
Original Article

Action in culture: Act I of the presidential primary campaign in the U.S., April to December, 2015

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Abstract This article offers a thick description of the United States during the first nine months of the 2016 presidential election competition. It argues that this competition is organized in a theatrical way, and that this period, from April to December 2015, represents act one of the drama. It argues that performances in act one contribute to setting the cultural and interpretive conditions in which citizens will enter and act back on the drama in its subsequent acts, in state primaries and caucuses, and in the general election in November 2016. Building on the works of Roland Barthes and Clifford Geertz, the article gives a structural, or semiotic, interpretation of the dominant symbols and discourses operating in the dramatic field, and using Alexander's cultural pragmatics, it identifies and analyzes key performances given by candidates Clinton and Trump, which crystalized particular meaning formations and lent the proceedings a sense of dynamism and flow. The article demonstrates how analyzing performances in a manner consistent with cultural pragmatic theory contributes to research on electoral politics, political authority, and legitimation processes.

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Introduction

A US presidential election cycle is a social drama composed of hundreds of short, discrete performances, and thousands of performatives. Candidates assemble teams of strategists, pursue resources, and build ground organizations. Yet a campaign apparatus's foremost practice is crafting interpretations

and discursive constructions and having its lead, the candidate, perform these meanings before citizen-publics and television cameras in effort to, quite literally, perform themselves into the office of presidency.

A candidate is the visible medium through which the campaign apparatus's interpretive and constitutive work is channeled. Candidates perform these meaning constructions emphatically and relentlessly before citizen-publics. The meaning constructions are often simple declarative formulations; they are performatives delivered in effort to build understandings and imaginings of certain subjects in the minds of one's audiences. Candidates' performative subjects include themselves and their opposition; the nation, as an historical agent; the public, as the embodiment of this historical legacy, and in terms of the public institutions and services it currently deserves; and finally, both the forces that endanger the nation and public as well as the principles and policies that will not only circumvent these threats but vanquish them.

An election cycle in a representative democracy comprises multiple candidates simultaneously engaging in this interpretive and performative work. A chorus arises from the repetition of it all, particularly in the contest's early stages, as candidates talk to Americans about how they are American, about what it means to be an American, and about how together, the candidate and the people, will lead America into its future in a way that ensures that the best of what it means to be America, and the best of what it means to be an American, will be born yet again.

Adopting a distanced stance, such that the particularities of each candidate's version of this story recede, the din that the performances create sounds much like the one produced four year's prior, and to those prior to that, stretching back for decades. Every four years, through the candidates' performances, and the audience's interventions – from initial declarations of candidacy, through the narrowing of the field of contestants through debates and primaries and still more debates, to the conventions and the naming of the party nominees, through October surprises, and to the final act in November – the nation undertakes a process that recalls what Clifford Geertz (1973a) observed of the cockfight in Balinese society: through the election cycle Americans do a table-read of scripts of American experience, and perform to themselves about themselves. They perform about making America great again! (Donald Trump), reigniting the promise of America (Ted Cruz), starting a new American century (Marco Rubio), moving America to higher ground (Mike Huckabee), and about rebuilding, restoring, and unleashing the American dream (Martin O'Malley, Rick Santorum, Rand Paul, respectively).

If we distance ourselves even further from the drama, and adopt the vantage point of an alien watching from space, one whose minute is a human decade, we would begin to see that these eruptions occur at regular intervals, and that each one repeats a pattern such that they appear to be rule governed. We would note that they are expressive of a symbolic character; that during them ideas and



beliefs about the nation are given extra discursive space and attention, and that emblems and symbols of group affiliations and identities are made visible and ubiquitous. In and through being distinctively ceremonial, these events stand out against the flow of mundane life. And as they culminate in the community elevating one person to stand in for and lead the many, and to represent the whole, the events increasingly look like an institutionalized technique for recreating the sacred (Durkheim, 1912[1995]; Shils and Young, 1953). Is this collective engagement in dramatic practice, in itself, the creation of their higher ground, the alien might wonder.

Yet if we want to focus not on the reproduction of a collective order, but on questions of how political power and legitimacy are won, inhabited, projected, and lost, then we need to return to a position closer to the action. We need to retain the centrality of symbolic codes and boundaries, but we need to introduce a more precise conceptual apparatus, one that specifies elements in the performances that are particularly influential in lending the entire process its form, but also capable of illuminating the hows and whys of its outcome. Cultural pragmatics (Alexander, 2004) provides this apparatus.

Interpreting the political process as social performance means seeing aspirants and holders of political office as actors continually engaging in interpretive and constitutive performances. It requires identifying audiences, specifying their bases of solidarity, and attending to their formations as well as their potential movements toward fragmentation. Interpreting politics as social performance also involves noting when and how powerful background collective representations are activated, and decoding the meanings lurking in the materiality of political staging. Likewise, it involves detecting the social dramatic process's submerged mechanisms of power, or the resources, material, and symbolic, that enable particular people to perform louder and longer while precluding others.

Actors, audiences, symbols, settings and staging, varieties of power: treating politics as social performance involves separating these concepts analytically, and then investigating how they work in conjunction with one another during moments of actual performance, in which the things these concepts specify appear fused together before attending audiences and camera lenses (Alexander 2004, 2010; Alexander and Jaworsky, 2014; Mast, 2013). It is in these moments that the political process is most powerfully channeled, expressed, and made visible: in these actors' performances before the public, during which they claim to represent and speak for the nation.

My contention is that power is the capacity to interpret and constitute, and that successfully inhabiting and exercising power means having one's interpretations and constitutive narrations be widely accepted as accurate, reasonable, and desirable. Put another way, power is performative: accruing power and projecting it well means having an acumen for issuing characterizations and prognostications that activate within audience members sentiments of recognition and identification. To win positions of leadership, ones that confer

institutional power, candidates must cultivate and deploy performative power (Alexander, 2010; Mast, 2013; Reed, 2013). Creating and inscribing meanings that will stir multiple audiences requires an anthropologist's interpretive skills and a playwright's acumen for interweaving structure with event. Communicating them effectively requires a different set of skills, ones that lead us to the realm of performance.

This conceptualization of power tells us much about how those who aspire to office orient to their challenge, yet in privileging political actors, it has the capacity to displace citizen-publics in the cultural pragmatic framework and to render them, metaphorically speaking, passive audience members sitting quietly in the back seats of a darkened theater. This article seeks to examine and reformulate the relationship between actors and audiences, and thereby contribute to cultural pragmatics, by linking performative power conceptually with a post-Weberian conceptualization of legitimacy (Alexander, 2013), one that privileges meaning-making but allows that audience interpretations may vary widely from the meanings performers intend to cultivate.

That to accrue and wield performative power a candidate must by accident or design anchor one's scripts in the community's collective representations demonstrates that we have traveled far from Weber's definition of power, which foregrounded material, military, and organizational means for achieving one's own interests over and against the wills of others. Weber was keenly aware that relations between the powerful and subjects are built of far more than brute force and coercion. He introduced the concept legitimacy to open up to investigation the conditions and means by which the ruled may comply or contribute to the preservation of power relations by, for instance, believing in their rightness. Power interpreted as properly won, borne, and deployed Weber-termed authority. By introducing authority and legitimacy, Weber lent the contributions of the ruled conceptual space and explanatory weight on the epistemological ledger of power relationships. And by emphasizing belief, Weber's formulation encourages a research program into the cultural elements that constitute legitimacy, and the processes by which it accrues in or recedes from particular persons, positions, institutions, and practices. Such a program, however, has yet to be undertaken in any sustained way.

