms (except capitalism) would forever linger as a collective liminal malaise, but one easily brought to the fore and as able to immediately elicit visceral reactions as ever. I suggest that this malaise, however, has been transformed into the belief in and expression of freedom, patriotism, and capitalism as a sort of *immunization* from said threats, as if going to the other extreme will even things out—like attenuating ice cold

[*] Reagan, 1961.

water (the potential 'lost' America) with scalding water (the rage of the Right) to bring it to a happy, comfortable, *familiar* medium: the America the Tea Party seeks to 'take back'. We need to keep this in mind when looking at where the Right is today and how it makes this known.

The opening quotation is from a record Ronald Reagan made on behalf of the American Medical Association to protest legislation that would bring about Medicare, a government-administered, single-payer health insurance program for the elderly (Bartlett, 2009). We know now that socialism didn't take over America and that men [sic] remain free, but this 'argument,' which is fundamentally a means to revive and rile up the same prevailing fear of a foreign 'ism,' is one that has been and continues to be rehearsed. In an August 2009 *Forbes* article published at the height of the very loud (both figuratively and literally) debate over health care reform, historian and Reagan advisor Bruce Bartlett (2009) wrote,

> The "slippery slope" argument has been a staple of conservatives' thinking for decades—they claim that every government program is the first step on the road to socialism… This argument continues to be made today in the health care debate, even though it is transparently false. The nations of Europe have governments much larger than ours and long had national health insurance without suffering the sort of tyranny that was certain to have come about by now if Hayek was even remotely correct.

And so it was with Barack Obama's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA, more commonly referred to as the Affordable Care Act or ACA, and of course, colloquially and usually derisively as Obamacare) of 2010 as it was with Medicare in the 1960s and Social Security in the 1930s, when Franklin Roosevelt was called a communist and a socialist for implementing what is now a much-loved and vital program—just another part of American life (Woolner, 2012). Obamacare would be a socialist takeover of health care that would institute 'death panels,' and as such, it *had* to be stopped according to (and *by*) those in which the kneejerk reaction I mention above was once again dug up, awakening with an arguably

unprecedented rage—and this time, the furious opposition was *organized* as a national movement with a catchy and historically significant name: the Tea Party.

It is agreed that this nascent protest movement began to congeal and self-organize following what has been dubbed the "shout heard 'round the world" (CNBC.com, 2009). On the floor of the Chicago Stock Exchange, CNBC commentator Rick Santelli went into a rant, calling for a "Chicago Tea Party" to protest the Obama administration's mortgage bailout plan. (Never mind that bailouts of the financial sector began under George W. Bush.) He shouted to the in-studio anchorman,

> This is America! How many people want to pay for your neighbor's mortgages that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills? Raise their hand! President Obama, are you listening? You know, Cuba used to have mansions and a relatively decent economy. They moved from the individual to the collective. Now they're driving '54 Chevys. It's time for another Tea Party. What we are doing in this country will make Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin roll over in their graves. (CNBC.com, 2009)

Noteworthy here is not only Santelli's invocation of the Boston Tea Party (a revolt against taxation without representation, and indeed, many in the current Tea Party have 'backronymed' *tea* as 'taxed enough already') and the Founding Fathers, but also his mention of Cuba, a longstanding communist thorn in America's literal and figurative sides. The Obama agenda, even as it bailed out capitalism in order to save capitalism, was being seen as nothing short of a socialist (or Marxist, or communist, or whichever scary-sounding '-ist' or '-ism,' which I call 'whateverist' and 'whateverism') takeover that threatened to destroy the very fabric of America. Health care reform, too, was indicative of the spectre of socialism. And so, inspired by Santelli's rant, enraged by Obama (both the man and all of what he *could* represent, though in the truthy–realish sense, to Tea Partiers he *did* embody all of what they had heard about him and his agenda on probably every level), and decidedly fearful of the

'otherness' on the horizon that posed a clear and present danger to the collective 'true American' self of "We, the People," Tea Party groups sprang up across the United States. Tax Day protests in the spring of 2009 were merely a faint prelude of what was to come.

During the summer of 2009, members of Congress returned to their districts to hold town hall meetings with their constituents to explain and discuss the health care reform bill that would soon be put before both Houses of Congress for passage. But a funny thing happened on the way to the fora: there materialized groups of very, *very* angry older white people (I will include supporting data on Tea Party demographics later in this chapter). Some were dressed in 18th century garb—breeches and powdered wigs under tricorn hats lined with hanging teabags—and most of them held inflammatory and often racist signs decrying Obamacare as a socialist (or whateverist) government takeover of health care imposed by a communist or fascist dictator variously depicted as Hitler, the makeup-smeared Joker, an African witch doctor with a bone through his nose, or a monkey. These visuals, writes Enck-Wanzer (2011), "all serve to mark Obama as a threatening, uncivilized, racialized Other without invoking the term 'race' and while hiding behind the justification of 'policy disagreements'" (p. 26). This is precisely what I meant when in the introduction I recount how the disgruntled *Huffington Post* user 'dissentisnowracism' first led me to consider that racism could now be expressed as dissent, and this was *before* the advent of the Tea Party. This username also suggested to me a certain self-perceived conservative victimhood, implying that his or her right to dissent had been taken away to be replaced with, and stifled by, imagined unjustified cries of racism. The thread of victimization, particularly white victimhood, is woven like a fishing net throughout the Tea Party movement and in the Right in general, and I will come back to this throughout. For now, however, I will include a brief excerpt from NewLeftMedia's coverage of Glenn Beck's "Restoring Honor" rally on

August 28, 2010, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. A Tea Partier, most likely in his late twenties to early thirties, said the following:

> There are black rappers that say the word "nigger." If I go to Chicago and I say that, I will get shot, because I'm not black. How that is not racist, I don't know. That double standard applies to a lot of stuff. To criticize the current head of the Administration for *anything,* you get screamed at for being a racist. It has nothing to do with whether or not you actually disagree with his policies, you think that history has shown different example [sic], or we keep losing millions and millions of jobs after spending a trillion dollars supposedly to create them. Pointing out any of that has about one third of the country screaming at you for being a racist, because the only way you can disagree with a black president is if you're a racist, not because you disagree with an issue. (NewLeftMedia, 2010b)

In fairness, there is most likely some truth to this complaint, and we cannot say it is completely unjustified, but that this expression of it includes a claim of reverse racism ("I will get shot, because I'm not black. How that is not racist, I don't know") betrays the respondent's—and the Hysterical Right's—internalized conceptions of rampant reverse racism and perpetual white conservative victimhood. "How dare you call us racists! We simply have some policy disagreements!" they cry, while holding signs depicting Barack Obama as an African witch doctor with a bone through his nose. Note here the clear cognitive disconnect that this demonstrates, one that appears to be prevalent among the Hysterical Right on a host of issues, some of which we will encounter later on.

Indeed, we cannot escape discussion of the Tea Party, and more generally the Hysterical Right, without addressing issues of race, racism, and racialization. Harvey Wingfield and Feagin (2012) write that "[w]hile soft racial framing has long characterized much of Obama's discussions of racial matters, in extremely rare cases he has deviated from this white-oriented path to employ a moderate version of black counterframing that draws attention to the structural issues that maintain patterns of racial inequality" (p. 156). Aside from Obama's highly-regarded "A More Perfect Union" speech during the 2008 campaign,

in which addressed the Rev. Jeremiah Wright issue[*], his later allusions to race during the Henry Louis Gates affair[**], and his very brief comments on the Trayvon Martin murder case[†]—where he simply stated that if he had a son, that son would look like Trayvon, and called for an investigation—stand out as examples of 'soft' racial discourse. (Even so, having very closely followed the Martin case and online comments, I can say that Obama's brief and benign remarks, as well as more passionate cries for justice by civil rights leaders such as the Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, were seen by the 'pro-Zimmerman' (the killer) camp as 'playing the race card'—which is what racists seem to say whenever race is legitimately brought up or even merely alluded to in public discourse, usually by a person of colour. The effect of this is to throw issues of race back in the face of those who address them, with the aim of silencing discussion and ignoring the issues.) This accurately encapsulates in rudimentary form Obama's race discourse dilemma. These experiences have shown that he simply *cannot go there* without an immediate backlash—the first black president is not 'allowed' to address race, even as race, racial discourse, and racialization are immediately evident in Obama's person.

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[*] The Rev. Jeremiah Wright was Obama's pastor, whose history of inflammatory remarks was seized upon during the 2008 presidential election campaign as a new offensive of the ongoing smear campaign against then-candidate Obama.

[**] Henry Louis Gates is an African-American Harvard professor who, upon finding the front door to his house jammed, attempted to pry it open, which led to his arrest. Obama's comment that the police had acted "stupidly" prompted a negative reaction; while calling the arresting officer to apologize, Obama suggested the three get together for a beer, and so invited him and Gates to the White House, to be joined by Joe Biden, for what would be called the "Beer Summit" (Khan, 2009).

[†]Trayvon Martin was a seventeen-year-old African-American who, returning home from a convenience store, was hunted down and shot by George Zimmerman, a resident of a Florida gated community where Martin had been staying with his father. Zimmerman claimed he was attacked by a vicious black thug who had been casing houses—which Martin was not, nor was he a thug—and while enduring a savage beating, had no choice but to shoot the youth in self-defense. Eyewitness testimony and forensics contradict his claim of self-defense and his ever-changing recollections of the incident. National and international outrage erupted once it was learned that the police had initially unquestioningly believed Zimmerman's self-defense claim and had released him that night without charges; media attention and protests led to a proper investigation and ultimately to Zimmerman's arrest—six weeks later—on the charge of second degree murder. The trial is scheduled to begin in June of 2013.

And yet a surprising amount of my research on the Tea Party, including scholarly work critical of the movement, seems to tiptoe around or whitewash (pun appropriate) the Tea Party's outward displays of racism, though implicit racialized discourse is generally acknowledged. For example, two of the seminal critical books on the Tea Party, by DiMaggio (2011) and Skocpol & Williamson (2012), who present differing and sometimes conflicting evaluations of the Tea Party in general, both address race rather briefly, as if this were not at all an insidious motivating force of the Tea Party (and, by extension, the Hysterical Right) as I argue throughout this thesis. Still, DiMaggio sees race and racialization closer to what I consider the underlying motivations and mechanics of the Hysterical Right through his critique of statements by the right-wing Media Research Center (MRC) and its complaints that the mass media showed bias against the Tea Party. Referring to an MRC complaint about an ABC News report that mentioned Tea Partiers with signs depicting Obama as Hitler, he writes, "[i]n the case of the Obama–Hitler references [on Tea Party protest signs], such placards *did* appear at many Tea Party rallies, although they constituted a minority of all messages in print. Also left unmentioned by MRC is the fact that conflation of Obama and the Democrats with Hitler is standard practice at Fox News, the media mouthpiece of the Tea Party" (2011, p. 225). This strongly suggests that the Right considers the mainstream news media—the 'lamestream media,' as Sarah Palin and others like to say—to be those news outlets that are *critical,* and rightly so in the name of good journalism, of the Tea Party and the Right. Fox News, on the other hand, being the "media mouthpiece" of not only the Tea Party but the Republican Party and the right wing at large, is apart from the 'lamestream,' and as such a purveyor of 'truth' in its ostensibly accurate and unbiased reporting. This, of course, evokes the notion of truthiness and, by extension, realishness,

upon which my conceptual model and overall argument pivot. In this vein, DiMaggio continues,

> MRC's attacks on CBS News for covering racial slurs and "emotional" protesters at Tea Party rallies are also without merit. Self-designated Tea Partiers are more likely to say that they are angry at the government, as revealed in national polling. This characterization, then, is technically accurate, rather than a statement of bias on the part of CBS. Furthermore, Tea Partiers have shouted racial slurs at rallies, and most of them display deeply racist attitudes towards Muslims, African Americans, and other minorities, as documented in national surveys. Rather than becoming angry at some fictitious "media bias," MRC appears to be angry at the mass media for refusing to parrot uninformed claims that the Tea Party does not harbor racist or irate members. Discussion of Tea Partiers' anger and racism may be embarrassing for conservatives, but they are not evidence of media bias. (p. 225)

Skocpol and Williamson (2012) write that "racially insensitive comments made in person [in interviews with respondents] were only a very faint echo of the racial slurs that appear *rarely but persistently* at Tea Party rallies across the country, including in signs with racial epithets and signs equating the presidency of Barack Obama to 'white slavery.' A sense of 'us versus them' along racial and ethnic fault lines clearly marks the worldview of *many people* active in the Tea Party, although raw expressions of this outlook tend to appear in public political contexts more than in discussions and interviews" (pp. 68–69; emphases mine). This is where I feel the authors' depiction of the Tea Party as a purely grassroots (even benign) movement, and their related endeavour to produce a ground-level quasi-ethnography of its members, have led to somewhat of an apologist undercurrent at points in their work. To wit, they continue,

> Grassroots activists are very aware of the charges of racism levelled at the Tea Party, and they are quick to point out evidence to the contrary. Tea Party members avidly come to hear fiery black preachers and other black conservatives on the lecture circuit. When some Tea Party attendees say or do overtly racist things on occasion, organizers and leaders try hard to eliminate such lapses. At various planning meetings, several Massachusetts Tea Party members raised concerns that outsiders might "infiltrate" their protests with racist or otherwise inappropriate signs in order to make local activists look

> bad. Worries about racist interlopers were not limited to Massachusetts; other Tea Party websites have posted guidelines about how to cope with such a situation. Tea Party members we spoke to were very concerned to assure us that they held no animosity toward black people. (p. 69)

I take issue with this passage. The Tea Partiers' being "quick to point out evidence" that they are not racist is merely a rehearsal of the empty "some of my best friends are black!" retort. The authors do not appear to have asked the respondents who these "fiery black [pro–Tea Party] preachers" are, for there are no further references to these; I would assume that if in fact there existed a club of black preachers and "other black conservatives" on some Tea Party "lecture circuit," that they would have been widely reported on if only for their anomalous novelty in an otherwise largely racist movement, and I would have heard *something* of them in my four years of immersion in political coverage. Again, I do not doubt that Tea Partiers have attended sermons and lectures by sympathetic African-Americans; what I object to is the notion that this tokenism (which is what it is) somehow 'proves' that the majority of the Tea Party is not racist. I will counter this gross oversimplification of the race issue by indulging in an oversimplified counterpoint: it seems as if Skocpol and Williamson insist that as long as a Tea Partier does not carry an overtly racist protest sign, or speak in overtly racist terms, then that means he or she is not racist, or at least does not harbour racial resentment or operate within racialized frames. The reality of racism and racialized discourse in the Tea Party is undeniable, especially in the light of empirical quantitative data and broader scholarly opinion that directly and explicitly support this.

As such, I will present some brief examples of such data here. The University of Washington Institute for the Study of Race, Ethnicity & Sexuality released a comprehensive set of multi-state polls that "examines what Americans think about the issues of race, public policy, national politics, and President Obama, one year after the inauguration of the first African American president" (Parker, 2010; links to all data tables and analyses are found on

this home page). One significant general finding was that "even as we account for conservatism *and* partisanship, support for the Tea Party remains a valid predictor of racial resentment. We're not saying that ideology isn't important, because it is: as people become more conservative, it increases by 23 percent the chance that they're racially resentful… Even so, support for the Tea Party makes one 25 percent *more* likely to be racially resentful than those who don't support the Tea Party." The categories of respondents are labeled "True Believers of [the] Tea Party," "Middle of [the] Road," and "True Skeptics [of the Tea Party]." Of True Believers, 72% *disagree* that "[g]enerations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class," compared to 55% of Middle of the Road respondents, and only 28% of True Skeptics. Seventy-three percent of True Believers feel that "if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites," with 54% of Middle of the Road respondents and 33% of True Skeptics agreeing. Affirmative action initiatives are implicitly opposed in the question "other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without special favors," with 88% of True Believers agreeing, compared to 67% of Middle of the Road respondents and 56% of True Skeptics.

Other scholars have been critical of Skocpol & Williamson's minimization of the racist element in the Tea Party. After attending a 2011 lecture by Skocpol (just prior to the publication of her and Williamson's *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism*) at the University of Minnesota, political science and political psychology professor Howard Lavine, whose own research "points to the possibility that Skocpol's they're-not-racists conclusion is an oversimplification" (Black, 2011), stated he found it

> believable that the Tea Partiers do not consider themselves racially prejudiced and that those Skocpol interviewed could talk about their views without making racist statements. [Lavine] also agrees with Skocpol's they-are-not-racists statement insofar as he considers the term "racist" to be a an

> overbroad and useless term that does little other than inflame and cut off conversation.
>
> On the other hand, Lavine said, Skocpol's statement was too strong and ultimately unpersuasive.
>
> "If you just say 'they're not racists,' most people will think you mean that race has nothing to do with it. And that's just not true."
>
> "There is consistent and strong evidence of a correlation between racial negativity and Tea Party identification," Lavine said. "It's a fairly strong correlation and it's been demonstrated across a number of independent surveys" and other academic research projects, including Lavine's current research.
>
> Summarizing all of that research, Lavine said: "On average, people who identify with the Tea Party hold more negative racial beliefs than other Americans, including other conservatives." (Black, 2011)

I present the foregoing citation in full because it aptly encapsulates what I have always believed and argued, based on my extensive knowledge and understanding of the Right through my immersion research; it also encapsulates the central debate over racism in the Tea Party and among conservatives in general. We must keep in mind that these data were collected, and these papers and books published, before the 2012 presidential campaign, when race—whether overt or of the 'dog-whistle' variety through coded rhetoric—would come of the proverbial closet and ultimately form part of the Romney campaign's truthiness and its (and the Hysterical Right's) subsequent descent into full-blown realishness and, ultimately, mass delusion.

Before proceeding, we should note key demographics of the Tea Party. A 2010 *New York Times*/CBS News survey (Montopoli, 2010) of 1,580 adults, including 881 self-identified Tea Party supporters, determined that the vast majority of Tea Partiers are white: 89% compared to 1% black. In terms of age, 75% are 45 and older; of these 29% are over 65 (and presumably benefiting from those socialist programs Social Security and Medicare). Men make up 59% to 41% women. Regionally, 36% are from the South, 25% from the West, 22% from the Midwest, and 18% from the Northeast. Thirty-five percent earn under $50,000 per year; 56% earn over $50,000 including 20% who earn over $100,000. As for

religious affiliation, 61% identify as Protestant (including 39% as Evangelical), 22% as Catholic, 6% as 'Other,' and 7% reported no affiliation.

It is thus accurate to say that the Tea Party is comprised mainly of older white people who are well-off financially, mostly Protestant with a large Evangelical segment, and usually racist to some degree whether they know it or not.

Knowing what we do post–2012 about the alarming and overt racialization of political discourse, we can apply these understandings retroactively in critical analysis of the Tea Party and the Right as they were *before* the election campaign, for the racism and racialization we saw in 2012 did not materialize out of thin air. It was there all along. A 2011 *New York Times*/CBS News poll (Campbell & Putnam, 2011) compared their earlier data from a 2006 poll (before the Obama era) of 3000 Americans on national political attitudes to those of the same respondents in 2011. "As a result," they write,

> we can look at what people told us, long before there was a Tea Party, to predict who would become a Tea Party supporter five years later… Our analysis casts doubt on the Tea Party's "origin story." Early on, Tea Partiers were often described as nonpartisan political neophytes. Actually, the Tea Party's supporters today were highly partisan Republicans long before the Tea Party was born, and were more likely than others to have contacted government officials. In fact, past Republican affiliation is the single strongest predictor of Tea Party support today.

In fact, Tea Party–like groups have been around for a long time; for example, the John Birch Society was formed in 1958 and is still active today (John Birch Society, n.d.). According to the history page of its website, "[t]he organization's overall goal, never altered in the 50-plus years of its existence, has always been to create sufficient understanding amongst the American people about both their country and its enemies, so that they could protect freedom and ensure continuation of the nation's independence." Moreover, "the Society insists that the Ten Commandments should guide all personal and organizational conduct.

Agreeing with numerous pronouncements of our nation's Founders, Society members believe that national freedom cannot long endure without moral restraint." (Note that the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments are invoked then directly followed by mention of the Founders, who intended and codified the U.S. as an unequivocally secular nation.) However, with a predictable measure of right-wing victimhood and paranoia, the Society notes that "[s]oon after its creation, *enemies discovered the Society's potential to arouse and inform a generally sleeping population*. At that point, there arose a totally unfair and withering smear campaign painting the organization and its members with an array of nasty and completely false charges, none of which ever had any validity" (my emphasis). Two things are noteworthy here: first, the notion of a "generally sleeping population" that can be awakened in populist revolt; second, the accusation of being victim of a "totally unfair and withering smear campaign," which is echoed in the Tea Party's denial of racism and xenophobia within its membership, even as these are, as I presented above, quantifiably demonstrable.

Besides appeals to the Constitution and the Founding Fathers, both fetishized by the Tea Party as beacons of the 'real' America, one current runs through all of these groups: morality, but *their* morality, for theirs is the only true one. To be sure, this indicates a certain realishness in the denial of the reality of a diverse society[*]—which is what the Founding Fathers *intended* America to be, drafting an amendable Constitution to provide for the *expansion* of individual rights, not the restriction or repeal of them, while also providing for the inevitable social changes that would occur and require codification—but it also is evidence of America's perpetual 'selfing' conflict that I will discuss in the conclusion.

Still, the election of the first black president, together with factors such as the poor economy (the basis of Santelli's rant), sweeping proposed changes to the health care system,

[*] A denial that was among the major factors in Mitt Romney's 2012 defeat.

the bailout of the banks, and others came together in a critical mass in 2009, the catalyst that would cause the seemingly sudden explosion of a protest movement with a name and budding national organizations, and a ready-made constituency of rage itching to take this to the streets.

I have presented above some of the conditions that favourized the birth of the Tea Party movement and provided impetus for the coming together of disaffected and very disgruntled conservatives, a brief discussion of the race issue (to which I will return several times), some demographics on Tea Partiers that persuasively demonstrate their being comprised mainly of older, white, well-off Protestant racists, and a preview of what would be the Tea Party's big coming out: the debate over health care reform. We have looked at the *who,* some of the *what* and *why,* but the question remains: *how* did this happen? By this I do not mean how did Tea Party groups organize themselves, how the movement derived its funding from corporate interests such as the Koch brothers, or how protests were planned and carried out. These and related questions have been covered at length in books, in news and opinion articles, and in scholarly papers. As I state at the outset, my aim here is to uncover what underlying social mechanics and forces—which actors, which agents, which social and cultural conditions—propelled a nascent far-right conservative protest movement into a force in government and, ultimately, just four percentage points away from the presidency. All of this motion took place while the strange gods continued fueling a growing hysteria that spread from the fringes to almost the entire Right, creating an operational realishness that ultimately achieved critical mass and led to outright mass delusion near the end of the 2012 presidential campaign, and continues in its aftermath as the GOP struggles to figure out what went wrong and what to do next time.

To do this, I will now begin to apply the conceptual model I detailed in Chapter One to the Tea Party and their strange gods, Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck. Both continually appeal to what I call the perpetual 'American liberty fetish'—the same appeal Reagan made in the earlier quotation on Medicare—and perform similar roles as 'leaders' of the movement, though in different ways and on different levels.

Just as FDR contended with Father Coughlin in the 1930s, contemporaries Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Rush Limbaugh, among others, figured prominently in the health care reform debate, their 'masses' performing the function of warping sociopolitical spacetime through their rhetoric and influence, thus creating the gravity that would draw their followers into the constructed realishness of the conservative political entertainment complex that at once inflames and soothes. In terms of the ACA debate, I focus on Sarah Palin insofar as she was able to both crystallize and boost the anti-ACA furor by coining the term "death panel" to distort a provision in the ACA that would reimburse doctors for providing end-of-life counseling to patients. To be sure, Palin didn't come up with the idea. The notion originated with high-profile anti-ACA activist Betsy McCaughey who, in that same 2009 Tea Party 'Summer of Rage' (as I call it) stated that "Congress would make it mandatory—absolutely require—that every five years people in Medicare have a required counseling session that will tell them how to end their life sooner" (McCaughey quoted in Richert, 2009). This counseling would advise elderly patients how to "decline nutrition, how to decline being hydrated, how to go in to hospice care… all to do what's in society's best interest or in your family's best interest and cut your life short."

But while McCaughey, as I said, had a high profile in the debate over actual policy, Sarah Palin had the power, the platform, a vulgarized prestige, and a mass media forever waiting for what she might say next. Her wading into the debate is demonstrably what fueled

much of the anxiety and subsequent hysteria that so terrified Tea Partiers that Obamacare now became the most urgent and imminent threat to the 'real' American way of life, to 'real' American values, and to the liberties enshrined in the Constitution. On August 7, 2009, at the height of the Summer of Rage, Palin posted a note to her Facebook page:

> The Democrats promise that a government health care system will reduce the cost of health care, but as the economist Thomas Sowell has pointed out, government health care will not reduce the cost; it will simply refuse to pay the cost. And who will suffer the most when they ration care? The sick, the elderly, and the disabled, of course. The America I know and love is not one in which my parents or my baby with Down Syndrome will have to stand in front of Obama's "death panel" so his bureaucrats can decide, based on a subjective judgment of their "level of productivity in society," whether they are worthy of health care. Such a system is downright evil. (Palin, 2009)

The notion of death panels as described here was not an exaggeration or distortion: it was a lie, with fact-checking website PolitiFact.com choosing this as its Lie of the Year for 2009 (Drobnic Holan, 2009). But it stuck, evoking something like a table of nameless bureaucrats (Nazis, or Communists, or whateverists) who would review case files and unfeelingly decide who would receive health care and who would be left to languish and die—and the Tea Party went with this in their rhetoric and in their image of Obama as Hitler. (While comparisons to Hitler are lazy and cheap rehearsals of Godwin's Law, in Tea Party realishness, it would oddly fit if such death panels were in fact a real provision of the ACA. The Tea Party got *that* part right. Ironically, though, death panels did exist in the sense that before institution of the ACA, health insurance companies could impose lifetime caps on insurance, leaving those with catastrophic illnesses without coverage, or refuse coverage for those with pre-existing conditions, or deny certain life-saving procedures, for example, as a result of decisions made by bureaucrats in offices. *This* is health care rationing by what were for all intents and purposes legal insurer death panels, and this is what the ACA abolished. Obamacare didn't institute death panels—it got rid of them!)

What really put the rage into the Summer of Rage—the element that took the Tea Party's anti-ACA protests from anger to a new realm of vicious and, arguably, anti-democratic tactics and rhetoric—occurred *inside* the town hall meetings. Rather than participate in legitimate debates over the ACA, the Tea Partiers' clear aim was to interrupt and shut down discussion by yelling and throwing tantrums (individual or group). In a *Talking Points Memo* article, Rachel Slajda (2009) writes,

> Angry teabaggers[*] and other opponents of health care reform are heckling members of Congress at their town hall meetings back home in an effort to sway the debate and drown out reform supporters. This weekend, a group of teabaggers showed up at a town hall in Philadelphia with Sen. Arlen Specter (D–PA) and Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. They shouted and booed to drown out remarks from both officials and questions from the audience. The Philadelphia Tea Party Patriots reportedly brought 40 people.

Below this is embedded a YouTube video of Sebelius attempting to speak while being drowned out by Tea Partiers standing near the back of the room, many with their hands cupped around their mouths, *en masse* screaming "No!" and "Baloney!" and so on. Other similar videos are widely available on YouTube. For the public at large, these clips and the corresponding news coverage were probably its first introductions to this new movement (aside from news coverage of Tea Party outdoor protests), and it was immediately clear that Tea Partiers were not only very angry but determined to channel this anger into vocal outward rage as *pro-active* and *pre-emptive,* rather than merely reactive, dissent.

My own impression at the time was that the Tea Party didn't seem at all concerned about debating the actual provisions of the ACA (the only 'provision' they seemed to know of was the death panels canard); rather, they seemed to be dismissing the entire *notion* of *any*

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[*] 'Teabaggers' (capitalized or not) is a derisive term used by liberals and progressives; while at first this evokes the teabags that some Tea Partiers hang on the brims of their hats, it is also a clear reference to a sex act known as 'teabagging.' 'Teabaggers' has been further shortened to 'Baggers.' Even though I like these terms, for reasons of propriety I will not use them here, and so I will use 'Tea Partiers.'

sort of health care reform through frankly childish conduct unbecoming of a sincerely engaged citizenry, including an apparently widespread ignorance of the actual legislation they were protesting. Sarah Palin's notion of death panels, then, only served to legitimize both what the Tea Party was protesting and a potential actuality that individual Tea Partiers feared and had to stop, because it was 'real'; as such, this is a clear and accessible example of truthiness begetting realishness, manifested phenomenologically and operationally. First, the truthy term death panel is introduced and popularized, along with the content of the lie and its related connotations; then, as the potential actuality of this idea becomes embedded within individual and group consciousness, the potential becomes 'real' and then is *experienced* as such—this is realishness. As I discussed in Chapter One, the epistemological 'truthiness' of death panels (derived, misinterpreted, then perverted from the truth of end-of-life consultation) leads to ontological realishness, and the actors begin to *operate within* this realishness in which Barack Obama wants to pull the plug on Grandma. Obamacare *will* institute death panels, according to the truthy—truth be not damned but rather *irrelevant* in realishness. This places Palin as one strange god of a burgeoning movement at that strange and unsettling, yet exciting, 'moment' of its awakening during that first Summer of Rage.

But Palin seemed to have sensed the growing malaise among the right, one that suddenly seemed urgent and suggested an imminent threat, even before Obama's election. At a fundraising event in North Carolina in October of 2008, just weeks before the presidential election, Sarah Palin spoke:

> We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard working very patriotic, very pro-America areas of this great nation. This is where we find the kindness and the goodness and the courage of everyday Americans. Those who are running our factories and teaching our kids and growing our food and are fighting our wars for us. Those who are protecting us in uniform. Those who are protecting the virtues of freedom. (Palin quoted in Eilperin, 2008)

By this point she was 'going rogue,' and these comments led to the inevitable statement of clarification by a (no doubt exasperated) campaign spokesperson. Still, Palin had it right, at least in terms of the convictions of these 'real' Americans. In 2008, long since the Red Scare of the 1950s, there still existed a 'real' America and an anti-America or other-America. The next day, Republican Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann (herself Palinesque and will figure prominently in Chapter Three) appeared on MSNBC's *Hardball with Chris Matthews* to support Palin: "I think the people that Barack Obama has been associating with are anti-American, by and large, the people who are radical leftists," she said. "I wish the American media would take a great look at the views of the people in Congress and find out, are they pro-America or anti-America?" (MSNBC, 2008). (Bachmann was essentially calling for a revival of McCarthyism—is this the America the Tea Partiers wanted to return to? Certainly, the usual hackneyed historical recollection of the 1950s is of a pleasant, surreal idyll.)

Clearly, Sarah Palin's arrival on the scene upon her selection as John McCain's running mate provided a much-needed conservative populist figure who could credibly convey a corresponding rhetoric for the McCain campaign. Larson and Porpora (2011) write, "McCain's choice was intended to court Hillary's [Clinton] women voters. The impact of Palin's nomination was unprecedented. While Joe Biden remained true to the rule that consigns most vice-presidential candidates to irrelevance, Palin received about 63.5% as many mentions in the press as John McCain (the typical vice-presidential candidate from either party receives 26%, and Biden received only 21% of Obama's)" (p. 755). But aside from her star quality, other characteristics converge that elevate her to strange god status. She is an incredibly dense mass of perpetually worked-up political and moral outrage (feigned or not), and seems to have discovered her power to reshape political debate through plain-spoken, and often misleading, rhetoric. Unlike Barack Obama, she projects a

hyperbolic folksiness, her speech featuring malapropisms ('blood libel') and invented words ('refudiate,' an ironically clever portmanteau of 'refute' and 'repudiate'), in contrast to Obama's eloquent and demure manner of speaking. One trope of Palin's stump speech during the 2008 presidential campaign was the suggestion that Obama's association with former Weather Underground activist William Ayers implied Obama was sympathetic to terrorism, domestic or otherwise. Palin stated, "We see America as the greatest force for good in this world. Our opponent [Obama], though, is someone who sees America, it seems, as being so imperfect that he's palling around with terrorists who would target their own country" (quoted in Stewart, 2008).

Palin also has a deft ability to side-step having to deal with the 'lamestream media' whose reporters, she claims, practise 'gotcha journalism'; what this actually means is a journalist posing questions she is unable to answer, such CBS News's Katie Couric's query as to which newspapers and magazines Palin read—"All of 'em"—or ABC News's Charlie Gibson, who asked her position on the Bush Doctrine—"In what respect, Charlie?". She issues her missives on her Facebook page and via Twitter—which she and her aides manage and mediate—and would appear only on Fox News[*]. In doing so, she seems to suggest that she and her allies should beat back against the potentially damaging effects of mainstream news media coverage by pre-empting these through the creation and dissemination of their own 'facts' and 'news'—their own truthiness. Larson and Porpora (2011) write that her Twitter and Facebook postings "ably create the illusion that she is personally in touch with her followers" (p. 756). They continue, "Palin's reality show about 'her' Alaska, her much-

[*] As of January 2013, Palin and Fox News have severed ties. The *Huffington Post* reported that "[t]he news is not very surprising, but it does highlight, as much as anything, Palin's diminished relevance. Reports about the increasingly icy relationship between Palin and Fox News CEO Roger Ailes have been circulating for years. He has mocked her in public, and is said to have privately labeled her 'stupid.' Meanwhile, her public profile has waned as the years since her bid for the vice presidency grind on" (Mirkinson, 2013).

watched performance as an 'analyst' for Fox News, her every appearance and public comment, and the messages that she broadcasts on Twitter and Facebook all share in different ways the clichés prevalent in her more serious displays, blending them with *her own inimitable take* on the news" (p. 756; my emphasis).

We can add her 'Mama Grizzly' persona to this self-mediated manipulation and realishness of being "personally in touch with her followers." She projects not merely maternalism but a *rugged* maternalism that evokes a loving yet tough, gentle yet non-coddling, pro-life yet 'conservative feminist' (a dubious identification at best) motherly figure who knows her way around a kitchen, a nursery, and a hunting range. Camille Paglia (2008) wrote that Palin "represented an explosion of a brand new style of muscular American feminism. At her startling debut on that day [when McCain introduced her], she was combining male and female qualities in ways that I have never seen before. And she was somehow able to seem simultaneously reassuringly traditional and gung-ho futurist." While we may disagree with Paglia on many of her stances on feminism, what is important here is to stress that Palin was indeed widely viewed as a 'conservative feminist,' a particular draw to Republican women who rightly view themselves as strong and equal while still espousing more traditional social conservative (and, often, religious) beliefs.

Palin's amorphous identity following the 2008 election is what I feel truly rounds her out a strange god, elevating her status accordingly. There is an undeniable mystique about her—she is "inimitable," as I cite Larson and Porpora (2011) above. The characteristics and abilities she possesses, projects, and exploits, along with other elements to be sure, converge and transform here in that sociopolitical alchemy I described earlier. Following their respective defeats, John McCain went back to the Senate, Paul Ryan went back to the House, and Mitt Romney disappeared entirely. Sarah Palin went back to Alaska, where she

was still Governor, only to quit in mid-2009 with a year and a half left in her term. The speculation over whether she'd run for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination began immediately and questions of a future run persist to this day. So was she still a politician? Was she a Fox News pundit? Star of her own reality show on TLC, a televised continuation of the Palin Family Alaskan Hillbilly show that fascinated us during the 2008 campaign? A bestselling author? The holy grail of conservative convention keynote speakers? The spiritual leader of the Tea Party? She was *all of these* at once, and my own critical observation throughout has been that she has been able to pull it all off seamlessly. Sarah Palin on the campaign trail was the same Sarah Palin on Fox News and on TLC and on the Tea Party speaking circuit and at book signings and on Twitter and on Facebook and so on and so on—just richer and richer, meaner and meaner.

As well, the persistent 'will she or won't she?' over whether she'd seek the Republican presidential nomination in 2012 kept interest in her alive while rounding out her mystique[*]. The result of this alchemy was her acquiring enormous mass, and as such able to warp sociopolitical spacetime and create the gravity that drew her followers, and by extension the Tea Party, into phenomenological realishness informed by her truthiness and enchanted by her mystique. Only the strange gods can do this through the synergistic confluences they both embody and project. To round out my portrayal of Sarah Palin, consider the words of her followers themselves, first as interviewed by Chase Whiteside of NewLeftMedia (2009b) at a 2009 book signing for Palin's *Going Rogue*:

"She's like a rock star in the conservative movement."

"She stands for what America is… Freedom, our liberty, our right to speak."

[*] Following her being dropped from Fox News in January 2013, MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell astutely opined that Sarah Palin was able to fool the punditry that she might run for president, stating, "Unlike a lot of other pundits who are still on a lot of the payrolls in the political news business, Sarah Palin never once fell for the idea that Sarah Palin could actually run for president" (O'Donnell quoted in Muller, 2013).

> "She is the epitome of conservativeness [sic]. And I'm telling you, if the Republican party doesn't back her, it doesn't matter, because she's *going* to get the presidency!"
>
> "She makes me proud to be a woman, and she's strong."
>
> "We need good people like her who aren't afraid to speak up for reality."
>
> "I think you're gonna see crowds like this wherever she goes."

And then, as sung in a YouTube video[*] by an elderly man and woman (perhaps a couple) in front of what appears to be a Tea Party meeting, to the tune of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, backed by a pre-recorded country track heavy on the slide guitar:

> Sarah has the wisdom to walk through an open door,
> She's stomping out the wretches where the evil lies in store.
> She will scrub the floors and sweep the riff-raff into cracks,
> With God and the Tea Party, she's gonna take it back.
>
> Sarah Palin, she won't listen to their bunk,
> Sarah Palin's coming south to hunt some skunk,
> Sarah Palin—she'll throw 'em all in jail,
> And when she gets to Washington, it'll be cold as hell. (Dempsey, 2010)

(Note the line "Sarah Palin's coming south to hunt some skunk." Whether this meaning was intended or not, a skunk is black and white—as is Barack Obama. As well, if it were "cold as hell" when Sarah Palin got to Washington having won the presidency, that would mean that hell had frozen over. I don't think the songwriter intended this.)

Sister Sarah, as a strange god, would be the Hysterical Right's redemption and salvation. If I were to choose a woman political figure from history whom Sarah Palin most resembled, it would be Eva Perón.

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[*] This video can easily be found by searching for "Sarah Palin Battle Hymn" on YouTube; the exact URL is in the corresponding bibliography entry.

The other strange god of the Tea Party who rivals, if not exceeds, Sarah Palin and her sociopolitical mass and influence is undoubtedly Glenn Beck. Certainly, other right-wing media figures such as Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh and their ilk wield tremendous influence, especially insofar as they use truthiness to foment outrage—and therefore *rage*—among their viewers and listeners. But Glenn Beck is the one who was actually *out there* organizing and speaking at Tea Party rallies, and as such this proximity to Tea Partiers contributes to the strength and reach of his rhetoric, and therefore his own sociopolitical mass and gravity, further enabling and solidifying the realishness of the Hysterical Right. He deals nearly exclusively in truthiness, far more than Sarah Palin ever has; this is probably due to his having (at the time) a nightly show on Fox News as well as a daytime radio show, platforms from which he could indulge an apparently overactive and paranoid imagination. While Palin is more inspirational, Beck is more *motivational* insofar as he gets into the nitty-gritty of the truthy and directly conveys misinformation and conspiracy theories—and he draws people off their sofas and recliners and out to his rallies, whether on foot or on (socialist Medicare-subsidized) Hoveround scooters.

What strengthens the agency of Beck's truthiness, besides his having had a nightly platform, are the rhetorical devices and emotional cues he so deftly exploits, and we must keep in mind that his viewers were watching the Fox *News* Channel, where they expected news—truth and reality. He possesses the same sort of amorphous quality as Sarah Palin insofar as it's not fully clear exactly what he is: A journalist? (Certainly not!) A pundit? (Perhaps.) A commentator? (Yes.) An entertainer? (Perhaps moreso to liberals.) The Tea Party messiah? (Most definitely yes.) I would think that to Tea Partiers, he is all of these, even though he does not remotely resemble a journalist—but again, his show was on Fox *News* and therefore his audience would likely consider his commentary as news.

His use of an on-set chalkboard was not merely a stylistic element but rather a crucial rhetorical device, an effective means of his conferring self-authority while communicating his truthiness. Consider that Beck's television audience was primarily made up of older adults who grew up long before digital technologies and sharp computer graphics to illustrate news stories; they didn't suffer teachers' (so often poorly-formatted) PowerPoints. For them, the chalkboard was the medium on which a teacher taught facts, and Beck could write whatever he wanted on his board; this was one of his more insidious means of constructing, as Bourdieu (2005) writes, "principles of vision and division, and have them recognized as legitimate categories of construction of the social world" (p. 37). In doing so, Beck would make

> the claim to legitimate handling of the categories of perception, of symbolic violence based on a tacit, surreptitious imposition of categories of perception endowed with authority and designed to become legitimate categories of perception, which is of exactly the same type as the symbolic violence performed by those whose labels slip imperceptibly from "Islamic" to "Islamicist," and from "Islamicist" to "terrorist." (p. 37)

Beck's manipulation of the categories of perception, then, would enable him to contribute to the taxonomies of opposition that Bourdieu discusses, "to say who is 'in' and who is 'out,' who are the citizens and who are the foreigners" (p. 38).

The effusive praise given to Beck by his followers further supports my position that his truthiness is their truth, which informs and directs the resultant realishness in which they operate. Referring back to the question of whether or not he is *seen* as a journalist, consider controversial British journalist and political advisor Lord Monckton's[*] address to a worked-up crowd at Beck's 2010 Tax Day Tea Party rally: "There would not be nearly 50,000 people here today were it not for the freedom-loving, fair, balanced, unafraid *journalists* of the freedom channel, Fox News! [the crowd cheers] Glenn Beck! [cheering] Bill O'Reilly!

[*] Christopher Walter Monckton, 3rd Viscount Monckton of Brenchley.

[cheering] Sean Hannity! [cheering]" (NewLeftMedia, 2010c; my emphasis). Here was a seemingly important and erudite journalist (if only for his being British, and a Lord at that) praising three political commentators as "unafraid journalists." Needless to say, in this passage Beck, O'Reilly, and Hannity are suggested as intrepid and daring reporters for Fox News, the "freedom channel," on the front lines in the war on whateverism; this further muddles exactly who and what they are, and the nature of the content they convey. The statements of praise from Tea Partiers as shown in the NewLeftMedia videos clearly demonstrate what they think of Beck and of Fox News:

> "Glenn Beck's very educational; you can learn a lot from him, he'll actually explain things to you, and he's not making things up, it's factual information." (2010c)
>
> "I think Glenn Beck is great for the dissemination of information, and to dispel with [sic] misinformation." (2010c)
>
> "Glenn Beck is such a logical thinker." (2009a)
>
> "They're [Fox News] all fair, they have people from all parties in there and *they give both sides,* and if you listen to 'em then you can make up your own mind and hopefully make an intelligent decision. We don't watch CNN; they're a bunch of lying pigs, to put it nicely. And all I got to say is 'screw you!'" (2010c; my emphasis)
>
> "They [Fox News] call themselves 'fair and balanced,' but I think that *they pretty much have a conservative viewpoint, and that's the kind of information that we're looking for*, anyway. That's the way we believe, and the way we were brought up, to fend for ourselves… You get what you're looking for, *and I'm not particularly looking for the kind of news I'd get on MSNBC.*" (2010b; my emphases)

The contradictions and ironies in these statements are evident. One Tea Partier believes Fox News presents both sides of issues (it doesn't) while another acknowledges its conservative viewpoint is what he's looking for, and deliberately so, to the exclusion of differing (real) news one might encounter on CNN, MSNBC, CBS News, ABC News, or NBC News—the 'lamestream,' reality-based television news media. Moreover, the Tea Partiers clearly believe

what Fox News tells them. A former Fox News employee, speaking to *Media Matters for America* (Boehlert, 2011), "confirmed what critics have been saying for years about [Rupert] Murdoch's cable channel. Namely, that Fox News is run as a purely partisan operation, virtually every news story is actively spun by the staff, its primary goal is to prop up Republicans and knock down Democrats, and that staffers at Fox News routinely operate without the slightest regard for fairness or fact checking. 'It is their M.O. to undermine the administration and to undermine Democrats,' says the source. 'They're a propaganda outfit but they call themselves news'."

Here is where the self-contained sphere of the conservative political entertainment complex becomes apparent, and indeed it is a necessary agent in the creation and maintenance of conservative realishness. The article continues, "It's clear that Fox News has become a misleading, partisan outlet. But here's what the source stresses: Fox News is *designed* to mislead its viewers and *designed* to engage in a purely political enterprise. In 2010, all sorts of evidence tumbled out to confirm that fact, like the recently leaked emails from inside Fox News, in which a top editor instructed his newsroom staffers (not just the opinion show hosts) to slant the news when reporting on key stories such as climate change and health care reform" (Boehlert, 2011). Finally, supporting my claim that Fox News viewers believe what they see and are told because they are watching Fox *News,* Boehlert asks, "So, Fox News as a legitimate news outlet? The source laughs at the suggestion, and thinks much of the public, along with the Beltway* press corps, has been duped by Murdoch's marketing campaign over the years. 'People assume you need a license to call yourself a news channel. You don't. *So because they call themselves Fox News*, people probably give them a pass on a lot of things,' says the source" (my emphasis).

* Washington, D.C., signifying the insularity of government and those in the political news media who report exclusively from there. "Beltway" refers to the highway that surrounds D.C.

And so it is clear how Glenn Beck's rhetoric, ranging from sobbing (enabled, many on the Internet claim, by Vicks VapoRub applied under his eyes) while waxing about the loss of America and liberty, to ending a segment and going to commercial while walking wild-eyed right into the camera (and as such into the living rooms his audience, whose view of a giant Glenn Beck face staring at them can only serve to reinforce his gravitas and the truthiness of whatever he'd just said), to his conspiracy theories diagrammed and flowcharted on his blackboard, was enabled (even encouraged) by Fox News's deliberate and explicit (to insiders, at least) culture of sanctioned truthiness on steroids. This at once riled up the conservative base while also directly benefiting the Republican Party through direct participation in politics, which is untoward for a legitimate and credible news organization:

> *Media Matters* revealed that during the 2009–2010 election cycle, dozens of Fox News personalities endorsed, raised money, or campaigned for Republican candidates or organizations in more than 600 instances. And in terms of free TV airtime that Fox News handed over to GOP hopefuls, *Media Matters* calculated the channel essentially donated $55 million worth of airtime to Republican presidential hopefuls last year who also collect Fox News paychecks…
>
> The source continues: "I don't think people understand that it's an organization that's built and functions by intimidation and bullying, and its goal is to prop up and support Republicans and the GOP and to knock down Democrats. People tend think that stuff that's on TV is real, especially under the guise of news. *You'd think that people would wise up, but they don't.*" (Boehnert, 2011; my emphasis)

And yet, even as the de facto leader of the Tea Party, having organized major Tea Party events of the march-on-Washington variety, Beck was unwilling to accept this role. He disputed then-fellow Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly's claim in *Pinheads and Patriots: Where You Stand in the Age of Obama* that Beck was the leader of the Tea Party. O'Reilly countered,

> you're not leading it as far as you signed up for it, but in the hearts and minds you're one of the leaders, along with Sarah Palin… I saw the Tea Party and how they reacted to you… Those people love you, and by example—not by signing up—you and Sarah Palin have stimulated the Tea Party… You, for

> better or for worse—and I think it's for better, because I like the Tea Party—have stimulated them, and so has Sarah Palin, to go out and to say what they believe in and to try to get those things enacted. Be proud of it, Beck! That's one of the few things you can be proud of" (O'Reilly cited in *Huffington Post,* 2010b)

(The last line is rather intriguing: was O'Reilly revealing a measure of disdain for Beck's other accomplishments?)