In this paper, I build from the works of Geertz and Barthes's an interpretive perspective, which I then train on the spectrum of meanings produced between political performers and citizen-audiences during the first act of the 2016 presidential election. I conceive of these events as legitimation processes in which actors and audiences negotiate meaning developments, and through which select candidates transform from representing minor celebrities of the political and entertainment spheres into elevated, privileged, quasi-heroic, and venerable personages. Comprising only the initial steps in the election sequence, and with many of the candidates entering the competition having established public identities, it should be noted that legitimation processes in act one are



significant and energetic but necessarily partial in relation to the overall election.

I do not begin my investigation of legitimation processes by presupposing power/knowledge fusion, or by searching for cultural practices of control or correlate manifestations of subversion or resistance. Nor do I begin with the assumption that I am searching for evidence of culture shaping practices that I can then associate with repertoires or cognitive schemas. In a counter-intuitive way, however, the latter approach does represent the seedbed for my leap into interpretivism.

I begin my analysis of act one not with the intent of investigating *culture in action*, but from the premise that *action occurs in culture*. This stands in sharp contrast to the pragmatist tradition in sociology and its currents in cultural sociology that begin by presupposing the ontological primacy and analytic autonomy of action.¹ The social act exists, it is assumed, and the charge of the sociologist is to discern the forces that shaped said act. Epistemological machinery is then set in motion to address the questions: If culture, then how did it shape the doing, and how did it do its shaping?

This point of departure conceals and elides questions such as what are the boundaries of an action's life, or its beginning, middle, and end? How do we know its constitutive features; which features are ancillary, or vestigial? Where does one act end and another begin, and could one act, in fact, be two? Is an action that never occurred still an action? A proletariat revolution in a western industrialized nation is one of the most famous actions in sociological literature, and yet for an action that never took place, sociologists certainly knew a lot about what one would have and what one would not have looked like. Upon what did sociologists draw to make these determinations?

My point is not that actions do not exist in real or in narrative form. My point is that the making of these determinations represent interpretive moments, and that actions are, in fundamental ways, attributions of interpretation. Action in doing and action in representation are inextricably linked. And they are both inextricably linked to meaning and interpretation. In this article, I train a robust interpretivism on the 2016 presidential election to exemplify an *action in culture* perspective. Political actors and citizen-audiences construct and contest

¹ Anne Kane (1991) argues that understanding culture's relation to the social requires attributing to it two kinds of autonomy, analytic, and concrete. Analytic autonomy represents culture's structure, content, and form, as organized and ordered by endogenous forces that are irreducible to social structural or cognitive and psychological factors. Concrete autonomy refers to culture's interconnection with social life in any particular historical moment. I borrow this term from Kane to argue that pragmatist formulations, in practice, presuppose that action exists and unfolds in a pure and unadulterated form and that it is sociology's job to determine which forces, institutions, and motives then lend it additional shape and direction. My argument is that specifying an action and delimiting it represent interpretive processes of construction and classification, which necessarily renders the real, nude, unadulterated, autonomous act a product of the cultural forces of narration, semiosis, and emplotment in discourse.

legitimation processes in a symbolic universe they neither created nor control, and they do so in both deeply familiar and in highly creative ways.

Theory, Method, Data

There is a lot of scholarship on presidential elections. Within this universe, the question that exerts the most gravitational force is how to explain electoral outcomes. The question looms in the background even in studies that do not explicitly set out to explain how or why particular candidates triumphed over their competitors. We can map this universe of election studies, if partially, by identifying vibrant clusters within it, and organizing them in terms of two features: how they frame their explanatory aims, and how centrally cultural dimensions feature in their explanations (see online Appendix). Mechanistic and economistic assumptions permeate much of this work.

With this article I contribute a strong cultural approach, or one in which symbolic content, form, and process play pivotal roles in my explanation. My aim is not to explain the election's outcome, however; at the time of this writing the two major parties have yet to formally name their nominees. Nor is my aim to predict the election winner. The parties' nominees and the election's outcome remain contingent. The cultural conditions in which the remaining candidates will craft their performances, and under which voters will interpret their messages and craft their voting decisions, however, do not. My aim is to give a structural hermeneutic analysis (Alexander and Smith, 2003; Smith, 2005: Ch. 2) of these conditions. I also aim to give a cultural pragmatic (Alexander, 2004) interpretation of two key performances in act one, with the intention of demonstrating how performances fit into and contribute to structural hermeneutic investigations.

In my investigation I lean heavily on the semiotic and hermeneutic analyses of Roland Barthes and Clifford Geertz. These figures excelled at identifying durable cultural codes and powerful symbols that shape expectations and motives, actions, and institutions, and in their theoretical and methodological tracts, they demonstrated that the exercise of specifying symbolic patterns produces findings and insights unobtainable by alternative methods.

My analysis is guided by Geertz's two prominent concepts of culture: a structural or semiotic one, in which he portrays culture as a symbolic context organized by public, socially available codes that can be thickly described (1973b); and a second one in which he conceives of culture as an assemblage of texts amenable to hermeneutic methods of analysis (1973a). Geertz uses these tools to render phenomena such as a murderous sheep raid and cockfights as points of intersection, or nexuses, at which apparent antinomies shift and dissolve. As cockfights vary from shallow to deep play, for instance, betting shifts from metrics of utility to those of "esteem, honour, dignity, respect"



(1973a, p. 433). A critical point for Geertz, however, is that money continues to “matter and matter very much” (ibid. 434). It is *meaning*, Geertz demonstrates, that explains the coexistence of, and shifts in register between, utility and disutility, rationality and irrationality, and the cognitive and the visceral. Focusing on meaning allays pressures and impulses toward one-dimensional explanations; it has the capacity to account for competing epistemological positions, ones that might pit ideal against material interests, or instrumental to value rational motives, for instance, without reducing one to the other, or forsaking one for the other.

What does Geertz’s interpretive approach uncover? A hermeneutic analysis of the cockfight illuminates its central feature, Geertz argues: “its use of emotion for cognitive ends.” It is of the emotions generated by cockfights that “society is built and individuals are put together,” Geertz maintains. He explains:

Attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what his culture’s ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in the symbolics of a single such text; and – the disquieting part – that the text in which this revelation is accomplished consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits (ibid. 449).

I analyze key events in act one of the 2016 presidential campaign drama in this spirit. Events such as the Iowa State Fair, the first Republican debate, and Hillary Clinton’s testimony before the House Select Committee on Benghazi, demonstrate in concentrated form this culture’s ethos, or to put it another way, the most powerful discourses currently dueling to constitute the community’s sense of identity and trajectory. Building on Geertz, I argue that audiences experience these events, and the myriad of occurrences between them, through a kind of hermeneutic negotiation between private sensibility and publicly performed national culture.