Now that we have effectively established Beck as the inspirational and motivational leader of the Tea Party—whereas Sarah Palin seems more of a spiritual leader, a shiny object, a gaudy gewgaw apparently more interested in self-promotion by *using* the Tea Party's idolization for financial gain and some measure of 'pundit capital'—and before proceeding to an examination of the Tea Party's (and by extension, the Right's) hysteria, a quick look at some of Glenn Beck's 'greatest hits,' compiled by *Media Matters* (2011), is in order to allow a smooth segue:

- In a sketch, Beck pretended to be Barack Obama pouring gasoline on the 'average American,' asking "President Obama, why don't you just set us on fire?"
- He argued that Hitler's atrocities could very well happen in the United States, saying, "The key is socialism. One never thinks or imagines that this can happen again. No one thinks it could happen here. Well, did the Germans think that it could? Did they—did the Germans sit there at night and go, 'You know, that Hitler thing—that could end in concentration camps and the liquidation of the Jews.' Did they really think that? Or did people say all along the way, 'Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, this isn't going well. This isn't—no, this isn't—no, this isn't us. We shouldn't go down this way.' And then they were told they were conspiracy theorists. They were told that it was wrong—that they would even speak out. And then the beatings started. And then

executions started. And then that argument just went away." Here, Beck is clearly linking those who dared to speak out against Hitler and Nazism to the Tea Party speaking out against Obama and his apparent whateverist agenda to enslave those who dissent. He also alludes to the conspiracy theory that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had begun building concentration camps at Obama's direction (see the conspiracy theory site http://www.freedomfiles.org/war/fema.htm).

- He likened Obama's policies to 9/11, stating, "We need to fight hard within the rules and pray, get down on your knees and pray, pray. It is September 11th all over again except we didn't have the collapsing buildings, but we need God more than ever… We can beat the issues that lie ahead of us. We can do it. But the situation is only made more difficult when our own leadership, our own Congress, our own president, is not telling us the truth and for political reasons, tightening that vise." Three coded appeals are here that would incite fear and potentially hysteria: First, the 9/11 comparison can be interpreted as suggesting Obama is a terrorist, even an Islamic one, since many on the Right still believe he is Muslim. Second, that the government is apparently "tightening the vise" implies an encroaching violence of oppression. Third, the call to God implies that the situation is so dire and hopeless that divine intervention is necessary in order for the Tea Party to triumph over Obama and his whateverist agenda.
- He alluded to a potential genocide of ten percent of the American population led by the long-defunct Weather Underground, a radical-left quasi-terrorist organization active from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. "They've changed

the radical pose. And they've put themselves in power and they've made you [presumably, the Tea Partier] the radical… A secret FBI report in 1976 noted that the Weather Underground was receiving aid from Cuba, technical assistance from North Korea.

"In other words, this was a situation that had the potential to become far, far worse with people like Bill Ayers[*] who was OK with killing 10 percent of the people. The point is to expose these people. We're not this stupid. Americans are not this stupid. We just don't want to believe…

"And when I go to bed and I say my prayers I say, 'Lord, what else do you want me to do? What else could I possibly say? What other video? What else could I do to get people to wake up? All right?

"Please. Please help people wake up. I'm not saying that you and I are going to, you know, meet each other next week in a concentration camp in southern Utah. I am saying that there are elements with connections, with government officials that have positions in the government now."

- A coming insurrection of Marxists and Islamic radicals would create a new caliphate (Islamist religious state) on Earth, after rioting and revolution in Europe and the Middle East inevitably spread to U.S. allies and interests: "Who will stand with the United States? Who will stand with Israel? Because this is Sunni and this is Shi'ite. You have Hamas and Hezbollah. Hezbollah has to got to cause more chaos here. They will clearly go into Iraq where we are and the squeeze begins… This will be on fire. This is already on fire. This is on fire. This is on fire. And it's riots all along…

[*] Former Weather Underground member; the terrorist Sarah Palin claimed Obama had been "pallin' around with."

> "Morocco is on fire. What's across from Morocco? Spain, connected to France and Germany and Italy, also on fire. And Greece, also on fire, which brings you right back here to Turkey… The entire Mediterranean is on fire. More than that, it's not just the surrounding countries of the Mediterranean. It also spreads up here. You have [the] U.K. and Ireland already with riots in the street. You have Russia with a bombing.
>
> "Well, now, let's see—let's play this through. What do you think happens? These two collide. They quite honestly, they could make us collapse financially… This becomes a caliphate. This becomes China dominant. This becomes Muslim caliphate."

This is the sort of thing we'd expect to see on the internet[*], or hear on far-right talk radio, or coming from professional conspiracy theorist Alex Jones (whose January 2013, post-Newtown, pro-gun maniacal rant on CNN's *Piers Morgan Tonight* went viral, alarmingly epitomizing the thinking of the most radical gun nuts). But all of this was being broadcast nightly on a major cable news outlet avidly followed and trusted (as in the Tea Partier statements above) by a justifiably ever-more-hysterical conservative constituency. Beck's use of the "I'm not saying that [whatever he is about to say] but… [he says it anyway and it is clear that he meant it all along]" rhetorical cheat (much like Fox News's "some people are saying" trope) is perhaps what kept him, at least on his former show, from *seeming* like a conspiracy nut through this sort of self-distancing from whatever it is he *actually* wants to convey; this way, he can at least feign some measure of impartiality and objectivity, and I believe that this ultimately solidifies his authority and credibility among his viewers.

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[*] For a humourous listing and Venn-diagram depiction of the litany of Obama conspiracy theories, see Suebesaeng & Gilson's (2012) "Obama Conspiracy-o-rama" on the *Mother Jones* website (URL is in bibliographic entry).

The arguably most controversial and enduring salvo of Beck's—if anything, his legacy from his Fox News days—is his claim that Barack Obama

> has exposed himself as a guy—over and over and over again—who has a deep-seated hatred for white people, or the white culture. I don't know what it is. But you can't sit in a pew with Jeremiah Wright for 20 years and not hear some of that stuff [incendiary statements critical of America] and not have it wash over… I'm not saying that he doesn't like white people. I'm saying he has a problem. [T]his guy is, I believe, a racist. (Media Matters, 2011)

(Note that Beck first says that Obama "has a deep-seated hatred for white people" and in the next breath, "I'm not saying that he doesn't like white people"—although he just did.) Here, Beck has hurled an extraordinarily grave accusation at Obama, and one that directly appeals to the racist beliefs, of whichever liminality, of the majority of Tea Partiers. Their leader, their teacher, their fetishized idol, has just told them that the President hates them for being white. My position is that this, together with previous examples I cite and discuss earlier, roundly demolish what I consider Skocpol and Williamson's (2011) astoundingly short-sighted apologist dismissal of widespread Tea Party racism.

Finally, Beck's rhetoric and influence have been shown to be dangerous in terms of his ability to inflame at least one of his followers to violence. In July of 2010, Byron Williams, an ex-felon, "opened fire on California Highway Patrol officers who had stopped him on an Oakland freeway for driving erratically. For 12 frantic minutes, Williams traded shots with the police, employing three firearms and a small arsenal of ammunition, including armor-piercing rounds fired from a .308-caliber rifle" (Hamilton, 2010). Williams "stated that his intention was to start a revolution by traveling to San Francisco and killing people of importance at the Tides Foundation and the ACLU." The Tides Foundation, a charity that funds progressive causes such as environmentalism and community groups, had been attacked by Beck 29 times on his show. "Williams sought to defend Beck from 'Obama and the liberals,' whom he said are afraid of Beck 'because he often exposes things that are

simply forbidden in news.' Williams said that Beck advocates non-violence and that he had already researched the conspiracy theories that informed his alleged plot—before *seeing them 'confirm[ed]' on Beck's show*" (my emphasis). He stated: "I would have never started watching Fox News if it wasn't for the fact that Beck was on there. And it was the things that he did, it was the things he exposed that blew my mind" (Williams quoted in Hamilton, 2010). Tides Foundation CEO Drummond Pike wrote an op-ed following the incident (see Pike, 2010), then penned a letter to high-profile advertisers on Beck's shows (such as JPMorgan Chase and Chrysler) "asking them to remove their sponsorship of the Fox News program or risk having 'blood on their hands'" (Stein, 2010c).

This sort of incident is inevitably followed by the usual blame-shifting and denials that whomever's statements were never intended to be taken literally and that he or she denounces violence, and so on. In fairness, this was an isolated act of a mentally disturbed man acting on a delusion (the result of truthiness become realishness in turn expressed as hysteria), the same thing we hear after seemingly regular U.S. mass shootings, and always parroted loudest by the gun lobby. But just as high-capacity gun magazines make mass shootings possible, so did Beck's repeated inflammatory attacks on the Tides Foundation: would Williams have even heard of the Tides Foundation were it not for Beck, who, Williams stated, confirmed the conspiracy theories?

At its simplest, the combination of characteristics shared by Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck that elevate them to strange god status, even as they operate differently, is that they are both at once charismatic and enigmatic.

In the end, though, the hysteria that has infected, possessed, and driven Tea Partiers is best demonstrated through their own words; to this end, I will again cite Tea Partiers

interviewed by Chase Whiteside in the NewLeftMedia video series. On the ACA, referencing the notion of rationed health care and 'death panels':

> "Why push health care on people who have excellent health care? We have the best health care in the world!" (2010b)
>
> "It's all about bureaucracy, it's all about control. It's not at all about people's health." (2010b)
>
> *A young woman wearing an 'I Survived Roe v. Wade' t-shirt, asked what about the ACA she opposed:* "The nice little death tax [sic: death panels], where they would rather send you a $50 cheque for a blue pill, end-of-life pill, than pay for the necessary medical expenses." (2010b)
>
> "Obamacare is euthanasia. It's rationing." (2010b)
>
> "They have a curve where you start out as a baby, you become more and more important until you get to a certain age, then you're not important anymore." *Whiteside: "Where is this in the bill, that people can find this?"* "I don't even know what's in the bill, per se." (2010b)
>
> "I'm an elderly—I'm 67, and it's going to be rationed." *Whiteside: "What in our bill makes you think that?"* "Everything there, it's just—that's the way it's gonna be, it's socialized medicine and we do not want it!" *"Anything specifically?"* "Umm… the rationing." *"But, I mean, where specifically in the bill do you find the rationing?"* "Well, I'm not actually sure, I just heard tidbits and so forth about it and I'm like, we don't want it." *"And where is it people are hearing about the bill, where are you hearing these things that it's going to ration health care?"* "Fox News." (2010b)
>
> "Anybody over 65 is expendable, and that [sic] they shouldn't expect to be treated. They [sic] should go to the younger people who can make more money for the government. They're trying to get control of the country so that they can run every business and run every person in this country and tell them what they can do and when they can do it, and tax us to death. We've all worked hard for our money, we're senior citizens, and now they're telling us we can't even get medical care because they're going to give us a [suicide] pill!" (2010c)

It is understandable that such confusion and misinformation over the provisions of the ACA should be a cause for alarm, since health care or lack thereof directly affects bodily integrity and security, and as such, physical survival, thereby rooting anti-ACA sentiment in a universal primal fear. On Barack Obama:

> "It mentioned his name in the Bible, I think it was under [sic] Hebrew, but it stated 'brak abama,' and they took his name and they separated his name and they deciphered it and 'Barack Obama' in its content means antichrist." (2009a)

> "His mother was white! So he's not African-American*, but he's going that way because that pays off for him." (2009a)

> "The Nazis had the Brownshirts. Obama has proposed, and I keep hearing him talk about it, he wants to have a nation of, what, two million citizen army armed as well as the Army?!" *Whiteside: "Well, he's talking about an army of volunteers to do volunteer work."* "If they're gonna be armed—" *"Well, I don't think they're going to be armed with weapons."* "They're going to be armed as well as the Army is!" (2009a)

> "A lot of the black families were pulled into that socialist way of thought. Mr. Obama is a socialist, and by definition socialism is not American and needs to be defeated." (2010a)

> "Fascism is a form of socialism, I would believe… I mean they're all intertwined, communism, fascism, socialism—they all have a little bit of each, they borrowed from each other." (2009a) *(Hence 'whateverism.')*

> "Do you know that President Obama is considering banning fishing in America? *Fishing!"* (2010c)

On Obama's appointment of advisors, commonly referred to as 'czars' since the Reagan administration:

> "I want people to know, what *is* a czar? What are they? They're a Russian king! Here, Jesus is our king." (2009a)

> "I don't even know why Obama appointed a czar. What are they doing? Czar came [sic] from Caesar in Roman times and then Russian czar. This is America, we don't have czars in America." (2009a)

> "The czars, we don't know who they answer to, we don't know how much they're being paid, we don't know what their jobs are!" (2009a)

> "We don't know what their power is! We don't know—what are they going to start doing? Are they going to be given land and power over the government?" (2009a)

And related to these sentiments, on the perceived decline of America:

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* Obama's mother was American and his father was Kenyan, and so he is in fact first-generation African-American.

> "We're here to make a statement. We're very concerned about our country. We think we're losing our country." (2010b)
>
> "Our country is going down the toilet really fast because our leaders are refusing to listen to us; they're being like tyrannical dictators." (2010b)
>
> "We don't even have the Constitution recognized as the governing document for determining who can run for president! Think of that! The Constitution says that you must be a born resident, I mean a natural-born citizen, of the United States of America!" (2010a) *(This refers to Birtherism, the belief that Obama was not born in the U.S.)*
>
> "The Founding Fathers would be very disappointed to know that we really don't have an actual citizen of the United States being in the presidency." (2010a)
>
> "The way I think the country's going, I'm wondering whether or not we're going to have a presidential election in 2012. I know there's some backroom talk about martial law." (2009b)
>
> "We're no longer an exceptional country. We're no longer the shining light, the beacon to the world of what society should look to be as far as of freedom. We're just another country." (2009b)

It is no surprise, then, that the Tea Party, fueled by outrageous truthiness of the strange gods on Fox News and on talk radio, these notions then discussed (and further distorted) among friends and neighbours, at Tea Party meetings and rallies, and online, so quickly became a national movement with ever-growing influence and, at the heart of it all, *significance* in terms of the fate of America. These statements show strong and deep emotional malaise in the areas of self-preservation, self-sustenance, independence, liberty (these constitute the American liberty fetish)—all of which are founding principles of America—and every one of these under direct attack from the Obama–Other. These people are not merely misguided by misinformation and individually delusional; rather, as I set forth in Chapter One, this is a widespread *collective* experiential phenomenon *in which they operate and interact,* and as such lends support to my concept of realishness.

The arguably outsized influence of the Tea Party has always fascinated me. The possibility of Tea Party backlash to whichever policy, whichever issue, whichever statement, whichever legislator, and so on suggests an agency that acts *even in the absence* of actual Tea Party (re)action. For example, many formerly moderate Republicans have either walked back statements (sometimes at the orders of Rush Limbaugh) or shifted their positions rightward in order to placate the Tea Party, as one would pacify a teething baby by rubbing booze on its gums. The ever-present threat of being 'primaried from the right'—being challenged for re-nomination by a Tea Party Republican—is clearly acknowledged by moderates, and they are careful to behave accordingly. Indeed, several long-serving Republican moderates have been 'primaried' while others have decided to bow out and not seek re-nomination, knowing that as moderates, they are no longer electable by their own party.

This is what I call the Tea Party's 'spectre-agency,' for the threat is ever-present yet not always clear or even visible—but it is there nonetheless, looming, a known unknown, and as such its agency is real even without action. Spectre-agency, as we will see, would go on to not only influence the 2010 midterm and 2012 presidential elections, and the electoral process itself, but would also be channeled into a weapon of political terrorism that has not only blocked important legislation, such as emergency funding for those displaced by Hurricane Sandy (only passed three months later, in January 2013, due to Republican obstruction), but has brought the United States to the brink of economic implosion in crises of brinksmanship.

And so, the Tea Party, now firmly established as a powerful new political actor, with spectre-agency and a hysterical constituency of rage chomping at the bit to take back 'their' country, had to take the next step by expanding its base, influence, and agency; as such, they

would focus their efforts on the ballot box. The 2010 midterm congressional elections would be the Republicans' chance to take back the Democratic-controlled House and Senate, in order to put the brakes on Obama's agenda—to continue the backroom plan cooked up by Newt Gingrich and the others on Inauguration Day 2009. Since they couldn't lynch Obama himself until 2012, in the 2010 midterms, they could at least take the boy out to the woodshed and give him a good whoopin'. Behold the advent of the 'Tea Party candidate' and the Hysterical Right's subsequent installation in government.

CHAPTER THREE

Metastasis, mendacity, and meltdown

> I have a message. A message from the Tea Party. A message that is loud and clear and does not mince words. We've come to take our government back… We are encountering a day of reckoning and this movement, this Tea Party movement, is a message to Washington that we're unhappy and we want things done differently… The mandate of our victory tonight is huge.
>
> – Sen. Rand Paul[*]

The Tea Party's loud, boisterous, and widespread coming out during 2009, especially during the Summer of Rage, was all well and good insofar as the movement exploded into the national consciousness, but if Tea Partiers were to stop the Obama agenda, they needed representation in the legislative branch. Moreover, they needed not run-of-the-mill establishment Republicans, but rather a new Tea Party–certified brand of Republican who could reflect the movement's ethos of ideological purity and standing for their principles no matter what, even if it meant voting against moderate Republicans on otherwise routine and common-sense bills. But these new 'Tea Party candidates' not only reflected, and by extension represented, Tea Party guiding principles; they also reflected the gross and astounding ignorance, petulance, and racism prevalent in the movement. It seems the Tea Partiers were seeking a *holistic authenticity* in their candidates, and could see through non–Tea Party candidates in Republican primaries even as the latter might attempt to *come off* as dyed-in-the-wool Tea Partiers. (This is the problem that would continue into the 2012 Republican presidential nomination primaries, the effects of its agency seen particularly in Mitt Romney's transparent attempts to move to the right in spite of previous policy positions. I will discuss this later in the chapter.) Tea Party candidates would displace moderate Republican members

[*] Paul quoted in *Real Clear Politics*, 2010.

of Congress, even stalwarts who had held their seats for years and years; this is the phenomenon of being 'primaried from the right' that I mentioned in the previous chapter.

As such, for Tea Partiers and Republicans in general, the November 2010 midterm congressional elections couldn't come fast enough. The opening quotation was spoken by Rand Paul, son of pseudo-libertarian Texas congressman Ron Paul, upon winning the Republican primary nomination for U.S. Senator from Kentucky. He had defeated Kentucky Secretary of State Trey Grayson, who had support from the senior Senator from Kentucky, Mitch McConnell (also Senate Minority Leader). Grayson had accused Paul of being more concerned with self-promotion and the Tea Party than the needs of Kentuckians; he also complained of being subjected to a more hard line of questioning on Fox News while Paul received softball questions and was covered more favourably in general (Raju, 2010). Unwittingly confirming part of Grayson's accusation, Paul stated "We think there's a Tea Party tidal wave coming… It's already hit Utah, and it's coming to Kentucky next" (Paul quoted in Raju, 2010).

But even before this, the Democrats' stronghold over both Houses had been greatly weakened, if not critically wounded, by losing only one Senate seat to the Republicans when Scott Brown won the Massachusetts Senate seat that had been vacated upon the death of Ted Kennedy in August of 2009. Kennedy, widely referred to and revered as the "Lion of the Senate" (see for example Hornick, 2009; *Time,* 2009; Forbes, 2009), had held the seat since 1962, and was a passionate crusader for health care reform and other liberal policies. (Though Kennedy did live to see the first African-American president—who had campaigned on a promise of health care reform—take office, he did not live to see Obama sign the ACA into law in March of 2010. Predictably disrespectful "Bury Obamacare With

Kennedy" signs began to be seen at Tea Party rallies soon after Kennedy's death [NewLeftMedia, 2009a]).

Brown had run with the support of the Tea Party Express (one of a few national, corporate-funded Tea Party associations), whose endorsement was matched with their running TV ads in support of his candidacy (Russell, 2010). The Tea Party Express's chief strategist Sal Russo stated, "Since Scott Brown is an opponent of the Democrat's [sic] abysmal healthcare mess, if he wins the Democrat's [sic] plan hits a roadblock in the Senate, where they would be 1-vote [sic] short of the 60 they need" (Russo quoted in Russell, 2010). And this was the critical wound I alluded to. In the Senate, a minority party can filibuster legislation, preventing it from being brought to a vote, effectively killing it. Senate rules require 60 votes to end a filibuster and bring the bill at hand to an immediate up-or-down simple majority vote. Ted Kennedy's death left Senate Democrats with 59 seats (these include two Independent members who caucus with the Democrats), that one crucial seat now lost to the Republicans. Following Brown's victory, then–House Republican Leader (now Speaker) John Boehner said,

> For nine months, I've talked to you about the political rebellion that's been brewing in America. It manifested itself in August at town hall meetings around the country. We saw it manifest itself in what happened in Virginia and New Jersey back in November. And we saw it manifest itself again last night in Massachusetts, when the people of Massachusetts stood up and said, 'enough is enough.' And it's pretty clear that while the American people continue to speak, the Democrat[*] leadership here in this House continues to ignore them and is looking for some way to continue to press this health care bill to a vote. (Standard Newswire, 2010)

Note the conflation of Tea Partiers with "*the* American people," which suggests on some level that their "political rebellion" is somehow that of all Americans, directly related to the notion that *they* represent *the* 'We, the People.' Their dismissal if not ignorance of the

[*] The use of 'Democrat' in place of 'Democratic' as an adjective is a strange but enduring epithet used by Republicans and conservatives (see for example "Democrats Find Ally In Republican Camp," 1984).

majority of Americans who elected (and re-elected) Barack Obama on precisely the promises that he was now acting on is symptomatic of their realishness in which 'everyone' opposes Obama.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell also praised Brown's victory, stating on the Senate floor:

> It's been a long time since the people of Massachusetts sent a Republican to the Senate. I'd like to congratulate Senator-elect Scott Brown on his decisive victory last night.
>
> There's a reason the nation was focused on this race. The American people have made it abundantly clear that they're more interested in shrinking unemployment than expanding government. They're tired of bailouts. They're tired of the government spending more than ever at a time when most people are spending less. And they don't want the government taking over health care.
>
> This is why Americans are electing good Republican candidates who they hope will reverse a year-long Democrat trend of spending too much, borrowing too much, and taxing too much. The voters have spoken. They want a course correction. We should listen to them. (McConnell, 2010).

In declaring that Americans wanted a course correction, we would think that McConnell was commenting on a *decisive set* of Republican gains in Congress: a clear majority with a mandate to "reverse" Congressional Democrats' (and, by extension, Obama's) agenda. But again: at that time, Democrats still held majorities in both Houses; it is abundantly clear, then, that any Republican-led course reversal could only possibly come through the use of the filibuster to obstruct legislation supported by *actual* Democratic majorities in Congress. Later in 2010, before the Congressional midterm elections, McConnell would infamously state that "[t]he single most important thing we [Republicans] want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president" (Shakir, 2010). The Republican *modus operandi,* made possible by Brown's victory and Republicans' retaking of the House later in the year, was clearly to obstruct legislation in order to sink Obama. This is not governance, nor is it non-governance, for the latter implies a certain abdication of *agency* in governance. Rather, it is

anti-governance, for the filibuster is a procedure to not only signal opposition, but to deliberately deny a duly-elected majority its ability to legislate; as such, even in the absence of debate on the Senate floor and the usually indefinite postponement of voting in order to kill bills, the agency of the Republican minority is effectively seen and deployed.

Even though this obstruction was (and continues to be) happening in the Senate, regarded as the more civilized, cordial, and deliberative of the two Houses, it can still be thought of as an expression of Republican hysteria, though in a decidedly more muted and liminal way. The effusive praise and congratulations upon Scott Brown's election indicated Republicans' burning desire to gain *any* advantage over Obama and the Democrats—anything at all that would allow them to exert the paradoxical supremacy of their minority. It wasn't about Brown himself; it was about that one critical Senate seat. Judson Phillips, a leader of the Tea Party Express, said: "He became number 41. He was the 41st Republican Senator and his presence denied Democrats the ability to break a Republican filibuster. Conservatives were elated. The celebrations knew no bounds. Even the manufacturer of a line of fountain pen inks created new ink that they called 'Brown 41' in his honor"* (Phillips, 2011). Ordinarily, we would expect such elation from all quarters to be in celebration of a legitimate victory of a duly-elected majority; that it was in fact over the deployment of a strategy of obstruction indicates a decidedly irrational view of governance.

Moreover, this jubilation suggests to me a catharsis: a release of built-up Republican tension. The Republicans had sought the power of obstruction since Day One, if not before: recall my earlier mention of the secretive meeting the evening of Obama's inauguration. The guests had included Eric Cantor, now House Majority Leader; Paul Ryan, future vice-

* Brown lost his 2012 re-election bid to Democratic Harvard law professor and consumer protection advocate Elizabeth Warren. In February 2013, he decided to not run for the Massachussetts Senate seat vacated by John Kerry upon the latter's appointment as Secretary of State (Cillizza, Sullivan, & Blake, 2013).

presidential candidate; and Newt Gingrich, former Speaker of the House who had maintained a public presence following his having to resign in 1999 as the result of a Republican rebellion against him, and would later toss his hat into the ring for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination. The meeting had been orchestrated by Frank Luntz, a Republican strategist and pollster, whose careful and focus group–tested crafting of sound bites (often of the dog-whistle variety) for use by Republican legislators makes him more of a minister of propaganda (Lieberman, 2013; Hananoki, 2012; PBS.org, 2004). In his exposé *Do Not Ask What Good We Do: Inside the U.S. House of Representatives* (2012), Robert Draper describes the meeting and its results:

> The dinner lasted nearly four hours. They parted company almost giddily. The Republicans had agreed on a way forward:
>
> Go after [incoming Treasury Secretary Tim] Geithner. (And indeed [Senator Jon] Kyl did, the next day: "Would you answer my question rather than dancing around it—please?")
>
> Show united and unyielding opposition to the president's economic policies. (Eight days later, Minority Whip [Eric] Cantor would hold the House Republicans to a unanimous No against Obama's economic stimulus plan.)
>
> Begin attacking vulnerable Democrats on the airwaves. (The first National Republican Congressional Committee attack ads would run in less than two months.)
>
> Win the spear point of the House in 2010. Jab Obama relentlessly in 2011. Win the White House and the Senate in 2012. (Draper quoted in Stein, 2012a).

All of these principal strategies were successfully carried out, save of course the final two, though these *were* realistic and not out of reach. (I write here based on my own observations during my immersion research.) Widespread opposition to Obama, together with the Tea Party's having awakened the constituency of rage that served to amplify (often literally) this, began to *realishly* seem like a consensus among *all* voters—the Right's 'We, the People.' It seemed as if the new common wisdom was that Obama had no chance of being re-elected

(especially after the devastating 2010 midterm elections, which I will discuss shortly), and this not only among conservative pundits but some centrists and liberals as well.

Watching all of this unfold was at once illuminating, alarming, and entertaining, and my critical analysis of this 'common wisdom' throughout my research proved pivotal in constructing my model of sociopolitical spacetime, hysteria, realishness, and strange gods. Even at the worst of times, when Obama seemed weakened (though never defeated) by the Republicans' obstructionist tactics, and the hysteria over a potential Obama loss in 2012 began to manifest itself even among the liberal commentators and pundits on MSNBC, I never wavered in my assurance that he *would* be re-elected, and this as a result of contemporaneously analyzing current political events and sentiments using the spacetime model, together with *New York Times* statistics genius Nate Silver's dead-on polling analyses. What others saw as the Republicans' gaining strength and momentum I saw as the Right's snowballing hysteria and deepening warp into realishness, and I was quite sure that this would draw the Right into an increasingly inescapable pit. The smugness of Republican politicians as to their 2012 chances became more and more apparent through their actions and their rhetoric; it seemed as if they believed they could run an empty suit (or pantsuit) against Obama and win. My contention was that this would ultimately result in a weak candidate who, ultimately, would not be able to pass the many tests of his or her leadership qualities, intricate knowledge of foreign and domestic affairs, clear vision for the nation, solid platform, integrity, and of course, sanity. With this sort of candidate, the election would become merely a referendum on Barack Obama. In right-wing realishness, their candidate's character didn't matter much. What mattered was that he or she (but preferably he, unless Sarah Palin decided to run) was white. As such, I remained confident that Obama would prevail over this, especially given his extraordinary Obama For America organization's

proven ability to get out the vote in 2008 through a precisely-calibrated, demographic data–driven 'ground game.' The ultimate, devastating mass delusion near the end of the 2012 presidential campaign would prove to be the result of what seemed to be going so well for Republicans during the first three years of the Obama administration.

The first step was to win back the House, and the conditions were right. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate in 2009 increased from 7.8% to 8.3% between January and February, to 9% in April, steadily increasing to a high of 10% in October (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Since these increases coincided with Obama's taking office, it was easy to blame the situation on him, even though it was the lingering result of the 2008 economic crisis: the unemployment rate hovered around 4.5% to 5% during George W. Bush's second term, only starting to increase around mid-2008. (By the 2012 election, it had returned to 7.8%.) While it is clear that trends such as these, especially in such extraordinary circumstances of a global recession, cannot be reversed in months, this didn't matter. Obama could be blamed for the continued increase in unemployment, even though the now-famous 'bikini chart' showed that job losses abruptly began to decline in February of 2009 when Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, a stimulus package; beginning in January of 2010, a solid trend of private sector job growth took hold (Benen, 2010). But since unemployment, not statistics on job growth, was the problem being experienced by workers and their families, this was the only number that mattered. The Republicans could campaign on this. Midterm elections bring out a party's base, and the Republicans now had a constituency of rage that could be unleashed upon the ballot box.

But who to run? The need to appeal to the Tea Party was clear, and so Tea Party candidates—however inexperienced and unpolished, and sanity apparently not

prerequisite—sprung up and began winning nominations across the country. I will look at the most memorable of these, Christine O'Donnell and Sharron Angle; even though both were unsuccessful in their bids, they aptly reflected the Tea Party's realish notions of competence and electability.

After the 2008 election, Joe Biden resigned the Delaware Senate seat he had held since 1973, and the Governor appointed Biden's former chief of staff to serve the rest of the term. Previously, Christine O'Donnell had lost the 2006 Republican primary for the seat; she won the nomination in 2008 and was handily defeated by Biden (presidential and vice-presidential candidates in Congress typically run simultaneously for re-election if their congressional terms are up; for example, 2012 vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan kept his Wisconsin House seat this way). But by 2010, the Tea Party's influence and agency were clear, and O'Donnell ran for the nomination against nine-term Republican congressman and two-term governor Mike Castle—an example of the 'primaried from the right' phenomenon. The *Washington Post*'s Dan Balz (2010) wrote that "her victory was a reminder of the unpredictable forces at work in politics this year and the power and energy of the antiestablishment sentiment among voters nationwide that could be aimed at Democrats." O'Donnell had been buoyed by an endorsement from Sarah Palin and the support of the Tea Party Express. The article continues,

> The outcome was the latest in a string of embarrassments for the Republican establishment this year, underscoring the civil war that continues to rage in the party. Last month, Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska lost her primary to political newcomer Joe Miller, who like O'Donnell had the support of Palin and tea party [sic] activists. Last spring, tea party [sic] forces defeated Sen. Robert F. Bennett of Utah at the Republican state convention.
>
> Those were the most prominent Republicans to fall to the grass-roots movement that is roiling the party, but hardly the only ones. Establishment-backed candidates in Kentucky, Nevada, Colorado and Connecticut also lost in their primaries, and in Florida, Gov. Charlie Crist bolted the party rather than risk losing the Senate nomination to conservative Marco Rubio.

Clearly, a Tea Party wave was crashing Republican primaries, the result of which was a stable of Tea Party Republican candidates. O'Donnell's inexperience further highlighted the Tea Party's realish support of weak, often trainwreck, candidates: while she had a solid history of conservative activism and participation in Republican campaigns, she had never held any elective office. Moreover, embarrassing video footage of her regular 1990s appearances on Bill Maher's *Politically Incorrect* quickly surfaced; most infamously, she stated that she had "dabbled into [sic] witchcraft" but had "never joined a coven" (O'Donnell quoted in Creed, 2010). "One of my first dates with a witch was on a satanic altar, and I didn't know it. I mean, there's a little blood there and stuff like that… We went to a movie and then had a midnight picnic on a satanic altar." After widespread media coverage, in both news and entertainment, O'Donnell's first campaign ad addressed the issue directly: in it, she stated, "I'm not a witch. I'm nothing you've heard. I'm you" (O'Donnell quoted in Siegel, 2010b). This backfired, leading to parodies on the internet and on television (including the obligatory *Saturday Night Live* bit); she almost immediately publicly expressed her regret over the ad (Fabian, 2010). She would thus forever be known as "Christine 'I'm not a witch' O'Donnell." Canon (2010) writes that this attention made her

> the first of a new category of amateurs: those who *become* celebrities because of their extreme outsider status and unusual events in the campaign. O'Donnell's famous "I am not a witch" ad had more than 1.5 million hits on YouTube and a sympathetic version of the ad by "Songify This" had another 2.5 million hits. The negative fallout from these controversies turned an almost certain Republican win into a decisive 17-point victory by Democrat Chris Coons. (A hypothetical match-up a week before the general election had shown Castle with a 21-point lead over Coons). (p. 5; emphasis in original)

Despite her loss, though, it is well worth noting that O'Donnell was squarely aligned with the Tea Party's notion of victimhood at the hands of some vague and undefined

'establishment,' and its realish conviction that the Tea Party was 'We, the People.' At the 2010 social conservative Values Voters Summit (sponsored by the Family Research Council, listed as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center [2013]), she spoke of the recent Republican resurgence, saying "They call us wacky. They call us wing nuts. We call us 'We the people'… *There are more of us than there are of them*" (O'Donnell quoted in Sidoti, 2010; my emphasis). Here, she establishes an 'us' comprising 'We, the People,' and a 'them' left undefined, merely some vague and threatening Other. What is alarming, though, is that in Obama-era right-wing politics, association with a hate group was not a potential liability but rather a boon to a politician's social conservative Tea Party 'cred,' and examples of this would multiply and amplify in the 2012 presidential and congressional campaigns.

While Christine O'Donnell represented inexperience, Nevada Republican Senate candidate Sharron Angle represented this together with realish-based ignorance that hinted at a decidedly more sinister and insidious potential of the Hysterical Right. Unlike O'Donnell, Angle had held elective office, first on the Nye County school board, then eight years in the Nevada State Assembly (Kim, 2010). She won the Republican nomination for U.S. Senator, hoping to unseat Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid; after the primary, a Rasmussen poll showed her leading Reid 50% to 39% (Rasmussen Reports, 2010). She characterized Reid as a "whack job candidate" who was "out of touch with the [sic] mainstream America" (Angle quoted in Siegel, 2010a).

This laughable projection would become both amusingly and frighteningly apparent during her campaign. At an event to which her campaign had invited reporters, she literally ran from them. The *Las Vegas Sun* reported, "In the warehouse of a family-owned clean diesel manufacturer in Sparks [Nevada], Angle delivered a three-minute speech on her desire to permanently repeal the estate tax. When invited by the final speaker to stay and answer a

few questions, she turned on her heel and rushed out a back door with a small cadre of staff members. Reporters, including one who [was] six months pregnant, chased after her, calling out questions on unemployment benefits and other topics she [had] largely refused to address" (Damon, 2010). Video footage of this was widely shown in the news media. Other bizarre and extreme statements were reported on, such as her comments on rape and incest victims' abortion rights: "I think that two wrongs don't make a right. And I have been in the situation of counseling young girls, not 13 but 15, who have had very at risk, difficult pregnancies. And my counsel was to look for some alternatives, which they did. And they found that they had made what was really a lemon situation into lemonade" (quoted in Stein, 2010b). Speaking to a high school Hispanic student union, addressing a campaign ad that portrayed thuggish Latinos as illegal aliens, she said that she wasn't sure if those were Latinos in the ad, adding, "I don't know that all of you are Latino. Some of you look a little more Asian to me. I don't know that… What we know, what we know about ourselves is that we are a melting pot in this country. My grandchildren are evidence of that. I'm evidence of that. *I've been called the first Asian legislator in our Nevada State Assembly*" (quoted in Ralston, 2010; my emphasis). Her campaign later clarified that this was because a reporter had once said that she *looked* Asian.

But just as Christine O'Donnell will forever be associated with "I am not a witch," Sharron Angle will be for "Second Amendment remedies." In January 2010, Angle stated:

> I feel that the Second Amendment is the right to keep and bear arms for our citizenry. This not [sic] for someone who's in the military. This not [sic] for law enforcement. This is for us. And in fact when you read that Constitution and the founding fathers, they intended this to stop tyranny. This is for us when our government becomes tyrannical... [I]t's to defend ourselves. And you know, I'm hoping that we're not getting to Second Amendment remedies. (quoted in Stein, 2010a)

This was not a one-time gaffe. She also stated, "I hope that's [revolution] not where we're going, but, you know, if this Congress keeps going the way it is, people are really looking toward those Second Amendment remedies and saying, 'My goodness, what can we do to turn this country around?'" (quoted in Somaiya, 2010). And again:

> What is a little bit disconcerting and concerning is the inability for sporting goods stores to keep ammunition in stock. That tells me the nation is arming. What are they arming for if it isn't that they are so distrustful of their government? They're afraid they'll have to fight for their liberty in more Second Amendment kinds of ways? That's why I look at this as almost an imperative. If we don't win at the ballot box, what will be the next step? (quoted in RGJ.com, 2010).

Even coming from Angle, this sentiment is a dangerous and alarming one that has persisted. Consider two signs seen at Tea Party rallies: one read, "If ballots don't work, bullets will," which originated from a speech given by Florida conservative radio show host Joyce Kaufman (at the time chief of staff for then–Tea Party Republican congressman-elect Allen West, himself known for incendiary remarks) at a Tea Party rally in July 2010 (Busis, 2010). The other sign read, "If [Scott] Brown can't stop it, a Browning [gun] can" (both signs can be found through a Google image search). Texas Governor Rick Perry, who would later vie for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, floated the idea of secession in 2009:

> Millions of Texans are tired of Washington, D.C. trying to come down here and tell us how to run Texas… The 10th Amendment* was enacted by folks who remembered what it was like to have a very oppressive government, to be under the thumb of tyrants in an all-powerful government. Unfortunately, the protections it guarantees have melted away over the course of the years… I believe the federal government has become oppressive. I believe it's become oppressive in its size, its intrusion into the lives of its citizens, and its interference with the affairs of our state. (Perry quoted in Koppelman, 2009)

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* The Tenth Amendment, which reads, "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people," is often seen as *carte blanche* for state supremacy and secession, even though the Supremacy Clause asserts the supremacy of the U.S. Constitution and federal laws over state laws (United States Senate, n.d.); moreover, in *Texas v. White,* the Supreme Court ruled unilateral secession as unconstitutional (Justia.com, n.d.).

The breadth and depth of the insurrectionist sentiment cannot be minimized. In his picaresque quasi-ethnography, *The Backlash: Right-Wing Radicals, High-Def Hucksters, and Paranoid Politics in the Age of Obama,* Will Bunch (2010) wrote of

> the 350 Tea Party activists and members of a new outfit called the Second Amendment Task Force who gathered on the first Saturday of 2010 along the main drag in Alamogordo, New Mexico, to wave their handguns and semi-automatics in the air—perfectly legal in New Mexico—at passing cars in a show of force against a bogus but popular notion that the Obama administration had a plan for confiscating the guns of regular Americans. One of the New Mexico protestors was Korean War veteran Jim Kizer, who was packing a .444 Marlin and a holstered .41 Smith and Wesson Magnum and told the local newspaper, "I've fought Communists all my life, and now our government is being taken over by them. That's why I'm here."… [B]y 2010 the arrival of these angry gatherings—even those armed to the teeth like the one in New Mexico—didn't feel so unusual anymore. (pp. 35–36)

He later concludes that the Tea Party is "braced to fight a war of the worlds, *real or imaginary*" (p. 348; my emphasis). The "real or imaginary" here is essentially the dichotomy of the real versus the realish; for example, the paranoid notion that Obama wants to repeal the Second Amendment and confiscate all guns is the outright lie flavour of truthiness, which leads to the realishness in which the Tea Partiers *act* as described above. (This Second Amendment hysteria has exponentially amplified since the Newtown massacre, once Obama finally began to address gun control—long the white-hot potato of U.S. politics.)

"If ballots don't work, bullets will" aptly sums up all of this. While armed insurrection is unrealistic, and would be quickly extinguished by the unparalleled might of the U.S. military, this phrase and the other passages above point to the Right's notion that not getting their way through free and fair elections (as set forth by the Constitution they fetishize) is unacceptable. Here two themes I discuss earlier are rehearsed: first, that of the Right's perceived ownership of "We, the People" and second, the realish notion that unfavourable election results are irrelevant and that their positions and beliefs remain the

only 'real American' ones. In the sociopolitical warp of realishness, the opposition (which resides and operates in reality) does not have the right to express and enact its will of the majority. Consider Paul Ryan's comments following his and Mitt Romney's 2012 defeat in which he stated that in spite of Obama's clear victory, Obama did not have a mandate to raise taxes on the wealthy (part of his campaign platform) because the Republicans had retained control of the House (Johnson, 2012). (While Democratic House members received a majority of *total* votes, redistricting favourable to Republicans effectively nullified this. The Republican majority, then, is unequivocally the result of gerrymandering.)

But on November 2, 2010, ballots did work. In what Barack Obama the next day called a "shellacking" (quoted in Lee & Thrush, 2010), Republicans took back the House in a decisive victory: the Democrats lost Senate seats, leaving them with 51 (plus the two Independents who caucus with them) while the Republicans had a net gain of six seats, bringing them from 41 to 47 (Miller, 2009; Haas, 2011). Again, while the Democrats maintained a slim majority, without the filibuster-proof 60 seats, they effectively had no control over the Senate. Tea Party candidates Marco Rubio of Florida and Rand Paul of Kentucky won their bids. The Democrats took a severe routing in the House, losing their 256 to 179 majority to the Republicans, whose new majority counted 242 seats to 193 seats. The result of the midterms was that the Republicans now had control over both Houses and the strength of the Tea Party constituency became abundantly clear: this was the first congressional election since the Tea Party explosion—the first in which explicitly Tea Party–backed candidates ran and won. As such, the Tea Party had been installed in government and could now wield real legislative power.

Moreover, the Tea Party energy helped other Republicans as well. Following the election, conservative *Wall Street Journal* columnist Peggy Noonan (2010) wrote that

> the tea party [sic] is not a "threat" to the Republican Party, the tea party *saved* the Republican Party. In a broad sense, the tea party rescued it from being the fat, unhappy, querulous creature it had become, a party that didn't remember anymore why it existed, or what its historical purpose was. The tea party, with its energy and earnestness, restored the GOP to itself…
>
> We may be witnessing a new political dynamism. The tea party's rise reflects anything but fatalism, and maybe even a new high-spiritedness. After all, they're only two years old and they just saved a political party and woke up an elephant.

('Elephant' here is a reference to the GOP mascot; the Democrats' is a donkey.)

Assuming elective office did not mean Tea Partiers in Congress would suddenly become sober and rational; rather, they continued to represent their constituency of rage not only in terms of extreme policy and dangerous ideology, but also in terms of their tactics, behaviour, and rhetoric. At the time, it was uncertain what influence the Tea Party presence would have; Courser (2010) wrote that "[t]o translate widely held political beliefs into government action requires a willingness to organize and associate as a political party. The Republicans, who understand this axiom of American politics, will in all likelihood leverage their experience, membership, fundraising power, and most importantly their organization, to keep the scattered Tea Party movement in check" (p. 15). This did not happen; rather, the Tea Party ethos would spread among Congressional Republicans, gathering political capital and clout, maintaining its spectre-agency over Republicans who feared being primaried from the right, its collective realishness ultimately metastasizing throughout both Houses.

Congressional Republican obstinacy grew increasingly petulant, and wielding its majority in the House and the filibuster in the Senate, gridlock became the defining characteristic and legacy of the 112th Congress—a "do-nothing Congress," as Harry Truman would say. Among the bills blocked were an increase in the minimum wage, an employment LGBT non-discrimination act, a U.N. treaty to protect the rights of the disabled, the Paycheck Fairness Act that would ensure women be paid wages equal to those of men in the

same jobs, and the American Jobs Act that independent economic agencies estimated would have created between 1.9 and 2.6 million jobs (ThinkProgress, 2012; Waldron, 2012). On the Republicans' blocking the American Jobs Act, Steve Benen of the *Washington Monthly* wrote, "in the midst of a jobs crisis and intense public demand for congressional action, [Republicans] killed a credible jobs bill for no apparent reason. Most Americans support the American Jobs Act's provisions; it enjoys strong support from economists; it includes ideas from both parties; and the CBO [Congressional Budget Office] found it will even lower the deficit over the next decade" (Benen, 2011). Psychologist Stephen Ducat (2011), writing in the *Huffington Post,* characterized the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party as having "become spontaneously, sincerely, and often comically untethered from the world of facts and history" and that Republicans were "sociopathic enough to blithely impoverish millions and destroy the country in order to deny paternity of the deficit, and win the next election." (His article, titled "Post-Reality Politics Part Two: The Mainstreaming of Political Paranoia," reflects and supports my arguments in this thesis; simply substitute 'realish' for 'post-reality' and 'hysteria' for 'paranoia.' That these characterizations are being made here by a clinical psychologist, I feel, lend weight to my concept of phenomenological operation in realishness as stemming in part from a psychosocial pathology of hysteria shared by the Hysterical Right that I posited in Chapter One.) Considering Republicans' ostensible concern over jobs and their preoccupation with the deficit, and despite Speaker John Boehner's claim that the American Jobs Act was in large part a collection of short-term gimmicks (in a speech consisting mainly of rehashed Republican ideology-based economic policies), and ignoring the conclusions of independent economic analysts that the American Jobs Act would be good for the economy including jobs and deficit reduction, it is clear that their obstruction of the bill was plainly to deny Obama a win.

Killing bills is bad enough; brinksmanship and political terrorism can have more serious and immediate consequences, and the Republicans' *insouciant* willingness to engage in such war-like tactics should make it abundantly clear that their drive to destroy Barack Obama at any cost had brought them to an operational realishness in which the catastrophic consequences of this terrorism are dismissed, ignored, or blame-shifted, as they were in four crises[*].

During the debt ceiling crisis of 2011, the debt ceiling and the need to raise it periodically were explained in the *New York Times:*

> The debt limit, or ceiling, which is the amount that the nation is allowed to borrow, must be raised if the United States is to pay for all the things that Congress has already bought: the spending in the budget bills it has already passed, the Social Security checks promised to retirees, the payments due to private companies with federal contracts and the interest on bonds it has sold. Washington has long spent more money than it takes in, and planned to make up the difference with borrowing. Both parties agree that this cannot go on forever. But if the debt limit is not raised, it will not cut the nation's deficit or allow the government to get out of its existing obligations. It will simply make it impossible to borrow the money that the government needs to pay for them. (Cooper and Story, 2011)

The debt ceiling has been raised 78 times since 1960, including 49 times under Republican presidents. Failure to raise the debt ceiling, the article continues, would mean "[t]he United States [would] not have enough money to pay all of its bills… Without enough money to pay all of its bills, the government [would] have to decide what to do. The possibilities range from 'prioritizing' some payments and paying them first to paying bills in the order in which they were received." Aside from the immediate consequences of such prioritization, such as inability to pay federal workers and members of the military, and potentially withholding Social Security disbursements, the larger economic calamity that would ensue would likely have been the U.S.'s default on its obligations, leading to considerable uncertainty in the

[*] The debt ceiling and payroll tax cut crises of 2011, the fiscal cliff crisis of 2012, and the sequestration crisis of 2013.

global market. Republican icon Ronald Reagan himself wrote that "[t]he full consequences of a default—or even the serious prospect of default—by the United States are impossible to predict and awesome to contemplate. Denigration of the full faith and credit of the United States would have substantial effects on domestic financial markets and on the value of the dollar in exchange markets" (Reagan quoted in Geithner, 2011).