While these performances, too, represent the use of emotion for cognitive ends, they are also more than that. These fighting cocks, so to speak, are not hacking one another mindlessly to bits. Rather, the candidates’ performances represent a particularly interesting intersection of cultural ethos and private sensibility precisely because they are scripted, rehearsed, and delivered so intently. They are interesting because they are designed meticulously, and because part of the intention behind their design is precisely to hit emotional and cognitive registers in their audience members. The fighting cocks, the real ones, neither craft representations nor fret over the aesthetics of their efforts. Presidential candidates and their teams of strategists, on the other hand, do a kind of lay structural hermeneutics of the cultural moment in effort to craft scripts that will resonate more powerfully and with more people than the scripts of their competitors. They strive to represent the ethos singularly; through script

and performance, they seek to transform themselves into representations of the ethos cast in embodied, material form.

My argument's cultural sensibility is also motivated by Barthes's distinction between the denotative and connotative dimensions of photographs and images. In "The Photographic Message," Barthes (1977a) explains that the photograph pretends to communicate its message simply, innocently, and without distortion or interference. The photo seems to be a message without a code: "What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality" (ibid, 16–7). The viewer needs no instructions or training in order to arrive at its meaning, it seems. Barthes calls this the denotative message. He then demonstrates that photographs communicate connotatively as well, or that their meanings are produced through sign relations in two ways. Meaning is produced through relations between the objects that are visibly presented on the image's surface, and meaning is produced through relations the visible objects have with others objects not presented in the picture, as well (Jakobson, 1990[1956]; Barthes, 1990[1967]). The key to decoding Barthes's point (i.e., decidedly not a message without a code) is "the arbitrary nature of the sign": we must accept that the objects are semiotic signs, or visible signifiers whose meanings, or signifieds, are not reflections of their visible surfaces, but the product of their relations of similarity and difference to other signs in the sign system.

Far too many election studies treat variables such as the economy, peace, policy, demographic identity, and the candidates and their campaign platforms themselves denotatively, or as if they were like photographs whose meanings were simple reflections of visible and easily understood objects. These studies stop at denotation. My intervention is designed to move political analysis toward connotation. My argument is that these phenomena are not only sites composed of dense layers of signs, or complex sign formations, but that they are particularly popular sites at which narration and performances are aimed. Neither the means by which they generate and project meaning; nor their meanings themselves, or what is called their contents; nor even their forms, or the boundaries demarcating what is included in the variables or phenomena and what is excluded; none of these are simple, singular, or inert. And yet, to paraphrase Barthes (1977b: 45), in much election research, the denoted *variable* naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation, which is extremely dense, especially in *politics*.

In "Photography and Electoral Appeal," Barthes (1999[1957]) examines the photographs with which mid-century candidates for Parliament had begun to adorn their electoral prospectuses, or documents on which they presented their qualifications and plans for serving in office. Barthes decodes the poses, and argues that what "is transmitted through the photograph of the candidate are not his plans, but his deep motives, his family, mental, even erotic circumstances, all this style of life of which he is at once the product, the example and



the bait” (ibid. 91). The photographs project a candidate’s image, but they also serve as a mirror, one that “offers to the voter his own likeness, but clarified, exalted, superbly elevated into a type” (ibid). The photos and the prospectuses communicate “a ‘manner of being,’ a socio-moral status,” and demonstrate the “irrational” underpinnings of representative politics. For Barthes, cultural codes and symbols are highly effective, yet their effect is rooted in not just in registers of the cognitive but in those of the moral as well. My argument builds upon this understanding.

Barthes’s essay, “Photography and Electoral Appeal,” contributes twice, as it were. In addition to offering a theory of how signification shapes the political landscape by pervading relations between power-seekers and voters, it also presents a brief interpretation of the rise in postwar France of the populist insurgent, Pierre Poujade. Barthes argues that Poujade ascended the national stage by sacrificing the politics of pragmatic problem solving on the altar of public performance: “It is well known that this antithesis,” wherein image overtakes and displaces substance, “is one of the major myths of Poujadism (Poujade on television saying: ‘*Look at me: I am like you*’”) (ibid. 91, italics in original). Performing from a script about the common man and his everyday woes, Poujade presented himself as representative of the shopkeeper, a figure who was being made to suffer by the indifference and ineptitude of the political elite. Barthes quotes Poujade as saying:

France is stricken with an overproduction of men with diplomas, polytechnicians, economists, philosophers, and other dreamers who have lost all contact with the real world, (Barthes, 1997[1979]: 52).

A precipitous tipping of the scales of style and substance, and an indictment of experts and intellectuals; the conditions and discourse approximate those that have animated and fueled Trumpist populism.

Barthes uses the case of Poujade to illustrate theory and method. He finds that Poujade’s discourse replicates the logic of the accountant’s general ledger: balance is its animating ethos, the production and restoration of equilibrium its *raison d’être*. All is presumed to be quantifiable, and the rules of calculation are the principles from which the terms of critique and judgment are derived. The discourse encourages flat, horizontal thinking that, trapped in a closed system of binarism, is blind to avenues of transformation and transcendence. Guided by a “morality of the retort” (ibid. 51), in this *langue* or discursive structure, any *parole* or talk that “risks substituting an explanation for a retort” is deemed illegitimate or “null and void” (ibid. 53). Barthes concludes that the ultimate consequence of this interpretive structure is the “refusal of alterity, the negation of the different, the euphoria of identity, and the exaltation of ‘kind,’” and in it he saw the “specific symptom of all fascisms” (ibid. 53).

We can begin to see affinities between Poujadist discourse and that which informed Trump's talk in act one: e.g., Trump exchanges the accountant for a dealmaker, and conceives of order as the product of negotiations predicated on unpredictability and impulse; he eliminates and reduces pathways of action by asserting that "we have no choice, we have no choice," such as when he announced that the US must ban all Muslims from entering the country (Dec 7, 2015)²; and his dominant and most frequently remarked upon rhetorical strategy is the retort, which is typically delivered via the 140 character tweets. The technique fuses with his character, particularly when he constitutes himself in terms such as, "I am counter-puncher." I use Barthes's analysis of Poujadism to develop a discourse analysis of the language and talk in act one, and to indicate how these structures and practices open particular paths of interpretation while foreclosing others.

My method involves identifying and interpreting signs, symbols, codes, narratives, and performances via the semiotic and hermeneutic tools articulated by figures like Geertz, Barthes, and Alexander and Smith, and my data are online media. The term "online media" represents a phenomenon that is in constant flux. I use the term here to mean that I accessed all of my data with a computer. The data were content that contained talk, text, or performance about or by the presidential candidates, political commentators, or everyday people engaging in some form of political activity. My data sources were videos of candidates' campaign events and press conferences, materials from network and cable news programs, AM talk radio, newspapers, websites principally dedicated to covering politics, and lay persons' statements and commentary, which was available in most online platforms' comments sections, as well as in video and radio content from platforms that encourage audiences to call-in and voice their opinions.

I started the project by following campaign news and commentary in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*; watching the *PBS NewsHour* on youtube, and paying particular attention to the Friday political commentary segments featuring columnists Mark Shields and David Brooks; watching campaign rallies and events on C-SPAN.org; watching C-SPAN's morning show, *Washington Journal*, which surveys newspaper articles that discuss topics the show will address that episode, and which features guests and experts as well as viewer call-in segments.