A potential default on its obligations is certainly not what the United States needed during a fragile and plodding economic recovery. Chris Mooney, whose book *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality* (2012) supports my concepts of right-wing truthiness and realishness as pathological, writes, "[r]easonably foreseeable consequences [of not raising the debt ceiling] included credit downgrades, a new recession, rising interest rates on future debt, and reverberations throughout the entire economy: more unemployment, greater costs on personal loans, including car loans and mortgages, and so on" (p. 198). But none of this mattered to Tea Party Republicans who, Mooney writes,

> saw an opportunity in the looming debt ceiling vote. They could threaten to block a debt ceiling increase, and thereby extract grand budgetary concessions and shrink government. Some even actually seemed to want to let a default happen: It would lead to a kind of automatic budget balancing and government shrinkage, since the Treasury Department would be unable to pay out more money than it actually had…
>
> What came to be known as debt ceiling denial amounted to a motivated rationalization of these tactics. The first and more simple argument was that somehow a U.S. government default on its debts would be a good thing, or at least better than the alternative of continuing to have huge debts and a spendthrift government. Rep. Ron Paul, for instance, wrote that "default will be painful, but it is all but inevitable for a country as heavily indebted as the U.S." John Tamny, the *Forbes* columnist, also epitomized this view, writing that this "starve the beast" approach would usher in an era of new productivity, since too much government spending was the real problem with the economy.
>
> This position is certainly coherent—but also senseless, because of the massive pain it would inflict. (p. 197)

In an interview with *Salon,* conservative historian and Reagan domestic policy advisor Bruce Bartlett said, "many people in financial markets, and perhaps even in Washington, just

assume away the possibility [of default]. They cannot conceive of the insanity of allowing the debt to default. But what I keep trying to explain to people is that these Tea Party people really are that crazy… It's the most monumental insanity that I can even imagine" (Bartlett quoted in Leonard, 2011).

After a period of backroom wrangling involving Obama, Joe Biden, and Congressional leaders from both parties, a deal was struck; the bill was passed by the House on August 1 and then by the Senate on August 2, and quickly signed into law—the day before the deadline. Republicans had succeeded in extracting major concessions from Obama and the Democrats; Senate Minority leader Mitch McConnell hailed the results as a victory for the Tea Party members of Congress, stating, "The American people sent a wave of new lawmakers to Congress in last November's election with a very clear mandate: to put our nation's fiscal house in order. And I want to assure you today that although you may not see it this way, you've won this debate" (McConnell quoted in Dwyer, 2011).

Still, there were major consequences both in spite of and *because of* the last-minute deal. Credit rating agency Standard & Poor's downgraded the United States's rating from AAA to AA+ (outstanding to excellent) just a few days later, stating, "The political brinksmanship of recent months highlights what we see as America's governance and policymaking becoming less stable, less effective, and less predictable than what we previously believed. The statutory debt ceiling and the threat of default have become political bargaining chips in the debate over fiscal policy" (Swann, 2011).

The same scenario would play out again a few months later, when a payroll tax cut affecting 160 million workers and an extension of unemployment benefits for three million needed to be passed by Congress. This time, though, Republican brinksmanship didn't yield any benefits or real compromise. The *New York Times* editorial board wrote, "For a full year,

House Republicans have replaced governing with confrontations that they allow to reach the brink of crisis, only then making extreme demands in exchange for a resolution. On Thursday, that strategy crumbled. Battered by public opinion and undermined by more reasonable Senate Republicans, the House's leaders backed down and signed off on a deal to continue the payroll tax cut and unemployment insurance for two months" (*New York Times,* 2011). Unlike the debt ceiling, the consequences here would be more readily felt and understood by Americans at ground level: had the Republicans successfully blocked the legislation, workers would have immediately seen the results in their paycheques, and the unemployed would have found themselves suddenly without benefits. Still, House Republicans, led by the Tea Party, rejected the initial deal that had been passed in the Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support (Buetler, 2011). The *Times* editorial, which referred to the Tea Party mutiny as a "tantrum," concluded that this latest attempt at hostage-taking had

> exposed voters in the starkest way to the real temperament of the House that Americans elected a year ago. If the president wants it, they're against it. If it might assist the middle class, as opposed to the rich, they will concoct an economic argument to oppose it. ("The payroll tax cut isn't really that effective.") And if it absolutely has to pass, they will throw in stray ideas—an oil pipeline, air pollution regulations—to win some part of their agenda, or kill the bill trying.
>
> The Republican wounds this time were entirely self-inflicted. The crisis over the two-month extension wasn't really about the payroll tax at all; it was about the hurt feelings of bumptious House members having to accede to a deal driven by the Senate and the White House. (*New York Times,* 2011)

The Republicans' hostage-taking committed a violence upon workers and the unemployed, and this regardless of whether or not a deal would be reached. Had the tax cuts expired and the unemployment benefits ceased, the result would have been catastrophic for those with precarious financial situations, especially the unemployed. Even if a worker's total payroll tax cut amounted to $40 a month—which might seem insignificant to many—that money can cover all or part of a utility bill, or a minimum payment on a credit card, or even groceries

for a week, for example. And, needless to say, unemployment benefits are, for all intents and purposes, an unemployed worker's paycheque. Even a short delay in receiving these funds (for example, if a deal had been reached *after* the benefits had stopped) can be devastating to household finances. Moreover, even though a deal was reached, the uncertainty undoubtedly caused tremendous widespread anxiety during the crisis, especially since it occurred during the holiday season. How many parents held off on buying presents for their children because they didn't know whether or not they'd have any funds coming in January? *This* is the reality the Republicans ignored in favour of ideology, political self-interest, and beating Obama up a bit. This is the Tea Party's spectre-agency. This is political terrorism.

There is indeed a strange god whose outsized influence informs and directs, even *enthrals*, Republican policy and (in)action: this is anti-tax lobbyist Grover Norquist, founder and president of Americans for Tax Reform (ATR). ATR claims Norquist was chosen by Ronald Reagan to found a taxpayer advocacy organization in 1985 (Americans for Tax Reform, 2011a); in a *New Republic* article, Timothy Noah (2012) clarifies that "this is a fanciful way of saying that the Reagan White House put future attorney general Bill Barr in charge of creating the lobby group, and that Barr's law associate Peter Ferrara, a friend of Norquist's from Harvard, recruited Norquist, who happened to be available because he'd recently been fired by a different conservative lobby group bankrolled by financier Lou Lehrman." (When I first read ATR's claim, I was immediately skeptical that Reagan himself had hand-picked Norquist, as it seemed to imply; a very quick internet search confirmed my instinct. "Trust but verify" no longer applies in the age of post-truth politics, for the mainstreaming of truthiness has eroded one's ability to trust first.)

Norquist is best known for his Taxpayer Protection Pledge, which he claims to have come up with when he was twelve years old and working on Nixon's 1968 campaign (Peters, 2012). ATR states that "[p]oliticians often run for office saying they won't raise taxes, but then quickly turn their backs on the taxpayer. The idea of the Pledge is simple enough: Make them put their no-new-taxes rhetoric in writing…

> In the Taxpayer Protection Pledge, candidates and incumbents solemnly bind themselves to oppose any and all tax increases. While ATR has the role of promoting and monitoring the Pledge, the Taxpayer Protection Pledge is actually made to a candidate's constituents, who are entitled to know where candidates stand before sending them to the capitol. Since the Pledge is a prerequisite for many voters, it is considered binding as long as an individual holds the office for which he or she signed the Pledge.
>
> Since its rollout with the endorsement of President Reagan in 1986, the pledge has become de rigeur [sic] for Republicans seeking office, and is a necessity for Democrats running in Republican districts. (Americans for Tax Reform, 2011b)

Prior to the 2012 election, 238 of 242 House Republicans and 41 of 47 Senate Republicans had signed the pledge (Lengell, 2011). Opposition to raising taxes is no longer a policy a legislator can merely claim to adhere to: he or she must make it official, on the record, and lists of signatories are widely available on the internet. As such, this public declaration makes if difficult for him or her to deviate from this, even slightly, without the threat of being primaried from the right—the Tea Party's spectre-agency essentially pre-empting the ability of the legislator to consider necessary changes in tax policy for fear of losing his or her job. Witner and Washburn (2012) examine the conflict between a legislator's oath of office and Norquist's pledge, insofar as the oath is "a term (condition) of employment. Consequently, the oath of office is part of the employment contract. If Members honor a pledge that violates the oath of office, Members violate their employment contract" (p. 2). They continue,

> The oath of office allows members of Congress to be unfettered and to freely exercise their judgment as to what is best for their constituents and the nation. Members can change their minds as circumstances change.
>
> The pledge asks members to oppose tax increases in all circumstances. The pledge, then, fetters members and does not allow them to freely exercise their judgment. Members cannot change their minds as circumstances change.
>
> The oath of office obligates Members to "well and faithfully discharge the duties of [their] office"… [T]he pledge ties the hands of Members, thereby impeding them from discharging their duties. The pledge, then, causes Members to violate their oath of office.
>
> Consider the duty of Members to represent their constituents. According to polls, a majority of Americans want taxes to go up for well-off individuals. If Members honor the pledge, they will oppose such tax increases. In so doing, Members will not represent their constituents. Thus, the pledge impedes Members from discharging their duties. (pp. 2–3)

They continue with further examples pointing out how legislators' adherence to Norquist's pledge violates their oaths.

Norquist's profile is rather high, considering he is just a lobbyist. He appears frequently in the cable news media, particularly on Fox News, and as such viewers are aware of his pledge. It gives him political mass, thus warping sociopolitical spacetime, and drawing in lawmakers and other politicians into a realishness where tax increases are *verboten*. Who wants their taxes to go up? The typical worker surely agrees with this. By dumbing down the issue of tax increases, which entails a necessary jettison of the reality that spending cuts alone do not increase revenue, the pledge can gather and increase support. In the truthy–realish world of the Hysterical Right, then, Republican Members of Congress who have signed the pledge *appear* to be on the side of the middle class and not the wealthy, and so Obama and the Democrats can be painted as ruthless tax-and-spend liberals who have no idea how the economy works and just want more of your hard-earned money. After all, the Boston Tea Party of 1773 was about taxation without representation under a tyrannical king, and so an association between then and now is established, further justifying the need for the new Tea Party while invoking notions of insurrection and revolution.

The 112th Congress—the first controlled by the Hysterical Right—was the least productive since the 1940s (Terkel, 2012).

For the Republicans, the real prize was winning (or taking back, in Tea Party parlance) the presidency in 2012. Newt Gingrich was right at that clandestine dinner in 2009: the seeds of 2012 had been sown, and now it was harvest time. All of the acrimony, the resentment, the petulant tactics, the now-mainstream ignorance of facts and reality, the Obama conspiracy theories (often referred to as Obama Derangement Syndrome), the vile rhetoric—in short, all of the *rage*—could now be gathered, aggregated, amplified, and then focused like a death ray on Barack Obama. At the same time, this hysterical need to unseat him would lead to the first post-truth* presidential campaign and a coalescence of strange gods that ultimately created a warp of realishness so powerful as to culminate in a mass delusion followed by a truly hysterical meltdown.

But first, a candidate was required. On the one hand, an ideal candidate would be able to eviscerate Barack Obama—a beatdown that would no doubt be a most satisfying spectacle for the Hysterical Right. On the other hand, their truthy–realish 'common wisdom' that everyone hated Obama (for again, they are 'everyone' since they are 'We, the People'), that his presidency to date had been a colossal failure (yet apparently successful in its imposition and implementation of tyranny), that he was 'one and done,' and that the energy and fervour and anger of the Right would easily trounce him and his coalition of Others, all signified to a certain extent that any Republican white male would handily defeat him. In a Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) convention speech in February 2012, Grover Norquist stated:

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* See, for example, MacGillis, 2012; Fallows, 2012; Krugman, 2011; Parmar, 2012.

> All we have to do is replace Obama… We are not auditioning for fearless leader. We don't need a president to tell us in what direction to go. We know what direction to go. We want the [Paul] Ryan budget… We just need a president to sign this stuff. We don't need someone to think it up or design it. The leadership now for the modern conservative movement for the next 20 years will be coming out of the House and the Senate…
>
> Pick a Republican with enough working digits to handle a pen to become President of the United States. This is a change for Republicans: the House and Senate doing the work with the president signing bills. His job is to be captain of the team, to sign the legislation that has already been prepared. (*DailyKos*, 2012)

Aside from the obvious suggestion that any old empty suit puppet would suffice, there is something more telling here: the notion of the abdication or elimination of the role of the president not only as leader but as the person entrusted with top secret intelligence in order to make difficult decisions and trade-offs, the person who engages in high-stakes negotiations with other world leaders, the person with superhumanly sound and reasoned judgment as to be Commander in Chief, let alone entrusted with the nuclear codes. These responsibilities cannot be roundly handed off to the Secretaries of State or Defense, or other cabinet members. These are the responsibilities and duties of the president and none else.

But to Republicans who subscribed to Norquist's view, the scope of the nation's issues seemed minimized to those that Congress could 'solve' through legislation, such as passing draconian austerity budgets (the Ryan budget), repealing Obamacare (with what as a replacement never even suggested), eliminating federal agencies that impose 'job-killing' regulations on the private sector (such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy), overturning *Roe v. Wade* or at least making access to abortion difficult to virtually impossible (as several states had done and continue to do), defunding Planned Parenthood, pushing a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, and whatever else suited their agenda. The Republican ethos had unquestionably become party and ideology over country. (Recalling the introduction, John McCain's 2008 slogan was

'Country First,' so his so very symbolic turn to the right to thank Sarah Palin can, in light of the foregoing, be interpreted as an end to this ideal.) This new order also explains in large part Republican intransigence during the crises discussed earlier in the chapter, and their continued brinksmanship during the fiscal cliff crisis of late 2012 and the sequestration crisis of February 2013.

The 2010 midterm elections were a massive backlash against Obama, and it looked as if the same scenario might play out in 2012. The Republicans just needed that white man "with enough working digits to handle a pen." The result of this insouciance would be an incredibly bizarre Republican presidential primary season during which 'GOP crazy' (as it came to be called) was on full display for a cheering (and booing) Hysterical Right tantalized by the realish prospect that one of these would be the hero who would do their bidding and lynch the boy. Even though primary caucuses and elections wouldn't begin until 2012 proper, the campaigning began a few months into 2011, really picking up steam in the summer. There were 20—*twenty!*—debates, a traveling sideshow at once a circus, a drawn-out game of musical chairs, and an unabashed, garish, full-throated display of what the GOP had to offer. In this section I will briefly discuss the candidates, Michele Bachmann as a strange god of the Hysterical Right in terms of her realish political potential, and the 'surge' phenomenon in which public support swung from one candidate to another (even the arguably 'unelectable' ones) and sometimes back again.

In any election cycle, there are always 'joke' or 'stunt' candidates who either hint at or declare the *possibility* that they might run for president. In 2012, the first joke candidate was Donald Trump, an avowed birther and reality TV blowhard, who threw his hat into the ring in early 2011. In a speech at an April 2011 Tea Party rally in Boca Raton, Florida, he stated, "If I run and win, our country will be respected again… I will create jobs, I will bring jobs

back home [from overseas outsourcing]" (Trump quoted in Hirschkorn, 2011). In an April 2011 CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey, Trump tied with former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee with 19% support—ahead of Sarah Palin at 12%, Mitt Romney at 11%, Newt Gingrich at 11%, Ron Paul at 7%, and Michele Bachmann at 5% (Montopoli, 2011). "Still," the article continues, "it would be premature to conclude that Trump has become a viable contender for the GOP presidential nomination. Forty-three percent of those surveyed said they didn't want to see him run; his relatively strong showing in the poll would seem to reflect both the media-savvy Trump's high level of name-recognition and the fact that the GOP electorate has not yet coalesced around a candidate." A *Wall Street Journal* article quoted an unnamed Republican Texas everyman as saying that Trump "may be a punch line, but when he talks about the way to solve our problems, *he makes sense to the average guy out there*… I don't know if people can get over him being the butt of every joke but for me, he can be serious when it's time to make real decisions" (Weisman & Greenberg, 2011; my emphasis).

Indeed, the desire of the average Republican guy or gal to have a leader whose policies were simple and made sense was, and continues to be, widespread. What we think of as 'ordinary folk' seem to prefer this kind of truthy–realish simplicity unfettered by the nuances of reality and the inherent complexities of policy. The Republican primary candidates' statements in the debates and to the press would make that abundantly clear.

As for Donald Trump, the ever-prescient Lawrence O'Donnell of MSNBC, during a segment lambasting NBC for enabling Trump's stunt candidacy, called him "the greatest individual embarrassment in the history of the network" and predicted that his candidacy would end precisely on May 17, 2011, when NBC would release its 2011–2012 programming schedule that would include another season of Trump's *Celebrity Apprentice*. O'Donnell was

right (Duell, 2011). Of course, that did not mean that Trump would go away; he would continue his birther antics well into the election campaign, followed by a Twitter tirade upon Obama's re-election.

Public support for Trump's silly and publicity-driven flirtation with a potential candidacy underlines Grover Norquist's contention that all the Republicans needed was a rubber stamp president. At the same time, though, there was the question of which candidate could garner enough support from the Tea Party base (which had delivered the House to the Republicans in 2010) to deliver a satisfying win most damaging to Obama while still seeming electable enough for more moderate Republicans to come on board. Or was perceived electability even necessary anymore, given the Right's new embrace of truthy–realish politics? In June 2011, Jonathan Bernstein of the *Washington Post* asked, "Is there any idea too crazy for the 2012 GOP hopefuls? Is there any nutty idea that, once proposed, GOP presidential hopefuls won't try to match or even top?" (Bernstein, 2011). The next day, Bernstein's *Post* colleague Adam Serwer expanded on the former's piece:

> How much craziness will the Republican base really demand from their prospective presidential nominee?…
>
> [I]t often seems like the 2012 GOP hopefuls are deliberately floating truly insane ideas in order to earn Palin-like credibility with the segment of the GOP base that is willing to embrace those truly insane ideas—and only likes them more when liberals sneer at them. Judging by Sarah Palin, a key quality Republican voters are looking for in their next president is an ability to drive liberals nuts and earn liberal mockery…
>
> We're in a situation now where media coverage has an outsize impact on who is viewed as acceptable to the Republican base, in part because conservative media outlets like Fox News have an incredible influence on the base in terms of shaping the image of a particular candidate…
>
> The conventional wisdom right now on the left is that due to an irrational hatred of Obama and all things liberal, the only way a Republican can win the nomination is by embracing the most extreme positions possible. (Serwer, 2011).

This passage is crucial to my argument in a few ways. First, the notion of 'GOP crazy' being expressed and echoed by journalists and pundits indicates that this assessment

of the new reality of right-wing politics had become widely accepted. They seem to have caught on to the idea that these "insane ideas" being taken seriously result from a collective abdication of facts, common sense, and reality. This also reinforces my concept of realishness, in which these ideas seem sensible, while also showing that *politicians,* and not merely Tea Partiers, had now been sucked into this warp. Serwer's mention of "Palin-like credibility" confirms that her mass as a strange god had now drawn in and ensnared these politicians in a realish state in which their ideas and statements needed to be as outlandish and inflammatory as Palin's in order to gain and maintain Hysterical Right cred, and this hopefully translating to votes. Finally, that the Right's "hatred of Obama and all things liberal" must be countered with "the most extreme positions possible" recalls my earlier analogy of the Hysterical Right's needing *scalding* hot water to attenuate Obama and the Democrats' reasonably temperate water.

If there was any doubt what the Republicans had become and where they were headed, the primary contest made this abundantly clear. First, a look at the candidates, in no particular order:

Former Massachusetts governor and Bain Capital 'vulture capitalist' Mitt Romney appeared (figuratively and literally) as the 'inevitable' nominee—the next in line—before voting had even begun. Besides having paid his dues in the 2008 Republican primaries, he had a generic 'presidential look' on top of a visually commanding presence. He had experience both in government and in the private sector, a combination that suggested a panacea to America's woes: his business experience would no doubt enable him to balance the budget and reduce the deficit in months while creating millions of jobs. The delicate, Jenga-esque vagaries of foreign affairs could be left to advisors; Romney would be Norquist's and Congress's pen-holder. Most importantly to his bid, he had lots and lots of

money. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling in 2010 removed restrictions on corporate and union campaign donations, leading to the creation of SuperPACs (PAC is an acronym for political action committee) that could raise unlimited funds. The result of this was that SuperPACs supporting a particular candidate could use these funds to, among other things, buy massive amounts of TV commercial time and conduct shock-and-awe attack ad campaigns on other candidates. Due to the prohibition of association between official campaigns and SuperPACs, the ads originated with the SuperPAC and so the candidate could maintain distance from the contents thereof. (Of course, collusion between the SuperPACs and the campaigns *must* have occurred: this is politics, after all.) As such, Romney's *modus operandi* during the primaries was to use attack ads to destroy whichever candidate posed the most immediate threat, and as we will see shortly, the 'surge circuit' meant that there was not merely one rival throughout the primaries, but rather, a rotating cast.

Former Utah governor Jon Huntsman was probably the most electable of the candidates; he was at least considered by many as the most sane of the bunch. Documentary filmmaker Michael Moore said, "There's only one [primary candidate] that has sanity operating inside of him, and that's Jon Huntsman. I mean when they asked 'who here believes in science?' he wanted to raise his hand" (Moore quoted in Strauss, 2011). *Game Change* co-author John Heilemann (2012) referred to Huntsman's "smarts and his sanity, both of which have come into sharper relief as his loopier and more right-wing rivals have swaddled themselves in C-4 [explosive] and pushed the detonator." In an *Esquire* article titled "Jon Huntsman: Fighting Off Invisibility with Sanity," Charles P. Pierce (2012a) wrote, "The calculations in Republican politics are as skewed and goofy as the field of candidates, to say nothing of the ideas most of them have been spewing since everything began last summer…

But Jon Huntsman has never been good at the calculus of the crazy[.]" During my research, it seemed that every news report and every article on Huntsman mentioned his sanity. Still, he could never muster enough popular or financial support to continue through the primaries, and dropped out in mid-January 2012. In any case, he was far too sane for the Tea Party base.

Compare this to Rick Santorum, former Senator from Pennsylvania, whose anti-LGBT and anti–same-sex marriage views have always seemed, in my opinion, a bit obsessive in the 'doth protest too much' sense. He is most notorious for having said in 2003, "In every society, the definition of marriage has not to my knowledge ever included homosexuality. That's not to pick on homosexuality. It's not, you know, man on child, man on dog, or whatever the case may be" (Santorum quoted in *Daily Beast*, 2012). The backlash from the gay community led to 'santorum' being chosen as a neologism for a particularly unsavoury sexual by-product, via an online contest sponsored by LGBT rights activist Dan Savage. Santorum is also against not only abortion rights but *contraception*; he spoke of "the dangers of contraception in this country, the whole sexual libertine idea…

> And if you can take one part out that's not for purposes of procreation, that's not one of the reasons, then you diminish this very special bond between men and women, so why can't you take other parts of that out? And all of a sudden, it becomes deconstructed to the point where it's simply pleasure. And that's certainly a part of it—and it's an important part of it, don't get me wrong—but there's a lot of things we do for pleasure, and this is special, and it needs to be seen as special. Many in the Christian faith have said, "Well, that's okay. Contraception's okay." It's *not* okay because it's license to do things in the sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be. They're supposed to be within marriage, they are supposed to be for purposes that are, yes, conjugal, but also procreative. That's the perfect way that a sexual union should happen. We take any part of that out, we diminish the act. (Santorum quoted in Scherer, 2012)

Santorum's social conservatism and devout Catholic faith, then, positioned him to appeal to like-minded Evangelical Christians, who, as I stated in the previous chapter, make up 39% of Tea Partiers.