C-SPAN.org is an indispensable resource for performance analysis. The site streams live video of a tremendous number of campaign events and news conferences, and it makes the content available in archival form for future and repeat viewings. The organization produces enough video of each of the candidates to enable one to discern how the candidates matured or failed to

² See <http://www.c-span.org/video/?401762-1/presidential-candidate-donald-trump-rally-mount-pleasant-south-carolina>.



mature in their performances over time. In its mission statement, C-SPAN claims that it aims to “employ production values that accurately convey the business of government rather than distract from it.”³ When this ethos is applied to filming campaign events, it results in content captured by a single camera maintaining a static shot. It also translates into breaking the standard time boundaries of the staged event, by capturing random anonymous people milling about the event space prior to the show, for instance, and by allowing the camera to linger on the attendees after the main event has ended.

From these initial resources I turned to aggregate sites such as *realclearpolitics.com*, which was also a resource for polling results and trends, and *drudgereport.com*; news and analysis sites such as *Politico.com*; discussion forums like *reddit.com* and its subreddits such as */r/the_donald*, */r/sandersfor-president*, and */r/hillaryclinton* as well as */r/AnybodyButHillary*; video of all of the debates, Sunday morning interviews and roundtable discussions, and clips from cable television news programs made available via *youtube.com* and *realclearpolitics.com*’s video webpage. I watched the parties’ debates on *youtube.com*.

While I began with these resources, part of the methodological journey of writing this article involved exploring the greater online media universe, striving to identify its form, and searching for its outer limits. This exploration was spurred foremost by signs of fracturing within the GOP, a splintering dynamic that appeared first between its intellectual elite and its more populist and popular representatives on cable television and AM radio, and second, between its party elite and its voter base. To identify voices of opposition within the party, or the ones that were not making it to television or mainstream newspapers, I searched for conservative online forums and blogs. In these spaces, I began to detect unanticipated references and to note repetitions of phrases and symbols, all of which began to illuminate this media universe’s referential and citational character as well as its tribalism (features which are certainly not exclusive to conservative online forums).

I began to query participants in online forums – on the subreddit */r/the_donald*, for instance – about where they were turning for news and opinion. Ultimately, however, this pulled me away from my research goal, which was to represent not the periphery but the centers around and through which the US was organizing – or, had been organizing, at least – its drama of democracy. I analyze and represent the splintering, but I do so by hermeneutically reconstructing it from the perspective of the commentators who have had the most interpretive and constitutive power to date. As a consequence, most of the data presented here are from fairly mainstream figures, or from people who

³ See <https://www.c-span.org/about/mission/>.

have name recognition, and what I will call performative recognition, to the vast majority of players involved in narrating these events.⁴

Analysis

Act one's structural and performative features

Every four years the US holds a presidential election on the Tuesday following the first Monday of November. Election Day is the dramatic focal point of the competition for office, the day on which citizen-audiences enter the action and resolve the plot by determining its outcome and naming a winner. The election drama opens when aspirants begin formally announcing their candidacies, which, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, means as early as the spring and early summer months of the year preceding the election.

Senator Ted Cruz declared his candidacy in March 2015 and Senator Marco Rubio announced in mid-April, while former Governor of Florida Jeb Bush, and real estate mogul and reality television personality Donald Trump, waited until June to enter the race for the Republican nomination. Hillary Clinton announced her bid for the Democratic nomination in mid-April. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont stepped into the media spotlight to challenge the former Secretary of State at the end of the month, shortly after the symbol “TPP,” or the abbreviation for the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement, entered political news discourse. The *New York Times* web feature, “First Draft,” reported that, “Hillary Clinton [is] expected to treat Bernie Sanders Gingly” (Haberman, 2015). While the posture seemed commonsensical in spring, its shrewdness would come under scrutiny as the Clinton team entered the summer months, when they would anxiously sweat through reports of Sanders’s meteoric rise and his impressive, crowd-pleasing performances.

This timing, from spring 2015 to November 2016, gives this particular presidential election drama a minimum of a twenty month run in the theater of

⁴ Many of these resources, from established institutions like the *New York Times*, to newer, web-only blog sites like RedState.com and Breitbart.com, offer newsletter subscriptions, which consist of daily emails containing titles and brief descriptions of the site’s articles and commentary, and links to other content available at the site. I created a gmail account and subscribed to receive newsletters from the sites listed here as well as a few others. These emails combined to create in my inbox an archive of the campaign contest’s news coverage. The archive facilitated a structural hermeneutic analysis in unexpected ways. For instance, browsing it swiftly and repeatedly produced an effect like that of a flip book, in which players in the drama appeared as stick figures entering, moving about, and exiting the stage. Browsing the archive like this cultivated recognition of the drama’s syntagmatic development and flow, or of how signs were developing and shifting meaning as the events unfolded. Being a series of emails filled with hyperlinks to texts, videos, audio podcasts, and user comments, the archive allowed for pausing the “flipping” of the flip book pages in order to focus in on a particular episode or event. As such, the emails contained links to materials that facilitated building a paradigmatic or cross-sectional analysis.

national news. The cycle's extended duration has become part of the narrative of presidential elections, part of the national consciousness, and like money's outsized role in politics, this feature is typically bemoaned by media critics and citizens alike.⁵ This lengthy run has a twofold impact on the process as drama. On the one hand, it makes the production's general themes and central characters broadly familiar to all but those who most diligently avoid media. On the other, it cultivates a sense that the proceedings have a momentum of their own, which in turn lends the production outsized autonomy from the audience, and feeds the representation of an exclusive "establishment."

The players, narrators, and critics in and around the competition work ceaselessly to establish a relationship with the drama's intended audience, and they insist that this relationship, and this drama, is of utmost importance. In its entirety, this dramatic production comprises hundreds of performances, and the spaces between are filled with reviews, rundowns of the latest opinion polls, and projections. Running for almost two years, and populated by the nation's political elite and the stars of its news outlets, it is a production akin to having an ardent high school student council produce the Oscars: it is bound to alienate, jade, or simply bore, if only intermittently, all but the most invested and the most ironic.

The election cycle's first act runs from early spring, through the summer, and into early fall, a period during which candidates filter onto stage and begin to emplot (Ricoeur, 1988) themselves in the drama. Media professionals and opinion-makers contribute mightily to this construction of characters and to assembling an architecture of the dramatic field. Throughout the summer, the networks' Sunday morning news programs perform both functions within each episode: conducting one-on-one interviews with the candidates, and following these interviews with 'round table' discussions in which members of the opinion-maker class diagnose the candidates' strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis one another and the electorate's mood. During this period, candidates situate themselves in relation to one another in terms of their biographical, professional, and ideological similarities and differences. They also begin to construct, in the broadest terms possible, plotlines that they believe will lend them an advantage in the competition. Bernie Sanders's entry into the race, and his use of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement to define himself in relation to Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party base, illuminates the performative tensions involved in character and plot development processes.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership entered political news discourse in March 2015, when treaty negotiations between the Obama administration and eleven countries were coming to a close. The Obama administration and supporters of

⁵ For a sampling of articles and commentary complaining about the extended length of the US election cycle, see MacGillis (2015), Parlapiano (2015), Colagrande (2015), Kurtzleben (2015), and Rikeus (2016).

the accord were seeking to “fast track” the bill, which would enhance the President’s control over the treaty and reduce Congress’s role to an up or down vote. Sanders began appearing on cable news channels such as CNN in mid-April, calling the TPP a “Trojan horse” piece of legislation that threatened US workers. While he only announced with certainty that he was running to become the Democratic presidential nominee on April 30, he began jockeying for position weeks prior, making statements designed to force Hillary Clinton to narrow the terms by which she could proclaim herself a Democrat; e.g., “This is one you can’t waffle. You’re either for the T.P.P or against it,” Sanders insisted throughout April (Chozick, 2015).

As mentioned, while act one is predominantly devoted to character development, candidates also engage in plot construction, but only in the broadest of terms. Their goal is to cultivate solidarity, and to build in voters a sense of identification with oneself and one’s mission. Initially, solidarity is best won through abstract statements, through simple declarations of belonging and fellow-feeling. These consist of simple performatives about identity: “we are alike, together we make a team, and I will lead this team.” This basis of solidarity is tenuous as, by design, it contains few specified ingredients that sustain the social stickiness. Yet this discursive mode is tremendously powerful and strategically advantageous, as it draws the boundaries of one’s solidarity sphere as widely as possible; it includes many while excluding few. Through abstract performatives candidates construct sinews of meaning that build identification. By keeping them general in content, the candidate preserves a wide universe of maneuverability, and retains a position from which she can narrow the boundaries of her inclusion by specifying with whom she agrees and from whom she insists on difference, should she see advantage in specifying and narrowing at a later date.

Abstract performatives also derive their power through their relative impermeability to challenge and contradiction. It is difficult for a competitor to assert that a candidate has contradicted herself when she makes such statements as, “I am an American and I am a Democrat, and I will lead the Democratic Party to victory in November.” It is far easier to press one’s opposition into a dramatic bind when she issues a more specific, detailed performative statement, such as “This TPP sets the gold standard in trade agreements to open free, transparent, fair trade” (Carroll, 2015), as then Secretary of State Clinton made in Australia in 2012.

Competition for popular support precipitates stronger avowals of solidarity along narrower boundaries and increasingly exclusionary criteria. Sanders used Clinton’s statement to force the candidate to narrow her solidarity appeals: “She’s going to have to be clear. It’s not a question of watching this. You’re going to have determine which side are you on? Are you on the side of working people who would suffer as a result of this disastrous trade agreement, and



seeing their jobs go to China or Mexico, or are you on the side of corporate America? It's not a very difficult choice" (Acosta, 2015).

Sanders's tactic simplified the symbolic logic such that Clinton could either present herself as a pro-trade Democrat or as a staunch supporter and protector of domestic labor, and effectively eliminated her ability to present herself as representative of both. It forced Clinton to confront a question of how to strategize maximizing solidarity boundaries. On the one hand, she could reassert her support for TPP, and thereby narrow her identity boundaries and shrink her pool of potential supporters, some of whom would likely pledge their solidarity to Sanders as a result. On the other, she could announce that she is no longer in favor of the TPP and that she would reject it if she were elected president.

One consequence remains, however, in so doing she would narrow her identity boundary by moving from "Democrat" to "Democrat who does not favor free trade" of the TPP variety. This choice may enable to the candidate to retain some potential Sanders supporters. However, should she win the party nomination, this choice may cause her to lose the ability to cultivate solidarity with some centrists and undecideds when the drama moves into the general election. Plus, this choice would introduce into the drama additional threats to her character: The costs of appearing to contradict oneself can be high, as these instances erode one's aura of authenticity, and can stir into the air sign associations of waffling, flip-flopping, trimming, or of "being for something before you were against it," which is the pathway Clinton chose.

Audiences and collective mood

Act one contains an air of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin, 1968) and the anti-structural (Turner, 1995[1965]). Candidates enter the stage at uneven times. People join the contest for reasons other than trying to win the presidency, such as to raise awareness of particular social issues or to try to move party agendas in particular directions. Yet, while the stage in act one becomes increasingly crowded and chaotic, its action receives less media coverage and commands less attention than the drama's subsequent acts. Television viewership ratings typically decline during the summer months; kids are out of their school routines and into their summer ones, the days are longer, and people take vacations, including politicians and media professionals. News that commands national attention during this time tends to be event- or oddity-driven, like 2001s "summer of shark attacks." The effect is akin to public access television; it contains acts of varying degrees of preparedness and skill, there are some familiar faces as well as some new ones, and hardly anyone is tuning in anyway.

Act one tends not to be nationalized. While the election drama establishes a spot in the nightly national news, those who pay the closest attention to these stories are the same citizens who are the subject of the media attention; they are

older, whiter, and they more strongly identify with a party than general election voters. Iowa and New Hampshire feature prominently in the first act. Candidates need not win either, let alone both, the New Hampshire primary and the Iowa caucus, but they must place in the top two or three in order to retain the interpretive framework of representing true contenders for their party's nomination. Thus, in act one candidates orient primarily to these states' voters. They devote considerable resources to cultivating an identity in each, and to building relationships with their voters. Being physically present in the state, meeting with people face to face, is valued highly. It facilitates the legitimization process and the production of authenticity. The net effect of these factors is that, in effort to build solidarity with these voters and to become their ideal representation of the party, candidates are pulled toward avowing more particularistic identities and making narrower, more specific policy claims than will serve them well should they survive to face the broader, more diverse general electorate in the following November.

On television, national political events typically show well-groomed candidates, wearing well-tailored suits, standing behind lecterns on a set that is predominantly painted, lit, or digitally rendered a shade of the national flag's Old Glory Blue, a shade that should be called electric-political blue. Splashes of red and white adorn the set, the candidates' lapels, and the digital layer added between the liveness on stage and the home viewer's eyes.

Act one, to the contrary, features scenes from the sun-washed fairgrounds of Iowa, and the white pine-encircled lawns of New Hampshire, the very juxtaposition of which punctures the sterility of the archetypical national political event and accentuates local textures and peculiarities from which the national is assembled and abstracted. The candidates are surrounded not by the antiseptic, rationalized spaces of the professional political playing field, but by fleshy Americans. Skin is visible. Candidates and citizens touch one another; they shake hands and huddle together for selfies.

Scenes from New Hampshire are built of candidates speaking to small gatherings of people in sparsely but patriotically festooned wooden barns, for instance. Candidates may cultivate a sense of identification between their audience members and themselves by substituting a sweater or flannel shirt into their rotation of suits, or signal their approachability by wearing a blazer without a tie. They wear the costume of New Hampshire Yankee reserve. On the other hand, Iowa lends act one an air of the carnivalesque by literally putting on a carnival. The Iowa State Fair levels the typical material and symbolic boundaries that separate the powerful from the people. The future president of the United States confronts the choice of having one's meat-on-a-stick bacon-wrapped or battered and deep fried. They may be shown navigating around animal dung, or photographed next to a golden calf carved out of 600 lb of butter.



Act one in 2015 made inroads toward becoming nationalized, in terms of increased media coverage and broader public attention, due in no small part to scenes such as the following:

Hillary Rodham Clinton was strolling [the Iowa fairgrounds] on Saturday... when the whirring sound of helicopter blades approached, then grew louder, then louder still.

“Look up in the sky!” Greta Tarbell, 63, cried out. “There’s Trump! He’s got his own helicopter. Have at it, baby!”