Ron Paul, Republican congressman from Texas, was the libertarian of the bunch, though his libertarian *bona fides* have been questioned. In a *New Republic* opinion piece, Will Wilkinson (2011) wrote, "If you were an evil genius determined to promote the idea that libertarianism is a morally dubious ideology of privilege poorly disguised as a doctrine of liberation, you'd be hard pressed to improve on Ron Paul… Ron Paul presents himself as a man of conviction devoted to liberty, plain and simple, who follows logic's lead and tells it plain. The problem is, often he's not." Paul's opposition to civil rights legislation (shared by his son, Tea Party Republican Senator Rand Paul, as revealed in an appearance on *The Rachel Maddow Show* in 2010; see *Huffington Post,* 2010a) was troubling: he stated that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to "a massive violation of the rights of private property and contract, which are the bedrocks of free society" (Paul quoted in Wilkinson, 2011). Still, Paul won over two million primary votes and, as Brian Doherty (2012) wrote in the *New York Times,* "took the party's libertarian wing from ignorable fringe to significant faction."

Texas Governor Rick Perry's August 2011 entry into the race shook things up. The *New York Times* wrote, "Mr. Perry's entrance into an already crowded field is expected to reconfigure the dynamics of the race, offering Republicans a fiscal and social conservative who not only appeals to the party's base but can also challenge Mitt Romney, a former governor of Massachusetts who is leading in many polls, on jobs and the economy. His passionate speech on Saturday [when he announced his bid] offered a vivid contrast to Mr. Romney, who comes across as more measured and often struggles to rouse his crowds" (Parker, 2011). Perry's unique advantage was his potential appeal to establishment

Republicans together with social and fiscal conservatives (Montopoli & Hirschkorn, 2011). Indeed, following his announcement, Perry's support surged to 29%, overtaking Mitt Romney's 17%, making Perry the front-runner (Shepherd, 2011). My assessment at the time was that his combination of 'don't mess with Texas' swagger and apparent 'dirty fighter' character, together with a potentially broad appeal to Republicans of all stripes, might indeed overtake Mitt Romney's rather milquetoast demeanour and ever-shifting positions on political and social issues (I will discuss these later in this chapter). *He* was the type who could really give Obama a good whoopin' on the national stage, a spectacle that would delight the Tea Party. The challenge was for Perry to maintain his front-runner status in such an unusual and unprecedented primary season.

Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich joined the fray, apparently having decided to sow some "seeds of 2012" himself. Serving as Speaker from 1995 to 1999, Gingrich infamously went head-to-head with Bill Clinton over budgetary issues, leading to two government shutdowns in 1995 and 1996. (This scenario replayed itself in February and March of 2013 during the sequestration crisis. Once again, Republican intransigence amounted to political terrorism, putting politics and party ahead of country and people. There was no last-minute deal this time. The extent of the sequestration cuts was such that this terrorism was of the 'nuclear' variety.)

During the 2012 primaries, Gingrich maintained his usual pomposity, stating in an ABC News interview, "They [the other primary candidates] are not going to be the nominee. I don't have to go around and point out the inconsistencies of people who are not going to be the nominee. They are not going to be the nominee… I'm going to be the nominee. It's very hard not to look at the recent polls and think that the odds are very high I'm going to be the nominee" (Tapper, 2011). Among his proposals was a moon colony:

> Newt Gingrich promised Wednesday [January 25, 2012] on Florida's space coast to create a moon colony by 2020 if elected president.
>
> "By the end of my second term, we will have the first permanent base on the moon. And it will be American," Gingrich told the crowd of roughly 700, taking them to their feet in applause.
>
> The former House speaker said the current space program in the country is a "tragedy" and believes his "grandiose" ideas can help fix it.
>
> "I am sick of being told we have to be timid and I'm sick of being told we have to be limited to technologies that are 50 years old," he said, noting that by 2020 he wants to be capable to go to Mars. (Moe, 2012)

Perhaps Gingrich was merely trying to court crucial Florida voters with the prospect of new jobs on the 'space coast,' or perhaps he was trying to evoke Kennedy's inspirational proposal to put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s; that the moon landing was accomplished within a decade was astounding, so clearly Gingrich figured that kind of rapid development could be done in eight years, even though going to Mars is far, *far* more complicated than going to the moon. Moreover, Moonbase Newt would be "American," which is in complete ignorance of the reality that such undertakings are now usually cooperative international efforts. As well, note his repetition of "I am going to be the nominee" (and the word 'nominee' overall) in the first quotation, and his allusion to winning a second term, together with a direct acknowledgement of his ideas as "grandiose" in the second. He was clearly full of himself, and his arrogant attitude of snappy comebacks was his notable rhetorical tactic throughout the primary debates.

Gingrich also made some more insidious proposals evoking far-right positions on welfare and its recipients. In November 2011, he advocated firing unionized school janitors and having children do the work. He stated:

> You say to somebody, you shouldn't go to work before you're what, 14, 16 years of age, fine. You're totally poor. You're in a school that is failing with a teacher that is failing. I've tried for years to have a very simple model. Most of these schools ought to get rid of the unionized janitors, have one master janitor and pay local students to take care of the school. The kids would actually do work, they would have cash, they would have pride in the schools, they'd begin the process of rising. (Gingrich quoted in Weissmann, 2011).

President Gingrich and his Republican-controlled Congress would have no hesitation in relaxing or even repealing child labour laws in order to enact this (im)modest proposal. Given his dog-whistle coded racist rhetoric, such as calling Barack Obama a "food stamp president" (Linkins, 2012), he was probably referring to black children, for in Republican-speak, "welfare," "food stamps," and "poor" signify African-American. Recall the survey I presented in the previous chapter, in which 73% of Tea Party "true believers" agreed that if "blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites" (Parker, 2010). Gingrich is also ignorant of the effects of students' working on their school performance, education being the key to rising from poverty, not spare cash made on the side. He was talking about children as young as nine years old (Weissmann, 2011); if high school and even university students encounter difficulties managing work and school, how could elementary school kids?

Godfather's Pizza mogul Herman Cain was the Trump-esque stunt candidate who actually did enter the primaries. Cain was a very successful businessman, having turned around Godfather's nationally as well as Burger King in the Philadelphia region (St. Anthony, 2011), and rode the wave of his "9–9–9 Plan" for reforming the tax code: this would consist of a 9% income tax, a 9% corporate tax, and a 9% sales tax (McKinnon, 2011). Cain took to repeating "nine, nine, nine!" as a catchphrase, including once to an NBC News journalist embedded with his campaign, who tweeted, "When I asked Cain if today's Libya gaffe builds on [the] idea he doesn't have in depth knowledge of foreign policy, he simply said '999'" (Rafferty quoted in Capehart, 2011). The Libya gaffe in question occurred when Cain was asked about President Obama's approach to Libya:

> OK, Libya. [Pause] President Obama supported the uprising, correct? President Obama called for the removal of Khaddhafy. I just wanted to make sure we're talking about the same thing before I say, 'Yes, I agreed' or 'No I

> didn't agree.' I do not agree with the way he handled it for the following reason—nope, that's a different one. [Pause] I gotta go back and see. I got all this stuff twirling around in my head. Specifically, what are you asking me that I agree or not disagree with Obama? (Cain quoted in O'Brien, 2011)

(This echoed Sarah Palin's non-response to Charlie Gibson's question on the Bush Doctrine.) Cain also displayed his foreign policy chops when asked if he was ready for 'gotcha' questions (recall my discussion of these and Palin in the previous chapter), such as who is the president of Uzbekistan: "I'm ready for the 'gotcha' questions and they're already starting to come. And when they ask me who is the president of Ubeki-beki-beki-beki-stan-stan I'm going to say, you know, I don't know. Do you know?" (Cain quoted in Gharib, 2011). This was the month before the Libya question above, so clearly, he wasn't ready for *that* 'gotcha' question. But the fact that questions on a candidate's knowledge of critically important foreign affairs, especially those of the Middle East, are treated as traps set by reporters (of the so-called 'liberal media') meant solely to embarrass a candidate speaks volumes on the Hysterical Right's ignorance of the "delicate, Jenga-esque vagaries" (as I characterized them earlier) of global relations; extrapolated further, this is a symptom of the Hysterical Right's denial of knowledge, science, and reality that has been much-discussed, notably in Chris Mooney's *The Republican Brain: The Science of Why They Deny Science—and Reality* (2012).

And then there was the inimitable Michele Bachmann, congresswoman from Minnesota, and founder of the Congressional Tea Party Caucus (Seitz-Wald, 2013). If anyone in the group of candidates was a *bona fide* Tea Partier, it was Bachmann. She was also a synecdoche for Tea Party cluelessness, as evidenced in many of her off-the-wall, "did she just say that?" statements over the years. (Recall her call for a renewal of McCarthyism that I mentioned in the previous chapter.) For example, in a speech on the House floor on Earth Day 2009, on the role of carbon dioxide in climate change, she said:

> Carbon dioxide, Mr. Speaker, is a natural by-product of nature. Carbon dioxide is natural. It occurs in [sic] Earth. It is part of the regular life-cycle of Earth. In fact, life on Planet Earth can't even exist without carbon dioxide, so necessary is it to human life, to animal life, to plant life, to the oceans, to the vegetation that's on the Earth, to the fowl that flies [sic] in the air. We need to have carbon dioxide as a part of the fundamental life-cycle of Earth. As a matter of fact, carbon dioxide is portrayed as harmful, but there isn't even one study that can be produced that shows that carbon dioxide is a harmful gas… Carbon dioxide isn't a harmful gas; it is a harmless gas… And yet we're being told we have to reduce this natural substance and reduce the American standard of living, to create an arbitrary reduction in something that is naturally occurring in [sic] the Earth, while we're told that the crux of this problem is human activity—it's humans that are creating more carbon dioxide! Is that true, or is that false? … What kind of human activity creates carbon dioxide? (Bachmann in 'climatebrad,' 2009)

Rep. Earl Blumenauer, Democrat from Oregon, responded:

> My good friend, the gentle lady from Minnesota, doesn't think there are any problems with the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. It was interesting to listen to her say that something that was "naturally occurring" simply couldn't be harmful… The consensus of the scientific community, *not people making things up on the floor of the House*, is that this has been profoundly influenced by human activity starting with the dawn of the Industrial Revolution… The consensus of the scientific community is that this is in fact a serious problem. (Blumenauer in 'climatebrad,' 2009; my emphasis)

Bachmann, then, aptly represents the Republican rejection of science that had become widespread. Predictably, she denies evolution, having said in a 2006 debate, "There are hundreds and hundreds of scientists, many of them holding Nobel Prizes, who believe in intelligent design" (quoted in Green, 2011). She demonstrates an ignorance of fiscal policy, claiming in 2005 that "Literally, if we took away the minimum wage—if it conceivably was gone—we could virtually wipe out unemployment completely because we would be able to offer jobs at whatever level" (quoted in Green, 2011). During the 2011 debt ceiling crisis, she insisted that the economic impact of the U.S. defaulting on its obligations would have no serious effect on the markets, saying "I want to state unequivocally for the world, as well as for the markets, as well as for the American people: I have no doubt that we will not lose the full faith and credit of the United States" (quoted in Ball, 2011). As I mentioned earlier in

this chapter, even though there was a last-minute deal on the debt ceiling, Standard and Poor's nevertheless lowered the U.S.'s credit rating. Global economic experts be damned!—for Michele has an LL.M. in tax law (*Washington Post,* n.d.).

Also predictably, Bachmann is anti-LGBT and against same-sex marriage. In late 2011, during the primary campaign, she stated that "We all have the same civil rights"; when asked why, then, couldn't same-sex couples get married, she replied, "They can get married. But they abide by the same law as everyone else. They can marry a man if they're a woman. Or they can marry a woman if they're a man" (quoted in *Global Grind,* 2011). She also stated, "If you're involved in the gay and lesbian lifestyle, it's bondage. It is personal bondage, personal despair and personal enslavement." She also echoes the Anita Bryant "save our children" motif: "[P]arents will lose the right to protect and direct the upbringing of their children and… they will be required to learn that homosexuality is normal, equal and perhaps you should try it. And that will occur immediately, that all schools will begin teaching homosexuality"; "The sex curriculum will essentially be taught by the local gay community"; "This is a very serious matter, because it is our children who are the prize for this community, they are specifically targeting our children." But of course, "[t]his is not about hating homosexuals. I don't. I love homosexuals" (all quotations in *Global Grind,* 2011).

I consider Michele Bachmann a strange god insofar as she brings together everything that the Tea Party believes—or doesn't believe—in, from social and cultural values, to small government and fiscal restraint, to rejection of science (and indeed, of facts and reality, proffering instead truthiness that further warps sociopolitical spacetime, reinforcing realishness). In a *Time* interview, her longtime political consultant Ed Brookover said, "There

is a vacuum out there for a combination Tea Party and social-conservative [Republican presidential] candidate" (quoted in Scherer, 2011).

But a critical difference between her and Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck is that Bachmann is *in government*. While there are other prominent Tea Partiers in Congress, she stands alone as the most vocal and most quintessential. She has the platform to "mak[e] things up on the floor of the House," as Blumenauer said in his rebuttal of her carbon dioxide speech. And yet, even if much of what Bachmann says can be (and has been) easily fact-checked and refuted, and seems outlandish to rational people outside of Hysterical Right realishness, she nevertheless conveys a certain authority simply for being a member of Congress. Much as Glenn Beck's audience believed what he would say because they were watching the Fox *News* Channel, Bachmann's truthiness, originating and disseminated from the House of Representatives, or at press conferences, logically has the same effect on Tea Party audiences: after all, she is in government, so she must know things they don't, and in the context of Congress, these *must* be factual and real—while in fact they are truthy (at best) and realish. Still, her being a politician and legislator is a complement to Glenn Beck as television and radio personality, and Sarah Palin as everything I described in the previous chapter. Recall, for example, Bachmann's defense of Sarah Palin's statement on the real, pro-America areas of the country, suggesting an investigation of who in Congress is pro-America and anti-America. Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck 'lead' the Tea Party in the ways I discussed earlier, but Michele Bachmann has a perceived power to change government from within.

Returning now to the primary contest, early support for Bachmann was disconcerting to be sure, but more importantly the first of the 'surges.' Given Mitt Romney's inevitability, every other candidate (except Huntsman) experienced a surge in support, becoming front-runner for a brief period before slipping in popularity to be replaced by

another candidate's surge. It was a merry-go-round—I call it the 'surge circuit'—that clearly indicated a malaise among Republicans with the likelihood of a Romney candidacy. In a cutting *Saturday Night Live* sketch lampooning "[y]et another GOP debate" (*Saturday Night Live Transcripts,* 2011), Jason Sudeikis as Mitt Romney said,

> I don't think [Republicans] dislike me. I just think they want to exhaust their options. You know, I understand that, before anyone goes home with Mitt Romney, they're going to take one last lap around the bar to see if there's *anyone* better than me. And I'm okay with that. Alright? Go! Go sow your oats. I will wait for you. You be Jenny, and I'll be your Forrest Gump. Be with as many guys as you want, I will still be here running around the country like an idiot until you come home so I can watch you die. Should've left off that last part, I guess!

This bit of satire explains the surge circuit succinctly. The Republican dilemma was thus: run an unelectable far-right social conservative candidate (such as Bachmann or Santorum) to appeal to the Tea Party base, or run a more moderate candidate who was electable (perhaps even appealing to Democrats disillusioned with Barack Obama) but risked not motivating the base to the polls in sufficient numbers?

At first, it seemed the former was seeming like a real possibility: Bachmann won the Ames Straw Poll in Iowa in August 2011. The straw poll is inconsequential in that it is not a state primary election or caucus with actual balloting, yet it is meaningful in that it gives the first indication of whom the party is backing in the early stages of the primary contest. Bachmann won 4,823 votes, followed closely by Ron Paul at 4,671 votes; Mitt Romney only got a measly 567 votes (Cillizza, 2011). "What we saw happen today is this [sic] is the very first step toward taking the White House in 2012, and you have just sent a message that Barack Obama will be a one-term president," Bachmann said (quoted in Cillizza, 2011), adding that "[t]his was a wonderful down-payment on taking the country back" (quoted in Martin & Allen, 2011). The nation's first look at the GOP primary race, then, showed Michele Bachmann—*Michele Bachmann!*—in the lead. Together with her contemporaneous

wild-eyed *Newsweek* cover photo (see Figure 1 below), which evokes the trope of the demonic doll in a horror movie whose eyes suddenly open on their own, captioned "The Queen of Rage," what was the country to think?

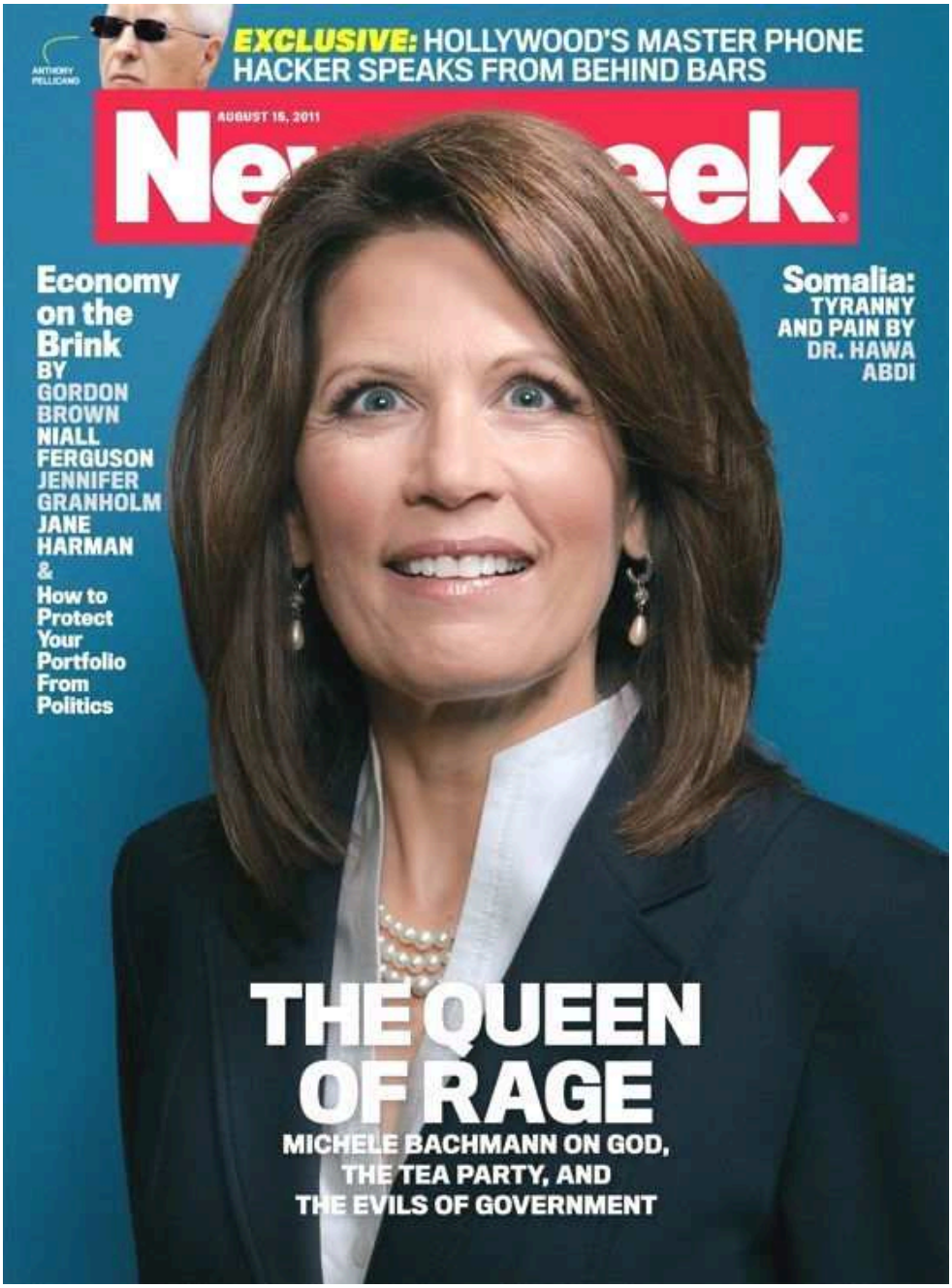

Figure 1 (*Huffington Post,* 2011)

The surge circuit continued. According to CBS News/*New York Times* polling, September 2011 had Rick Perry in the lead, with 23% to Romney's 13%; Herman Cain became the front-runner in September, with 25% to Romney's 21%, maintaining a slight edge over Romney (18% to 15%) in November; Newt Gingrich tied with Romney at 20% in December[*], followed by a bump to 21% to Romney's 28% in January 2012; followed by Rick Santorum's astounding surge in February to 30% against Romney's 27%, growing to 34% to 30% in March (De Pinto & Dutton, 2012). *Rick "Man on Dog" Santorum!*

The podium arrangement at the umpteen debates clearly reflected current polling: Romney was always in one of the two middle positions, together with whomever was surging at the moment. Again, the same *Saturday Night Live* sketch explains it best through satire:

> We have rearranged the seating from past debates, based on the most recent polling results and, therefore, the likelihood of each candidate winning the nomination. In the center, the new leader in the polls: Herman Cain… Next to him is former Governor Mitt Romney… Three seats over, in a chair facing the wall, the fading Rick Perry. In a locked janitor's closet are Congresswoman Michele Bachmann and curio from a bygone era, Newt Gingrich. Out in the parking garage, it's Texas congressman Ron Paul. And, live from a crowded gay bar in the Castro District in San Francisco, Rick Santorum… John [sic: Jon] Huntsman couldn't be here tonight because we gave him the wrong address—on purpose. (*Saturday Night Live Transcripts,* 2011)

While I cannot discuss the content of the debates for reasons of space, I will say that these were marked by untoward audience participation that bordered on rowdiness, including booing a gay soldier asking a question on the (since-repealed) "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, applauding Texas's record number of executions, and cheering Ron Paul's

[*] Around that time, I recall MSNBC's Chris Matthews, discussing the surge circuit, saying something to the effect of, "Who's next? *Newt Gingrich?*", and as if on cue, Gingrich's surge began.

inference that a person without health insurance in a coma should be left to die (Brooks Thistlethwaite, 2011). And, of course, there was Michele Bachmann's memorable take on Herman Cain's economic plan: "When you take the 9–9–9 plan, and turn it upside down [6–6–6], the devil's in the details" (quoted in Linkins, 2011).

Ultimately, by April, Romney had won enough states to be considered the presumptive nominee, "all-but-assured to win the Republican nomination" (De Pinto & Dutton, 2012). He did, of course, and thus began the first post-truth Republican presidential campaign, marked by an audacious and inexcusable, yet outwardly unapologetic and even proud, mendacity—a ever-propagating truthiness that fomented hysteria to such a degree that realishness became populated not only by Tea Partiers but conservative pundits and journalists, Republican politicians, and even the presidential and vice-presidential candidates themselves. The result was a mass delusion and hysterical meltdown like nothing ever seen in politics, and perhaps the most compelling evidence for my concept of the Hysterical Right's strange god–induced warp of realishness in sociopolitical spacetime.

"We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers."

This statement by Romney campaign pollster Neil Newhouse (quoted in Stein, 2012c) was an astoundingly direct revelation of the campaign's wilful disregard for facts in favour of truthiness, and this *in spite of* its clear awareness that fact-checkers had been working overtime on a litany of distortions and lies. The Romney campaign was openly operating in a realishness where facts didn't matter, and the dissemination of truthy misinformation was an acceptable campaign strategy.