The black chopper with bold white letters spelling T-R-U-M-P circled the fairgrounds once. Then twice. Then a third time. The Donald had arrived (Rucker and Johnson 2015).

Summer 2015 had found its shark. Commentators named the electorate’s mood, anti-establishment.

Enter Donald Trump

The first Republican primary debate

One of the earliest indications that the drama was being nationalized, if only fractionally, occurred a week prior to Hillary and Donald’s outings to the state fair. On August 6, Fox News Channel staged act one’s first televised primary debate featuring the Republican Party’s ten highest polling candidates. The event was conducted in the Quicken Loans Arena in Cleveland, Ohio, the same performance space where Republicans would hold their national convention eleven months later, in July 2016, at which the party would name its official nominee to contend for the presidency in the general election.

The debate smashed television viewership records. Approximately 24 million people tuned in, making it the most-watched presidential primary debate ever, and the most viewed non-sports event in cable television history (Steinberg, 2015).⁶ Fox News hosts Megyn Kelly, Bret Baier, and Chris Wallace played the moderators. The audience was rowdy and boisterous from the outset. Kelly introduced the candidates. “Positioned on the stage by how they stand in the polls,” she beamed, “in the center of the stage tonight, business man, Donald Trump.” The camera framed Trump straight on. He waved hello with his right hand, the crowd erupted, and the candidate mouthed a semi-audible “thank

⁶ To put into context the level of interest the event generated: the first Republican debate in 2011 drew 3.2 million viewers, and cable television’s most-watched series, Monday Night Football on ESPN, averages 13.4 million viewers per game (Koblin, 2015). Compared to other television events that blend the conventions of political analysis and entertainment, the debate far eclipsed Jon Stewart’s farewell episode of *The Daily Show*, which aired the same night, hit the airwaves as the debate was drawing to a close, and garnered the attention of 3.5 million viewers (Steinberg and Kissell, 2015).

you, thank you.” Broadcasting audio from off-screen, a chuckle from Chris Wallace could be heard accenting the audience’s hoots and applause.

Following the remaining introductions, Bret Baier segued the production into its question and answer sequence by first posing a question to the entire group. Were there any candidates unwilling to sign a pledge to support the Party’s ultimate choice for the Republican nomination, and if so, Baier requested, please raise your hand. The issue implicated the candidates’ loyalty and obedience to the party, forced them to clarify their political identities, and to reveal their degrees of solidarity with the clan. And it elevated the legitimation process into deep play (Geertz, 1973a).

This opening choreography generated degrees of emotional intensity and on-stage energy that far exceed levels typical of presidential debates. It also reiterated the centrality of Donald Trump. It established, even more clearly than before, that this was Trump’s stage, that he was the lead, and that the drama that followed would be the story of Trump.

As Baier initiated his question his voice was accompanied by a rising wave of cacophony from the audience. The camera shifted from Baier to a shot of the entire stage taken from stage right, giving the television audience a view of all ten candidates fanned across the screen. Nine stood motionless. At center, Trump leaned forward, and in a comedic gesture glanced down the row of candidates to his right, as if checking to see if any hands had been raised. Everyone in the arena knew that Trump was the only candidate refusing to sign the pledge. It was a moment designed for the antics of a showman and a jester. As Baier neared the end of his question, noise from the audience receded into silence. Trump raised his right hand. The audience howled and booed, to which Trump responded by adding his left hand, so that he stood before them with both arms out, hands extended and palms up. With the one hand, Trump had identified himself as the rebel, the individual, the autonomous agent onstage. With the second hand, Trump had gestured, so be it, this is me, take me as I am. As the audience continued its challenge, Trump performed again his two armed, palms-up pose, simultaneously declaring his self-satisfaction and his demand that the audience love him just as he is (Figure 1).

In the seconds that followed, Trump briefly revealed a capacity for vulnerability. Baier began speaking again, and the television production returned to a direct shot of Trump, revealing that his typical expression, whereby his mouth rests between frown and scowl, had morphed into an assertive smirk. He started to mouth a word, but failed to deliver even a full syllable. It was a brief, singular glimpse of the candidate discombobulated. Trump snapped back to composure quickly, and before Baier had finished summarizing the implications of the candidate’s raised hand, Trump was speaking over him in a measured, even tone, saying “I fully understand,” and pausing, “I fully understand.”



Figure 1: Candidate Donald Trump at the first Republican presidential primary debate, held on August 6, 2015, in Cleveland, Ohio. John Minchillo, Associated Press (Color online).

The reply Trump delivered next may have been scripted, but it showed no trace of it. He spoke as if extemporaneously. The flow of his words revealed no rehearsed spaces for stops or pauses, no patterned and practiced place-holders for emphasis, or conversely, for intimations of interior vulnerability, or spaces other candidates might script for communicating splashes of biography and intimacy.

As the debate settled into its turn-taking flow of question and answer, question and answer, Carson, then Rubio, and then Bush replied to their first queries with responses that smacked of picked over scripts and multiple rehearsals. Whereas in his delivery Trump projected the flow of uninhibited speech, the flow of words coming from the other candidates betrayed the cadence of written monologues. They appeared well-rehearsed both substantively, in terms of what they said, as well as stylistically, in how they did their saying: their words flowed from comma to comma, short pause, from comma to period, longer pause, to comma, and so forth (Bush, groomed in the Bush style of diction, being the exception). Trump, for instance, started his first full answer with the words, “I cannot say I have to respect the person that, if it’s not me, the person that wins. If I do win and I’m leading by quite a bit, uh, that’s what I want to do.” Rubio, by contrast, started with the words, “Let me begin by saying...,” and delivered them as if he had begun with this response dozens of times before. It rang of practiced, and the practice dimension had never fallen away such that the performance might approach the rhythm of skilled but unpremeditated speech.

Before the debate’s first break, Trump interrupted Megyn Kelly as she charged him with having a history of sexist language. Trump interjected, a

single finger raised, “only Rosie O’Donnell.” The audience erupted with laughter, and as Kelly tried to re-establish her question, Trump spoke over her, saying “thank you” to the crowd, as if he were a comedian building intimacy with his fans during his set. He responded to Kelly’s charge, stating, “I’ve been challenged by many people and frankly I don’t have time for total political correctness, and to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time either. This country is in big trouble. We don’t win anymore.” The audience adored him for it. Trump worked the room for the remainder of the evening. He joked and delivered asides. He grew angry, and routinely set his right arm into motion, chopping at and puncturing the air around him. He pointed.

The production’s staging and choreography combined with Trump’s words and comportment to project powerful representations of an autonomous and authentic character. He was named a rebel at the outset when he was prompted to raise his hand. He commanded center stage, and was spoken to and spoken about more than any figure alongside him. He claimed that what he spoke he knew with certainty; that it was truth, and that he truly felt what he expressed. He claimed that his thoughts and feelings were just like those of his audience, only better. Thus by speaking them, he simultaneously asserted that he was authentic, or that he did not hide anything within him, and that he was brave, because he alone was willing to speak what others also thought but dared not voice. The production combined with Trump’s discourse and performative stylings to cultivate dimensions of charisma (Smith, 2000). Trump used his performative power, and played his character with force and swagger. The audience listened, watched, interpreted. Over the course of the debate, a considerable portion exchanged its howls of disapproval for cheers of rapturous adoration. If one accepts the candidate’s premises, the characterization falls within the rubric of what could make for a compelling leader. Between performer and audience, legitimation was underway.