Indeed, Mitt Romney as post-truth Republican candidate satisfied two vital criteria: First, he was the empty suit with enough digits to hold a pen, meeting Grover Norquist's minimum requirement; related to this, his policies and beliefs had already been established as fluid and as such moldable to fit Republican zeitgeist. Second, his and his campaign's disregard for facts and reality made him a truthy–realish candidate who would placate the demands (even needs) of the Hysterical Right that already resided in realishness.

On the first point, Romney was a known flip-flopper, especially on social issues; these surfaced in this 1994 Senate bid against Ted Kennedy, during his time as Massachusetts governor (2003–2007), during his unsuccessful run for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, during the 2012 Republican primaries, and finally, during the 2012 election campaign. I will present several of Romney's changes in position on important social and political issues, as compiled by *Business Insider* (Dougherty, 2012). (Many other such lists are easily found online.)

- His stance on LGBT rights went from pro to anti. In 1994 he praised Bill Clinton's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy as a good first step in allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military, which is not how things worked out; even so, in 2007 he said the policy (which kept gay and lesbian servicemembers in the closet) was working well. Moreover, on same-sex marriage, in 2002 he opposed a proposed constitutional amendment banning this; in 2006 he urged the Massachusetts State Legislature to pass a 'protection of marriage' amendment.
- While governor, he signed state-level health care reform into law; it became known as "Romneycare," which, among other things, contained an individual mandate requiring Massachusetts residents to purchase health care insurance. (The same provision of the ACA would later be put before the Supreme Court, which ruled it

constitutional by a 5–4 vote.) Widely considered as the model for the ACA, Charles Pierce in *Esquire* (2012b) referred to Romneycare as "the source code for Obamacare." A few weeks after campaign spokesperson Andrea Saul had been eviscerated by conservatives for defending his plan, Romney said he was proud of it. Still, during the 2012 campaign he distanced himself from it, since Obamacare was and continues to be anathema to conservatives, seen as a whateverist government takeover of health care. Throughout the campaign, Romney pledged that he would repeal Obamacare on Day One of his presidency.

- In 2002, while running for governor, he refused to sign Norquist's anti-tax pledge; campaign spokesman Eric Fehrnstrom referred to it as "government by gimmickry" (quoted in Doughery, 2012). Running for the 2008 Republican nomination, however, he signed the pledge.
- While running for U.S. Senate in 1994, Romney claimed to be more pro-choice than opponent Ted Kennedy. In 1999, he stated he refused to label himself as pro-life or pro-choice. In 2002, running for governor of liberal Massachusetts, he declared himself pro-choice. Running for the 2008 Republican nomination, he became anti-abortion.

Billionaire businessman Foster Friess (who would become Rick Santorum's main source of funding during Santorum's surge) joked in his 2012 CPAC speech: "A conservative, a liberal, and a moderate walk into a bar. The bartender says, 'Hi, Mitt!'" (quoted in Lizza, 2012).

In fairness, anyone's positions can evolve, but in Romney's case, these switches seemed more about political expediency, especially given the timing of the flip-flops. Still, while flip-flopping can seriously, if not fatally, wound a candidate (such as John Kerry in

2004), my assessment is that Romney's ease in doing so *helped* his candidacy and his campaign. I would say this was ironic were it not for the context of this being first truthy–realish presidential campaign. During the primaries, when he needed to appeal to the more conservative Republican base (including Tea Partiers), Romney was able to tack to the right, even convincingly throwing the base some red meat during his stump speeches. At the same time, he needed to get establishment Republicans on board; in his appearance at the 2012 CPAC convention during primary season he repeatedly stressed his conservative cred. The *Washington Post* reported,

> Mitt Romney gave a detailed defense of his own conservative credentials Friday before a convention of right-wing activists, telling them that his life as a businessman and Massachusetts governor had been a series of battles for Republican ideals.
>
> "I know conservatism, because I have lived conservatism," Romney told a packed ballroom at the Conservative Political Action Conference, in a speech in which he underlined the point by saying "conservative" or "conservatism" 24 times. At some points, even those words weren't strong enough: Romney called himself a "severely" conservative governor in Massachusetts…
>
> Romney has spent the past few months trying to transform himself from a presumed front-runner into an actual front-runner for the GOP nomination. But he has lost four primary contests to Santorum and one to Gingrich, in part because conservative voters have deserted him.
>
> The speech Friday was designed to change that: The CPAC conference is the country's best-known gathering of conservatives, and Romney's talk was scheduled between panels blasting President Obama's health-care law and other Democratic ideas. (Farenthold, 2012)

Even in our digital age in which everything (including much of the past) is forever, and a candidate's positions, claims, and statements can be instantly fact-checked, that no longer seemed to matter in 2012; once again, the irony I alluded to.

In a *New York Times* opinion piece, Robert Cohen (2012) cites George H.W. Bush's "read my lips: no new taxes" and John Kerry's "I actually did vote for the $87 billion [supplemental funding for U.S. troops in Iraq] before I voted against it" as flip-flops that

contributed to their defeats in 1992 and 2004, respectively. "How times change," Cohen continues:

> Everything is situational these days. I don't think people expect consistency any longer. It's considered quaint. What matters is to be quick on your feet, not to walk in a straight line.
>
> After all, if your life is on view and being recorded 24/7, the current zeitgeist, how can anyone be expected to avoid some form of inconsistency, if not flagrant contradiction? Most people, to some degree, will adjust their remarks to their audience; and a digitized, hyperconnected world rewards instantaneous adaptation rather than the hard principled slog.
>
> There is just so much out there—such a mass of information and opinions—that people tend to shrug if something is demonstrated to be fact-lite, contradictory or plain wrong. "Whatever" is not an overused word for nothing.
>
> How else to account for Mitt Romney's apparent ability to float over his numberless flip-flops to a position where, less than a month from the U.S. election, he has a serious chance of winning.

He concludes, "I wish I thought people cared. They don't. Flip-flopping is so 20th century an issue. Performance trumps persistence."

Croco and Gartner (2012) concur that this "moderating tactic, or flip-flopping, did little to fundamentally harm Romney's election prospects," continuing,

> Our research suggests that the act of flip-flopping may not matter, and certainly does not have the dire electoral costs claimed by so many pundits, scholars, and media analysts. We conducted a number of experimental studies of how people responded to potential shifts in senators' positions on the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. We found that whether a politician recently adopted a position or held it consistently had little effect on public support for the senator…
>
> Instead, people backed politicians who held positions similar to their own and opposed politicians who held differing positions. In our studies, people prioritized the similarity of their own and the senator's *current* wartime position and not on whether a politician shifted positions—flip-flopped—to reach that position…
>
> Our research—and this presidential election—confirm that people generally back politicians who support popular positions—no matter how late the candidates come to hold them. And while some might be distrustful of a politician who only espouses such positions later in an election, it is critical to recognize that this strategy will typically win more votes than it costs. Advocating for positions popular with voters leads to more votes than consistently promoting less popular positions—even if it necessitates flip-flopping.

The Romney campaign may not have *understood* this, but it at least openly espoused this strategy. In another stunning admission, like Newhouse's on fact-checkers, longtime Romney advisor Eric Ferhnstrom, describing the shift in his candidate's positions from the primaries to the general election, stated, "Everything changes. It's almost like an Etch a Sketch. *You can kind of shake it up and restart all over again*" (quoted in Shear, 2012; my emphasis). Also astounding was that Fehrnstrom said this in March 2012, *during* the primaries, revealing Romney's plan for the general election campaign once he had snagged the nomination. "Etch a Sketch" stuck, at least with Democrats and liberal pundits, but as Croco and Gartner argue above, this didn't seem to matter anymore. Moreover, I maintain this extends beyond the notion of mere 'post-truth' (truthy) politics into the expansion and reinforcement of realishness, for it is in the phenomenological condition of realishness that we can account for Romney's shifting positions as constituting a fluid truthiness in flux. Realishness provides the phenomenological space in which truthiness can thrive and be understood as 'truth' by those within.

Even as he surely knew that his strategy was one of truthiness, policy shifts, and outright mendacity, Romney himself seemed to be operating in realishness as well: commenting on a prior statement, he said, "I'm not familiar with precisely what I said, but I stand by what I said, whatever it was" (quoted in Negrin, 2012). (This was one of a litany of verbal gaffes Romney made during the campaign; I will eschew discussion of these since they aren't relevant to the campaign's mendacity and truthiness.) During the early primary season, his stump speech included statements on Obama's stewardship of the economy, including, "Barack Obama has failed America. When he took office, the economy was in recession. He made it worse" (quoted in Keyes, 2011). When asked about this by a journalist, who countered Romney's claim with data on the improving economy, Romney replied, "*I*

didn't say that things were worse. What I said was that the economy hasn't turned around" (my emphasis). Another Romney standard was that Barack Obama had gone on an international 'apology tour,' something first suggested by Karl Rove in an April 2009 editorial (barely three months into Obama's first term) that gained traction among Republican politicians and conservative organizations such as the Heritage Foundation; this was thoroughly fact-checked and roundly debunked by the *Washington Post* (Kessler, 2011). (The notion that Obama had gone around the world apologizing for America plays on a more fundamental level than economic issues: he is portrayed as a weak president seeking to diminish the United States's international dominance by apologizing for American values, further othering him as not a 'real' American.)

On such claims and the media's ultimate complicity in disseminating them, *Washington Post* columnist Greg Sargent (2011) wrote,

> What you're seeing here [are] the limitations of fact-checking, and it's something we rediscover during every presidential campaign. Candidates make false claims; media fact-checkers go to work and debunk them; the candidates go right on making them anyway; reporters weary of pointing out that they're false and they start making their way into stories with no rebuttal.
>
> There's no denying that the new [May 2011] jobs numbers are terrible, and that this is very bad news for Obama and Democrats politically, which is why it's understandable that Romney would pounce on them. But it's now clear that Romney is going to make the claim that Obama made the recession "worse" a core message of the campaign—an assertion that goes beyond the debate over jobs numbers and right to the heart of the argument over the efficacy of Obama's policies. And as the Associated Press points out, according to the prime measure of economic strength it's demonstrably false. Will reporters press him to explain himself if he keeps making this claim? Will media outlets take a stand on whether it's false every time he makes it?

Granted, Sargent says this is "something we rediscover during every presidential campaign," and we cannot argue with that, but we have to keep in mind that he wrote this in June of 2011, the beginning of primary campaign season, and long before Romney's presidential

campaign would unleash ads that clearly exposed 2012 as the most truthy–realish election to date.

To wit, two outstanding examples: In the summer of 2012 the Romney campaign produced an ad criticizing Obama's handling of welfare reform, stating, "President Obama quietly ended the work requirement, gutting welfare reform… Under Obama's plan, you wouldn't have to work and you wouldn't have to train for a job. They just send you your welfare check. And welfare to work goes back to being plain old welfare" (quoted in Foreman & Marrapodi, 2012). This was fact-checked and debunked by numerous outlets, including CNN, PolitiFact.com, the *Washington Post*, and FactCheck.org (Foley, 2012). Even so, Romney maintained that the ad was truthful, stating, "We've been absolutely spot-on, and any time there's anything that's amiss, we correct it or remove it" (quoted in Foley, 2012). Pressed again by a journalist, he said, "Fact-checkers on both sides of the aisle will look in the way they think is most *consistent with their own views*… It's very clear that others who have looked at the same issue *feel* that the president violates the provision of the act which requires work in welfare, defines what work is. He guts that, he ends that requirement for those that seek that welfare" (quoted in Delaney, 2012; my emphases).

Romney's argument that fact-checkers are partisan and investigate claims "consistent[ly] with their own views," and that others who fact-checked the welfare ad "feel" that their results are factual leads us right to the 'official' definitions of truthiness I cite in Chapter One. What is realish here is that after all of this, the Romney campaign produced *two more ads* stating Obama had gutted the work requirement for welfare, a strategist saying, "Our most effective ad is our welfare ad. It's new information" (*PolitiFact*, 2012). It seems as if the campaign, if not operating in realishness itself, understood that much of the Republican consituency existed in some sort of environment in which they believe such

claims at face value, and dismiss fact-checkers who state otherwise (with evidence) as partisans with an agenda: Romney is telling the truth and the fact-checkers are lying liberals. What is important to keep in mind is the element of conflicting truthful evidence being disregarded, if even considered at all; this would fuel the critical mass that led to the election meltdown.

The second ad claimed that Obama sold Chrysler to Italians who were going to move Jeep production to China. This, like Sarah Palin's 'death panels' before it, was chosen by PolitiFact as the 2012 'Lie of the Year' (Drobnic Holan, 2012). The accompanying article continues, "Even though Jeep's parent company gave a quick and clear denial, Mitt Romney repeated it and his campaign turned it into a TV ad. And they stood by the claim, even as the media and the public expressed collective outrage against something so obviously false." The initial *Washington Post* fact-checking article (Kessler, 2012) had cited Romney as saying in a speech in Ohio, "I saw a story today that one of the great manufacturers in this state, Jeep, now owned by the Italians, is thinking of moving *all production* to China" (my emphasis). The article Romney referred to had clearly stated that Chrysler was "adding Jeep production sites rather than shifting output from North America to China" because of increased demand (Trudell, 2012), and in fact, he made the "all production" statement *after* Chrysler's clarification (Drobic Holan, 2012). Moreover, the campaign stood by the ad and kept running it (Kessler, 2012; Drobnic Holan, 2012).

Incredibly, in January 2013, former Romney chief strategist Stuart Stevens wrote the *Washington Post,* asking them to "reconsider a Four-Pinocchio ruling for Romney's ad on Chrysler and China, which aired in the campaign's last week," citing Stevens as saying "I've been doing campaigns and writing about campaigns for some time and I believe that the ad and Romney's statement were completely accurate, *unusually so by any standards*" (Kessler,

2013; my emphasis). The article nevertheless reaffirmed the *Post*'s original "Four-Pinnochio" ruling, citing even more evidence, concluding that Stevens's "reasonable" standards "may be the standard[s] for campaign ads, but *not for reality*" (my emphasis).

This was the culmination of Romney's truthy–realish campaign: the ad in question was part of the frenetic final week in which he hoped to sway auto workers in Ohio, a state critical for an Electoral College win (Drobnic Holan, 2012). While the ad clearly backfired, what is important here is *when* this occurred: by this point, the hysteria of the Right, driven by truthiness, was *this* close to achieving the critical mass (to use another physics metaphor) that further deepened, strengthened, and finally *sealed off* in operational closure the full-on realishness in which they phenomenologically existed and operated, leading to a collective delusion of an assured Romney victory.

Romney was going to win, and depending on the pundit and the poll, in a landslide. Barack Obama would finally be 'one and done.' Mitch McConnell, Michele Bachmann, and other Republicans' pronouncements that their efforts would make Obama a one-term president would come to fruition, and most satisfyingly. The Kenyan fascist socialist Marxist Muslim usurper-in-chief—that Other—would be deposed, and his coalition of blacks and gays and lazy Latinos and abortionists and intellectual elites and welfare queens and bratty entitled Millennials and dirty Occupy hippies would be put back down in their rightful places. The country would be taken back by and for Sarah Palin's real Americans. After the celebrations, the conservative political entertainment complex could string Obama up and beat him, like Mussolini—or Emmett Till.

This was the truthy promise that existed in the Right's realishness. Nate Silver's polling aggregations and analyses, in which Obama never dipped below a 61.1% chance of winning (Terdiman, 2012), were widely criticized. In late October 2012, *Politico*'s Dylan Byers

(2012) wrote that Silver could become a "one-term celebrity," adding that Silver "says President Barack Obama currently has a 74.6 percent chance of winning reelection. It's a prediction that liberals, whose heart rates continue to fluctuate with the release of every new poll, want to take solace in but somehow can't. Sure, this is the guy who correctly predicted the outcome of the 2008 election in 49 of 50 states, but this year's polls suggest a nailbiter." This passage succinctly sums up the dominant Republican take on the polling: Silver gives Obama the win but nervous nelly liberals can't trust him, perhaps because they secretly know Romney will triumph. Moreover, Silver's accuracy in his 2008 predictions—based on math, which doesn't change from one election to the next—was a fluke, and 2012 would be different. Here was another Republican dismissal of science in favour of the truthy 'science' of sites like conservative blogger Dean Chambers's UnSkewedPolls.com, which claimed to "eras[e] the bias to show an accurate picture of politics." His "method of 'unskewing' polls involved re-weighting the sample to match *what he believed the electorate would look like,* in terms of party identification. He *thought* the electorate would lean more Republican when mainstream pollsters routinely found samples that leaned Democratic" (LoGiurato, 2012b; my emphases). Chambers posted articles such as "The bizarre world of Nate Silver's voodoo political predictions" and "Reality vs. liberal fantasy world in the presidential polling." Again here we see realish projection: *Silver's* math is "voodoo," not Chambers's, and *liberals* live in a "fantasy world" compared to conservatives' "reality." The election results proved Silver correct and Chambers wrong, validating Silver's math versus Chambers's 'mathiness,' and the ensuing Republican reaction to Obama's re-election would show exactly which camp was living in reality and which in a "fantasy world."

Chambers admitted he was wrong, placing the blame on conservative-leaning pollsters (LoGiurato, 2012), but two weeks after the election, he launched a site called

"BarackOFraudo.com," claiming Obama won the swing states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Florida through voter fraud, based on "credible information of evidence [sic]" and "a lot of chatter" (Kroll, 2012). What's important here is that Republicans were operating based on the truthiness of Chambers's 'data' because it *felt* right to them (and they are *the* people), reinforcing realishness in which Romney *was* going to win, because the numbers said so—as did many conservative pundits.

In a Fox News interview with Bill O'Reilly, Charles Krauthammer agreed with O'Reilly that Romney would take the swing states of Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina; he predicted a Romney win, citing "the intensity factor in all the polls everywhere on Romney's side. And Republicans tend to be somewhat under-represented in the polls. You put them all together, Romney wins Ohio, one more state and he's president" (*The O'Reilly Factor,* 2012). In *The Telegraph,* Janet Daley (2012) wrote:

> Time to stop being a wuss. I will take my chances and say it straight out: I think Romney is going to win—not just the popular vote but the electoral college as well… The turnouts and atmosphere at Obama events are rather pitiful by comparison to the tremendous, ecstatic receptions that are greeting Romney and they are notably pitiful by comparison to the thunderous Obama pre-victory march across the country in 2008. He and his surrogates (even the still hugely popular Bill Clinton) have often played to half-empty venues. It seems that only by offering a free pop concert with A-listers like Bruce Springsteen, or a Hollywood celebrity fest, can the President pull really large crowds. And those crowds, if my television screen is to be believed, consist overwhelmingly of kids who scream for Springsteen and the rap artist Jay-Z as enthusiastically as they do for the President.

Similarly, Peggy Noonan of the *Wall Street Journal* (2012) based her predictions on a feeling and how the candidates and their rallies looked:

> Romney's crowds are building—28,000 in Morrisville, Pa., last night; 30,000 in West Chester, Ohio, Friday It isn't only a triumph of advance planning: People *came,* they got through security and waited for hours in the cold. His rallies look like rallies now, not enactments. In some new way he's caught his stride. He looks happy and grateful. His closing speech has been positive, future-looking, sweetly patriotic. His closing ads are sharp—the one about what's going on at the rallies is moving.

> *All the vibrations are right…*
> In Florida a few weeks ago I saw Romney signs, not Obama ones. From Ohio I hear the same. From tony Northwest Washington, D.C., I hear the same. *Is it possible this whole thing is playing out before our eyes and we're not really noticing because we're too busy looking at data on paper instead of what's in front of us?* Maybe that's the real distortion of the polls this year: *They left us discounting the world around us.* (my emphases)

She goes on to use her assessment of the candidates' demeanours to support her prediction: "I suspect both Romney and Obama have a sense of what's coming, and it's part of why Romney looks so peaceful and Obama so roiled."

Two days before the election, Dick Morris went on Fox News to offer his forecast that Romney would win 325 electoral votes to Obama's 213. "It will be the biggest surprise in recent American political history," Morris stated. "It will rekindle the whole question on why the media played this race as a nailbiter where in fact Romney's going to win by quite a bit" (Real Clear Politics, 2012a). On election day, he gave Romney a 90% chance of winning and a 60% chance in a landslide (Real Clear Politics, 2012b).

Most infamously, live on Fox News as the election results were coming in, Karl Rove disputed the results of Ohio once the tipping-point state—and thus the presidency—had been called for Obama, saying it was "premature" and "early"; anchor Chris Wallace added, "Well I have great respect for our decision desk, and I can see that they're very happy in Chicago [Obama headquarters], but I have to tell you that the Romney camp has real doubts by the call that has been made by us and by other networks. They do not believe that Ohio is in the Obama camp." Anchor Megyn Kelly then walked across the hall to the number crunchers' office, cameras following her, where she was assured that they were "99.9 percent" certain of their call. "Rove continued to contest their call. 'They know the science!' Kelly responded, exasperatedly. It turned out that nobody was on Rove's side" (Shapiro and Mirkinson, 2012).

CNN's Howard Kurtz (2012) wrote that Rove's refusal to accept the Ohio results "captured, for some long and awkward moments, the refusal of some in the media-and-politics game to accept reality," adding:

> This, unfortunately, has been a recurring theme all year. When Romney was down in the polls, some conservatives complained that media organizations were putting out biased surveys (which led to such sites as unskewedpolls.com). When unemployment dropped in September, even critics as prominent as [former CEO of General Electric] Jack Welch accused the Obama administration of cooking the books without a scintilla of evidence.
>
> And when Nate Silver, The New York Times' number-crunching blogger, predicted Obama had a 90% chance of winning, conservatives accused him of bias. Turns out he called the outcome correctly in every state.

And this belief-centered and 'mathiness'-driven realishness went all the way to the top: the Romney campaign's internal polling showed swing states moving squarely in his direction; earlier on Election Day he proudly stated that he had written only a victory speech and began discussing appointing a cabinet and what breed of puppy the new First Family would bring to the White House (Scheiber, 2012; Rucker, 2012). The Romney camp was sure of victory, and upon accepting his loss, Romney was "shellshocked," according to an advisor. Ann Romney and Janna Ryan cried as he telephoned Obama to concede before dashing off a brief concession speech (Crawford, 2012).

Barack Obama won re-election with 51.1% of the popular vote to Romney's 47.2% and, exactly as Nate Silver predicted, 332 Electoral College votes to Romney's 206. The ensuing meltdown on the Right was nothing short of epic in volume, emotion, scale, and meaning. I will discuss this in the next chapter through the critical framework of my conceptual model.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fission

Beginning this story on Election Night 2008 and now ending it on Election Night 2012 certainly serves as a stylistically satisfying and symbolically appropriate bookending of a very strange period in U.S. politics. What is important here, however, is to use the immediate aftermath of Romney's defeat to resume a more directed critical analysis of a sudden, jarring, and (melo)dramatic sociopolitical event and resultant phenomena through the perspective of the conceptual model I set forth in Chapter One. Returning to physics yet again, much as particle colliders provide scientists with snapshots that simulate the conditions a fraction of a second after the Big Bang, here we have in the few days following the election a similar picture of what happened to the (nearly closed) system of conservative realishness that I described at the end of the last chapter.