Collective representations and comportment

Presidential candidates aspire to lead an entire nation, one composed of a multitude of groups, each formed around shared identity traits, and held together by varying degrees of solidarity. The nation comprises individuals whose selves represent varieties of combinations of these identities. The challenge for candidates seeking office under these conditions is to signal both identification and distance, both membership and autonomy, from these various identity spheres. Candidates must appeal to particular identities and signal solidarity with them, and they must distance themselves from others. Yet to signal the capacity to lead the entire collectivity, a candidate must perform the contradictory act of simultaneously embracing particularistic identities while signaling a capacity to transcend them as well. Candidate Obama, for instance, had to negotiate the boundary of race, and to signal a connection with the African American community while also performing his autonomy from it



(Alexander, 2010). Put another way, a candidate must indicate that she has the capacity to understand and identify with a group's basis of solidarity while not being beholden to it. And to make it even more challenging, the candidate must appear to walk the boundaries between these social spheres with authenticity.

Donald Trump, however, played by a different script, one carved not from typical discourse of the political sphere but one cobbled together from television and movie treatments of leaders and the political process. Commentators such as Mark Shields (*PBS NewsHour*, 2015a) noted that he seemed to be part Howard Beale, the unhinged television news personality in *Network* (1976). In the film's defining scene, Beale claims to speak what should be obvious to any right-thinking individual: "I don't have to tell you things are bad. Everybody knows things are bad... They're crazy." Solutions are not to be pursued through detailed discussions about the problems; "first," Beale instructs his TV audience, "you've got to get mad," exhorting viewers to shout out of their windows, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" Others, such as Eliza Berman (2015; see also Douthat, 2015) of *Time.com*, commented that in Trump they saw dimensions of Bob Roberts (1992), the titular character in Tim Robbins's representation of a Senatorial candidate who is both a wealthy businessman and an entertainer, as well as "something of an American fascist in the making." In the movie, candidate Roberts presents himself as a winner who can clean up the mess that past and present politicians, all failures, have created. He traffics in American nativism and nostalgia as well, performing at his campaign events his folksongs, "Retake America," "Times are Changin' Back," and "Complain."

Trump also projected the persona he inhabited in his reality television show, *The Apprentice*, which aired 14 seasons, and was been broadcast on NBC from 2004 to 2015.⁷ In the show Trump plays himself, which he presents as an authoritative, boardroom boss-like figure, one who speaks in simple characterizations and declarations, with "you're fired" being his signature phrase.

In these references, we see these fictional characters, and the broader themes they represent – from voicing anger and initiating a reckoning, on the one hand, to the dangers of charisma and callowness of the electorate, on the other – shaping public interpretations of Trump and his campaign while the drama is developing and unfolding. When Shields, Berman, and many untold others, recall figures like Beale or Roberts – or Goldwater, Joe McCarthy, or Huey Long – they are bringing to the fore particularly resonant dimensions of the interpretive reservoir of shared signs, or the collective symbolic environment, that texture the social drama as it takes on its form. Many redolent signs within this universe inform our interpretations of Trump, even as they remain unspoken. Whether we explicitly, and with intention, draw upon this

⁷ See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0364782/?ref_nm_flg_slf_42.

environment or not, it is operating on us, suggesting who Trump is *not* like – Henry Fonda’s Young Mr. Lincoln, for instance – and who he is like.

For instance, Trump’s performance in the first Republican debate re-introduced to America a character who could start and stop a machine with the pound of his fist, and could attract women to his side with the snap of his fingers. “It’s not a trick,” he once explained, “it’s a gift.” The audience knew that The Fonz would fix the problem, and that they did not need to fully understand how. He was a winner, and he was always in command. The other characters in the show could trust him, as could the audience.

The Fonz was a lead character in the American situation-comedy television show, *Happy Days*, which aired on the ABC network for ten years, from 1974 to 1984. The show was set in 1950s Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Stories were typically set in either the living room and kitchen of the lead family’s suburban home, or in the dining area and men’s bathroom of the local drive-in diner. The show was laden with nostalgia for the simple troubles and sincere pleasures of small city life in mid-century America. The cast was largely white, and most of the show’s dialogue was spoken by teenage boys. When Trump says he is going to “Make America Great Again,” *Happy Days* approximates the collective representation he is conjuring.

The Fonz was a liminal figure in this universe. He was older than the teens but younger than their parents. He was an outsider who was always around, and he was clearly loved, respected, and admired by the other characters. He was a problem solver. A central feature of his character, however, was that he had a capacity for violence. When it appeared in the plot, it would be directed at temporary characters introduced to harass and bully the show’s teenage leads. The Fonz would intervene as the teens’ protector. He would stand up to the bullies, and his aura of potential menace would prompt the bad guys to yield and surrender. When The Fonz performed his capacity for violence, its lifespan was short, and, being mobilized in the service of justice, it was followed by applause. Trump and Fonzie are far from identical. Yet both figures perform an exaggerated masculinity, for instance, and both pretend to fix problems with the equivalent of a wave of the hand. Both project, in and through their bearing, expectations of authority and respect in a manner that is performative in its purest sense. They are both resistant to criticism, and are incapable of apologizing except in a joking manner. In the debate, Trump was angrier and more forceful, and with greater intensity and for longer duration, than The Fonz ever indulged in. Yet Trump was also angrier and more forceful than real political theater will typically indulge.

Why was Trump impervious to this stage’s typical rules of decorum? How did he defuse the punitive and disciplining forces that he set into motion, forces that sought to coral and subdue him, for at least the duration of the drama’s first act? Part of his capacity to evade punishment – i.e., the destruction of his character’s role within this dramatic context – resides in the way he used his body to



Figure 2: The Fonzie examining himself in the mirror on the television show, *Happy Days*. Screenshot from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQc9L2RbQkw> (Color online).

acknowledge, but ultimately resist criticism from others and to dismiss their demands that he engages in self-reflection.

Trump channeled *The Fonzie* most powerfully when his ego was challenged. In the first episode of *Happy Days*, Fonzie enters the men's room of Arthur's diner to find Potsie struggling to unhook a brassiere he had earlier placed on the radiator. Potsie fails, sputters nervous gibberish to Fonzie, and leaves. With the bathroom to himself, *The Fonzie* eyes the undergarment, rubs his fingers together, and as he touches it the brassiere springs open. Fonzie then turns and walks to the mirror to face himself, at which point he raises his hands to comb his hair. He stops himself halfway, however. He lowers his arms a fraction and with hands out and palms up as if to initiate an embrace, he leans back and shakes his head slightly as if to say, "what did you expect, you're perfect just as you are," and then he casually exits the scene (Figure 2).

Through this gesture, Fonzie is forgiving himself for engaging in the act of self-reflection as much as he is engaging in simple narcissism. To reflect is superfluous, particularly if undertaken to analyze and alter oneself. To initiate the act represents a momentary lapse in one's knowing of oneself. It suggests that he forgot who he was, a person who is flawless, and in engaging in reflection, he has insulted, if slightly, himself as sovereign, and as a sovereign. Having initiated the check for flaws, he must apologize and then forgive himself, and thus restore a kind of unity. Inasmuch as it invites, Fonzie's mirror performance is a gesture that commands of its recipient: "Accept the truth as it stands before you, and that truth is I that I am presenting myself to you in my entirety, my inside is the same as I present myself on the outside. What you see is me. I am flawless, and I am to be accepted, and loved... just as I am."