For a system that aggregated and constructed itself (I hesitate to say it is emergent, though) over a period of four years to experience a nearly instantaneous decoherence required not only a precipitating catalyst (the election results) but prior conditions already in place that would provide the fissile material for explosion. (When I refer to this system as cohering over four years, I acknowledge that such systems operating according to my model, as social phenomena, were extant; I am referring here to the particular Obama–Hysterical Right phenomenon that is the object of this analysis.) These conditions are all that I illustrated in Chapters Two and Three: from the Tea Partier convinced of a coming army of Obama Brownshirts, to the strange gods Palin and Beck, to the complicity of Fox News and other right-wing news media in disseminating truthiness, to the baffling candidacies of O'Donnell and Angle, to Republican obstruction in Congress, to the GOP primary surge

circuit, to the Romney campaign's open (even boastful) disregard of fact-checking, to the unskewed polling that reinforced realishness with mathiness, to Rove's denial of the actual election results. All of the components of the spacetime model were in place and functioning; what was amplified were the forces that drove its mechanics. The Right's unbridled enthusiasm and gleeful anticipation of the impending destruction of Barack Obama had achieved critical mass of complete hysteria. Had Romney won (and had truthiness and realishness become 'validated' in the sense of perceived legitimacy) this energy would likely been a combination of jubilation, victory in the war of taking *our* country back, and perhaps most importantly, a reclaiming and re-assertion of the inherent privilege of 'real' Americans in the 'real' America: the might of the white.

But Obama won—and as the system blew itself apart, its energy had to go somewhere. (I had actually expected significant Election Night violence; I envisioned drunken Southern bubbas blasting through town in pickup trucks looking for a black man to beat to death and/or lynch, symbolically making up for 'real' America's failure to do this to Obama.) Still, what we witnessed was not the *collision* of reality and realishness, for such a collision would annihilate (as in a particle accelerator), or at least fracture, *both* states. Here is where we can see a validation of realishness as a warp in sociopolitical spacetime created through the masses of the strange gods. The mass they aggregated through the accumulation and amplification of truthiness and the realishness that this constructed and reinforced was suddenly greatly diminished. This led to the warp of realishness losing 'depth,' for less mass means less gravity. Those who had been operating within this realishness were suddenly 'lifted' out of this depth to a state more resembling reality; we can even think of them as being catapulted out from this to a destabilizing space in which the impossible—Obama's

re-election and the failure of the Hysterical Right's four-year project—was now *really* real, and most definitely frightening.

I say that this 'new' space is destabilizing because truthiness and realishness still inform and direct thought and behaviour, but within a stronger and clearer enveloping state of truth and reality. For example, Obamacare would no longer be repealed on Day One of a Romney presidency, so Obama's re-election meant that the institution of death panels would go ahead as planned—and who could know what else he had in store?

My critical analysis of this aftermath looks first at the strange gods (and those pundits who became part of a unified strange god mass near the election), and the Republican body politic in terms of individual and group actors. Beginning with the strange gods, for the sake of objective analysis, it is necessary to jettison their own post-election statements, articles, commentaries, and so on, for these obviously are the convenient media loci of mea culpas, or mea culpas with self-serving excuses, or veiled denials, or even statements that they were not wrong by way of twisted logic. For example, in his first post-election interview, Paul Ryan (a quasi–strange god for his being perceived as a budget guru, and of course his being on the ticket which in and of itself confers mass) "wouldn't admit that voters rejected his economic vision and instead chalked up President Obama's victory to a large turnout of the 'urban vote.' 'I don't think we lost it on those budget issues, especially on Medicare, we clearly didn't lose it on those issues… I think the surprise was some of the turnout, some of the turnout especially in the urban areas, which gave President Obama the big margin to win the race" (Volsky, 2012). (In Republican-speak, 'urban' means black, and in saying these voters put Obama over the top, he is tacitly saying that the 'real' electorate—whites—had in fact voted for Romney to win, only to be thwarted by 'those' people.) Another meme that circulated was the notion that since the Republicans had held

the House (though most actual votes for House representatives went to Democrats), they still had a mandate there; since budget and fiscal bills must originate in the House, this meant the Republican-backed Romney/Ryan budget had apparently still been approved by voters. Never mind that Obama campaigned and won on a clear economic vision that explicitly proposed that the wealthy pay more in taxes and rejected the austerity of the Ryan budget—Republicans could claim an Obama mandate on these issues as illegitimate.

And so to see what happened to the aggregated strange gods of the conservative political entertainment complex it is perhaps easiest to look at the critiques of their reality-based counterparts. *Salon*'s Alex Seitz-Wald compiled a list of the "biggest losers of punditry in 2012" (Seitz-Wald, 2012). He categorizes the pundits as those who predicted Mitt Romney will win, those who predicted a Romney landslide, those who believed Romney would win the swing state Minnesota due to a marriage equality ballot initiative that would bring out Republicans (as Karl Rove had so deftly engineered to assure George W. Bush's 2004 victory), the poll unskewers such as Dean Chambers and related to this, the Nate Silver detractors, and so on. The variations upon the 'Romney will win' theme tell us much about the vagaries of the pundits who came together as part of the pre-election 'mega–strange god' that created a truly inescapable warp in sociopolitical spacetime (a black hole, perhaps?). This suggests that while the agency of a strange god—the sociopolitical alchemy I discussed in Chapter One—is the result of ever-increasing mass, this mass need not be uniform in composition. When the gravity that brings these variants together weakens—here, upon the decoherence of the sociopolitical warp of realishness—the component parts scatter, much weaker due to being no longer part of the larger central mass. The confluence of a unified 'Romney will win' mass no longer unites them, and they are left to defend themselves *outside* of realishness. For example, after Karl Rove's colossal on-air embarrassment, Fox News

chief Roger Ailes put him and Dick Morris on hiatus (Sherman, 2012). That Fox News, the paragon of truthiness and misinformation, should attempt to sweep these offenders under the rug says much about the lot of right-wing pundits post-election. Their credibility with target audiences—those who feed on their truthiness and experience realishness—no longer had sufficient mass to sustain a sufficient depth of realishness warp. Up to the election, their confident predictions of a Romney landslide became part of the operational structure of the realishness warp, and their being so wrong contributed to the collapse of this structure.

The lessened force of the agencies that first drew individuals into the system of realishness has the effect of untethering them from the central bodies within that had provided the gravity that kept all within. Recall my initial discussion of realishness, which emphasized the requirement of a collectivity in which the same truthiness is shared. The state of Republicans (whether in the experience of realishness or not) leading up to and during the election became a solidified collectivity with one sole purpose and one shared direction. It no longer mattered that social conservatives had preferred Rick Santorum over Romney, that Tea Partiers had looked to Michele Bachmann as the one voice that most aptly spoke for their interests (and delusions), that Romney's history of flip-flopping called his political character and motives into question, and so on. The election wasn't about any of them, or, arguably, Republican ideology itself, but rather about Barack Obama. Just get rid of him, and everything would fall into place. Grover Norquist had already promised that fiscal policy would involve the president only insofar as his signature would be required. Romney's complete lack of foreign policy experience wouldn't be a problem; he could pass these responsibilities and decisions on to his advisors. In short, for Republicans in 2012, there was no real leader with a unifying and promising direction—there was just Obama, strapped into the electric chair and awaiting the inevitable as 'real' America pulled the switch.

After a primary season that uncovered divisions within the various wings of the Republican party, the ultimate unification among the Right was therefore tenuous, for there was no 'there' there. If those with significant agency—politicians, pundits, and so on—drifted away from the core at the heart of realishness, then what happened to ordinary individuals with no real agency? Where would their hysteria, their rage, go? The broader question in terms of the spacetime model is what happens to the phenomenological experience of realishness when this state exists liminally *vis-à-vis* reality, for it is within this state that the actors continue to operate.

The reactions of Romney voters upon the election being called for Obama, again like a snapshot, show us the immediate trajectory and character of their hysteria. Visual depictions of stunned voters spread quickly over the internet, with a picture blog called "White People Mourning Romney" (whitepeoplemourningromney.tumblr.com) perhaps the most notable. They were in tears, their jaws agape in disbelief, they covered their faces in shock, they sat hunched over with their heads in their hands, and so on. They were in hysterics—here moreso in the colloquial sense of the word. At the University of Mississippi ("Ole Miss"), hundreds of students "exchanged racial epithets and violent, politicized chants"; one photo showed an Obama–Biden campaign sign being set on fire (Johnson, 2012). This particular instance of racially-charged outrage is noteworthy insofar as it involved not older Tea Partiers, but rather Millennials, a demographic that largely supported Obama over Romney, forming part of Obama's winning coalition. These students at Ole Miss most likely supported some progressive causes such as marriage equality (which, among this age group, crosses party lines with significant support from young Republicans), and might ordinarily appear to be outwardly non-racist. But that a spontaneous and explicitly racist demonstration should materialize indicates an embedded racism, or at least racial

resentment, that continues to exist cross-generationally, particularly in the South. Further research and critical analysis could shed light on such ingrained beliefs, demonstrating that racially-motivated sentiment capable of becoming hysteria is not confined solely to older generations. Echoing this, Ibram Rogers (2012) wrote,

> These students have been written off in the last week [following the election] by many Americans as fanatics. They have been mocked and ridiculed as crazy. But are they? Or are they merely highlighting a racist America?
>
> It seems to me these public protesters last week highlighted what was occurring in private, what would have occurred in public 50 years ago. The Ole Miss riot last week is similar to the riot there fifty years ago. It demonstrated the pervasiveness of racism whether Americans these days want to recognize it as such or not. I wonder how many students sat in their dorm rooms tossing around racial slurs and racial threats? I wonder how many people sat in their homes privately protesting the re-election of a Black man?

The suggestion here is that the Ole Miss protest was merely an outward and unabashed public display of a much larger, yet insidious, racism. This immediately evokes the rise of the Tea Party as I discussed earlier: the racism and racial resentment were there all along, but having the an ostensibly acceptable reason of political dissent allowed for racist discourse (overt or coded) to be openly expressed, validated by the collective nature of this expression. The shock of Obama's re-election provided a motivation and justification for these students to express themselves just as the Tea Partiers had been doing since 2009. They were unhappy with the results of the election and gathered on campus to voice their dissatisfaction and disappointment; to be sure, this is part of acceptable political discourse. But that their rancour so easily crossed the line to overt racism reveals not only that such sentiments exist below the surface (at varying levels, of course), but also the power of hysteria when uncontrollably released through reality's ripping apart of the realishness system.

Once the dust had settled, there was most definitely no 'oh well, we lost, let's get on with it' among the Right. We have to remember the Tea Party's embrace of the Constitution (the parts they liked, at least), and so it was to be expected that remedies would be sought through the percieved principles of the American liberty fetish. The White House maintains a "We the People" website where petitions can be filed; once a petition reaches 25,000 signatures, it is officially reviewed. Only hours after Obama's victory, opponents in Louisiana had posted a petition to secede from the Union (Dias, 2012). Louisiana signatories was soon joined by the similarly disaffected in all of the other 49 states. The White House response, of course, was gracious in its acknowledgement of the petitions, writing that "democracy can be noisy and controversial. And that's a good thing… But as much as we value a healthy debate, we don't let that debate tear us apart" (Carson, 2013). However, the response also gently pointed out that the Supreme Court had ruled state secession illegal in 1868, shortly after the Civil War.

The obvious question is whether these petitions were merely knee-jerk reactions to Obama's re-election or whether secessionist sentiment is genuine, at least among some of the signatories. Certainly, the notion of unilateral state secession is a realish one not only for its illegality but also insofar as such an undertaking would be a logistical, bureaucratic, economic, and ultimately social nightmare. But my discussion throughout this thesis has never been about the potential reality of such ideas (including death panels, the appointment of Russian czars, or Obama banning fishing); rather, the focus has squarely been on the phenomenological state in which these *seem* real to actors to the extent that they begin to experience realishness in a collectivity. The realishness centered upon an imminent Romney victory, as reinforced and deepened through the rhetorical mass of those pundits who

performed the role of quasi–strange gods, may have lost this particular agency on individuals, but its *focus* can change, providing for a new deepening warp.

This can be seen in the reaction of Republican lawmakers following Obama's victory. Setting aside Paul Ryan's seeming denial of the policy implications of a second Obama administration, we also continue to witness Republican obstructionism in Congress. They were unable to deny Obama a second term, but they still had the capacity to deny him a legacy broader than the one he had already established. Big issues were still to be tackled, among them a new push for gun safety following the Newtown massacre, immigration reform, the future of Social Security and Medicare, climate change and clean energy, and so on. The ACA, yet to be fully implemented (which, according to supporters, will lead to its evetually becoming as beloved as Medicare), would most certainly qualify as a defining achievement of the Obama presidency, since health care reform had long been a pipe dream of Democrats. (The real victory, of course, will go to whichever future president successfully leads the ultimate paradigm shift towards single-payer universal healthcare.) But big projects remain, and damned if the Republicans will let Obama succeed in these.

This, however, depends on the Republican Party's survival in the first place. Following the 2012 defeat, the Republican National Committee set about preparing an 'autopsy report' to uncover what went so wrong for them. (After all, given the realish perception of universal hatred for Obama, together with the Republicans' massive gains in the 2010 midterms, the 2012 election should have been a cakewalk for whichever white person won the nomination.) The RNC released the "Growth & Opportunity Project" report in March of 2013. Rather than bring Republicans together in the interest of honest reflection, however, the report and the immediate reaction had the opposite effect, touching off a "heated debate between the party's establishment elites and its grassroots activists.

That's because the elites who authored the report implicitly lay most of the blame for the party's misfortunes on the anti-immigrant, anti-gay, anti-minority sentiments that suffused the national conversation during Obama's first term" (Green, 2013). Much of this debate pivoted on two strategies: rebranding the party or rethinking policy. Will the Republican Party's electoral future (and indeed, survival of the party itself) depend on packaging or product?

This brings us squarely back to the seemingly irreconcilable Republican conundrum of ideology versus electability. A main focus of the new Republican strategy is minority outreach, in particular, selling itself to African-Americans. But this is the party that refers to welfare queens, the urban vote, and food stamps, that often uncritically harbours birthers, and has, at the state level, implemented draconian (and completely unnecessary, given the extremely low incidence of actual voter fraud) voter identification laws that effectively make it difficult for minorities to vote. We should not believe for a second that Republican state legislatures are genuinely concerned with voter fraud; rather, it is plain that such regulations are insidious ways to re-institute the voter suppression of the Jim Crow era. (These laws also openly flout the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, particularly the pre-clearance clause, which we can consider a rebellion against the supremacy of the federal government.) And so the conflict continues to reside within the party itself: the same turn from John McCain to Sarah Palin I recount in the introduction was the same conflict seen in the primaries, and then embodied in Mitt Romney who tried to go in both directions—"severely conservative" and yet palatable and ostensibly sane enough to win mainstream Republicans and disenchanted former Obama supporters. Much as I likened the Tea Party's adopting more and more extreme positions as an antidote to Obama and liberalism, should the Republicans

maintain far-right ideological purity, or return to a moderate medium? (The moderate Republican of the Obama era is most certainly far to the right of moderates past.)

The shock of the Republicans' 2012 loss revealed the untangling of its strategically woven wings: the social conservatives, the neoconservatives, the fiscal conservatives, the libertarians—and now the Tea Party. The civil rights–rooted cracks in the Democratic party in the 1950s and 1960s allowed for the Republican Southern Strategy to directly and deliberately appeal to racist white former Democrats. This led to the Republican Party's becoming 'Southernized,' and this character necessarily requires the concerted exploitation of racism and racial resentment. Then there is the Christian Right, whose growing influence in the 1970s, led mainly by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, resulted in the Republicans' welcoming them and adopting some social conservative party positions on issues such as abortion and homosexuality. The neocons are there too, of course, perhaps the most frustrated of the factions as they watch the other wings divert the party from their primary purpose of warmongering and profiteering. And the Tea Partiers were putting their full spectacle on garish display for the whole *world* to mock, thanks to YouTube and other sharing platforms.

What all of this means is the Republican Party, for all intents and purposes, has been in a civil war since at least the 1960s over the true and authentic soul of the party, and perpetually living the mortifying fear that this might have already died. Such a widespread collective malaise creates the ideal conditions for strange gods, hysteria, truthiness, and realishness. That I estimate the emergence of this malaise as coinciding with the Civil Rights Era should be noted, for this reveals the most fundamental conflict of America: to whom belongs "We, the People"?

CONCLUSION

Who, the People?

I have spent this thesis telling the story of what I watched unfold, in real time, over four-plus years. My earlier work in literary analysis led to my becoming attuned to narrative, to character, to plot, to tropes, to rhetoric, to symbolism, and to meaning. I found all of these elements in a most unique and frankly bizarre manner when I was first captivated by those angry white people in teabag-lined tricorn hats, hoisting yellow "Don't Tread On Me" Gadsden flags or those repellent signs depicting Barack Obama as a monkey, while screaming about death panels and tyranny and all of the other horrible things that had suddenly descended upon America (though these were nowhere to be found, because they just didn't exist). Watching this I also looked for what this meant sociologically. Had we seen this before? Or were we well and truly witnessing a seismic shift in U.S. politics at par with the Dixiecrats' defection or the meteoric rise of the Reagan-era Right? And what underlying social agents and forces were at work?

I saw that this shift was driven by a skewed sense of reality that seemed to pervade the Right most strikingly since the election of Obama. These Tea Party people believed things that were *simply not true*, and often even after these were pointed out as such. What made all the difference between a random confused person and these Tea Partiers was that the Tea Partiers seemed to *share* this characteristic of thinking and operating in a reality in which truthiness existed imperceptibly next to truth. The way I felt I could best get this across in an academic thesis was to conceptualize a model accessible to the sociologist in which strange gods gather rhetorical mass, organize all in relation to themselves, warp

sociopolitical spacetime, and draw in the body politic, such that they can contentedly proceed in a collective phenomenological state I decided to call realishness.

And so throughout Chapters Two and Three I argued and illustrated these notions and showed how this conceptual model can be demonstrated via real-world examples. By way of this, I was allowed to do two things: first, to paint the best, the most vivid, and the most faithful portrait I could of these strange people whom I found so compelling, and second, to make a few of my own points here and there, sometimes cautiously, and sometimes less so. As such, these chapters might have seemed more journalistic or quasi-ethnographic in tone, and perhaps the reader might consider this more of an essay than a thesis. These are fair criticisms, but they do not bother me.

Still, I have more to say, and so this conclusion belongs to me. Please allow me the berth and latitude from here on such that I may present my take on *all* of the foregoing. I must recount the heart of what I have been pondering ever since the day I flipped 'dissentisnowracism' and just *knew* what was about to happen—what they were going to do to Barack Obama. Forgive me if I wander into polemic here and there; instead, given the presence on cable news and commentary throughout this thesis, let us consider it punditry.

This is the last stand of the South in a Civil War grudge re-match that we have seen in earlier eras—but this time, it's for keeps. Whichever side prevails will claim the ultimate prize of the American self, which has been elusive for as long as America's original sin of slavery has remained unreconciled. Thinking back through American history, we see recurring cycles of culture wars; even as these might appear primarily political and/or social in nature, culture remains at the very heart these conflicts. The issue is that the American self necessarily requires an other. It is a nation born of conflict *fought and resolved*, and so it is

understandable that new social or political or cultural problems that might arise over time suggest the need for similar resolution through the inflation of conflict followed by a battle. We think immediately of the Civil War, and this is by far the most extreme example, but we must also consider other perpetual conflicts that aim to solve social problems through the wielding of power rather than reasoned debate, among them reproductive rights (including violence against abortion providers and clinics), gun safety (where the gun lobby successfully trumped the will of 90% of the American public who supported universal background checks), the role of the welfare state and the social safety net (which pseudo-libertarian Ayn Rand devotees such as Paul Ryan and Rand Paul seek to eliminate), and fiscal policy (where the '1%' still call the shots). Now governance itself seems to have been abdicated and left to the devices of partisan sniping and obstruction. The Republicans have been behaving like petulant children ever since Obama won.

We can raise our academic hackles and, as we have been trained, look for that hopefully unique and fascinating post-whateverist 'so much more to it' cachet that we can conceptualize, slap a catchy name on, and then show off in our papers. (And I have indeed done just this, just now.) But we also have to be willing to establish an honest and unfettered intellectual clearing in which we can just call things as they are, the tone and tenor of our emphases supplanting the standard academese we string together.

So let me say it another way: the Republicans, and the social conservatism they embody, are the impediments to progress whose agency has become so outsized that it often seems as though this minority of the American body politic can assert its will—that of the 'real' America—over that of the *true* America, and bring everyone else down with them in the process. But social conservatism is by its very nature untenable, for even as it rams a cudgel into the engine of social progress, it is ultimately incapable of countering social phenomena

such as changing demographics that reflect a growing rejection of, and open disdain for, regressivism. Society marches on, regardless of what the Tea Party wants. Just as Paul Ryan said: Republicans weren't counting on the "urban" vote turning out as it did. And their attempts at minority voter disenfranchisement through voter identification laws—fundamental violences upon democracy—didn't work, either. Nothing seemed to work this time around, not even good ol' time Jim Crow poll shenanigans updated for the twenty-first century.

And now they are beside themselves trying to figure out what to do next. Who will be their saviour in 2016? Or will they need a sacrificial lamb if Hillary Clinton decides to run? The buzz around New Jersey Governor Chris Christie as a new hope faded dramatically in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, when, purely in the humanitarian interest of his constituents, he worked alongside Barack Obama in mutual cooperation between levels of government, each evincing leadership and a respect for each other in spite of ideological differences. Christie's 2013 CPAC invitation didn't get lost in the mail. He was banished for deigning to associate with the black president during a natural disaster. They invited Donald Trump instead.

All the while, the Republicans maintain their grip on Congress, killing measures such as gun safety legislation, pointlessly delaying cabinet confirmation hearings, or using the filibuster in the Senate to prevent mere up-or-down votes on any legislation that might remotely make Barack Obama look good. Allowing Obama to win on the larger conflict that underlies the issues would mean a de facto resignation of the white political privilege that formed the foundation of America. Such a submission would be the ultimate American role reversal as its original sin is confronted once and for all, with stalemate not an option. The mythologized embodiment of Christian whiteness that for centuries signified the 'real'

America would recede further into the realm of myth, replaced by a growing diversity and progressivism that in a sense *rejects* this American mythos, since it operates in—and *celebrates*—the reality of contemporary life, rather than the realishness of that vaguely familiar yet indefinable era (because it never existed) that the Tea Party so desperately wants to return to. It's not so much a fear of accepting the apparent 'loss' of their country as it is the terrifying realization that it is not theirs alone to claim, much less take back on their own terms.

This crisis is therefore about culture and power, and throughout U.S. history these have been unequivocally linked under the aegis of white privilege. In the absence of such unshakable monolithic agency, though, who claims control? Whose face will be chosen to face the world as embodying the totality and meaning of America and all that this ongoing project, begun by the Founders, promises? This is of utmost national importance and meaning. In 2008, Americans chose a black man as this embodiment, and this was *just too much* for vast swaths of the body politic, especially the social conservatives (regardless of region) belonging to a Southernized political party. The only possible reaction was hysteria, perhaps at the very root of which was the hard-wired primal survival mechanism that identifies the threat of the Other and reacts spontaneously and often violently. Our contemporary society of digital communications technologies allows for the global broadcast of the primal scream. And then in 2012, Americans chose to *keep* this black man, a bit more wrinkled, his hair greying, as their collective national avatar in a clear, decisive, and direct victory over those who sought nothing less than his destruction.

"We, the People" has been unshackled from what it has traditionally meant. "We, the People" now represents a once unthinkable coalition of diverse peoples and cultures, with a prevailing (if not necessarily uniform) ethos that has evolved past mere tolerance. Tolerance

is neither acceptance nor understanding. Tolerance maintains a power dynamic in which the more privileged group tolerates the lesser. Acceptance and understanding only burgeon once communication enters the dynamic as a means to not only bridge gaps and discover each other, but move toward mutual celebration of the diversities of all, with the ultimate common goal of shared progress. This is why I always maintain that the internet changed everything in terms of social progress, for within a very compressed period of time, we became suddenly and fantastically joined together in a true global village in which communication fosters good will and progress among peoples. "We, the People" of America can now self-determine and self-identify themselves, no longer bound by the rigid traditions, conventions, sentiments, resentments, and conflicts of the past.

But so many in the United States—that constituency of rage—just aren't ready to go there yet. And it took a black man, a devoted follower of Lincoln, to show this to America and to the world.

Thank you.

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