Trump gestured similarly in his debate performance, during moments in which the audience expressed its disapproval, and when moderators asked him

to reconsider his prior statements. Through performing the Fonzie-mirror gesture, Trump was simultaneously acting out a refusal to engage in self critique as well as an insistence that he knows, and we know, and he knows that we know, that he is flawless, if not magical. “It’s not a trick,” he performs, “it’s a gift.”

Asked on *The Graham Norton Show* to explain the phrase, “jump the shark,” film director and former actor on *Happy Days*, Ron Howard, replied:

Well the show had gone and become a number one hit. Very successful. And, along with it, there was sort of a culture around it. The mythology of the Fonzie character, that started off as kind of a normal guy and then he kept getting more and more powerful, tapping on jukeboxes, snapping his fingers, girls would run, everything would happen. And, but audiences loved it. And it was really working.

And so finally they decided that they would start off season, I think it was probably season 5 or 6, with the biggest thing ever. Fonzie was going to waterski and jump over a white shark (light audience laughter). And...we did it.

But people tended to think years later that that was the point where the show had kind of gone beyond the pale. And so then they started saying, you know, that that’s *Happy Days*’s jumping the shark ...moment, that it sort of reached its high, and um sort of came down.

The reality is that it remained a number one show for a long time and after I left the show it was a top ratings getter. So I don’t know how accurate it is, but: jump the shark (-Dec. 4, 2015).

Contemporary lay pop culture criticism poses that this formula worked up until the Fonzie character was set in a plot device so artificial that it defied even the show’s already highly artificial parameters. Yet this was not the case. The show continued for an additional six seasons, five of which it remained in the top 25 most popular shows in Nielsen ratings, and during which Henry Winkler, the actor who played The Fonz, continued to be nominated for and win television awards for best actor in a comedy series.

In early-December 2015, Republican elites are asking themselves when candidate Trump will begin to alienate voters and lose support. When will one of his statements be interpreted by his supporters as so outrageous that it breaches the boundaries of acceptable political discourse and effectively sinks his campaign, they ask. Their question is as much about drama as it is about rational discourse or political and material interests. Some portion of the electorate on the right is cathecting with the character, not being swayed by his



arguments, to the extent that he offers arguments that reach beyond simple binary oppositions of us and them, heroes and villains, winners and losers. Fonzie remained popular well after he jumped that shark.

Rewriting the political script

Trump's plot is that America is in decline because its leaders are stupid losers who have let the cunning leaders of foreign peoples out-negotiate them. Presidential candidates' plots have simple structures. They have a beginning, in which the candidate names a problem; a middle, in which the candidate describes a plan, however broadly, to fix the wrong; and an end, at which point the candidate insists that, once elected, he will fix the problem and restore the nation to its mythical greatness. Trump initiates a plot in similar fashion, by naming a problem. He varies from typical plot form, however, in the middle element; instead of naming a policy or plan, he shifts to character development – to a winner, an experienced manager, and a strong negotiator. He then return to form by closing the plot with the reiteration of his campaign slogan, namely that he will “make America great again.” For instance, when asked to speak in greater detail about the policies he may pursue if elected president, Trump replied:

“Well, I think the press is more eager to see it than the voters, to be honest,” he said. “I think the voters like me, they understand me, they know I’m going to do the job.” ... “But I know the press wants it,” he continued. “I don’t think the people care. I think they trust me. I think they know I’m going to make good deals for them” (Bump, 2015).

If the middle element of the plot is the policy or plan, then in Trump's formulation, the plan is the man, and the man is the plan. Like in the Fonzie-mirror performance, the reflection in the mirror solves the riddle of how what might be wrong will be fixed. Trump will bump it with his fist.

His script dictates that he make inflammatory characterizations of identities who have been marginalized historically but whose claims for greater inclusion and respect have received increased attention in recent years; basically of women, and ethnic, racial, and religious minorities. In most cases, candidate Trump responded to criticism of his comments by initially insisting that he was telling the truth and that he will therefore not apologize. Next he would soften his exclusionary rhetoric by adding caveats, or by insisting that the source of the problem lie with who questioned him or with people misinterpreting him. He would couch these strategies within the central theme of his campaign, that good management and deal-making will reverse the poor decisions the nation's current, stupid leaders have been making.

Trump denigrated Mexican immigrants during his announcement speech (Jun 16), portraying them as a threat to the nation, and adding that “[t]hey’re rapists.” In subsequent exchanges he added that he loved the Mexican people,

that many Mexicans work for his companies, and that he will win the Latino vote in the general election. Next he dismissed the notion that Senator John McCain's prisoner experience during the Vietnam War made him a hero (July 18), but that he liked "people who weren't captured." During an interview on CNN the day after the first Republican debate (Aug 6), in which he was questioned by moderator Megyn Kelly about his history of using sexist language, Trump characterized Kelly's demeanor during the exchange as, "You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever." He later tweeted that "wherever" referred to her "nose," and that "So many 'politically correct' fools in our country. We have to all get back to work and stop wasting time and energy on nonsense!" (Aug 8). He suggested that Carly Fiorina was too ugly to be president (Sept 9). And when he was asked if he would support registering Muslims within the US into a database, he replied that he certainly would (Nov 20). While he initially insisted that the database was not his idea but the interviewer's, Trump later said that tracking techniques were essential if the US wants to prevent the arrival of Syrian refugees, who in videos look to be strong and very powerful men, from turning into a great Trojan horse event (ABC News This Week, 2015). And during a campaign rally in South Carolina in late November, after being challenged for asserting that thousands of Muslims cheered in the streets of New Jersey when the World Trade Centers were destroyed, Trump mocked the reporter who he claimed had documented the celebrations. Trump locked his elbows to his side, raised his forearms, made loose his wrists, and wiggled them about wildly, all while pretending to imitate the reporter's speech by collapsing syllables into one another.

Performing charisma

Examining the biographies and political careers of Adolf Hitler, Winston Churchill, and Martin Luther King Jr., Phil Smith (2000) finds that though these figures were famous for inspiring oratory and captivating performances, they were attributed the status of being charismatic for just brief periods of their lives. Through comparative analysis, Smith describes how each of these figures rose to prominence during periods defined by cultural climates in which the binary symbolic code contrasting good to evil was unusually active and perceived to be deeply threatened and troubled. It was through skillfully performing salvation narratives under these cultural structural conditions, Smith argues, that charismatic authority coalesced around these figures and transformed them into mythical heroes and saviors. As the cultural conditions changed, and the charge that had been animating the binary code of good versus evil abated, Churchill's and King Jr.'s charisma evaporated.

Trump narrated the American community as degraded and humiliated, as being laughed at, and as having had suffered a string of losses. He specified enemies and named threats. Performing exaggerated, clownish, and grotesque



motions, he mimicked enemies with his body. Pointing and slashing downward fiercely in his gestures, he attacked and threatened the enemies with his hands. He insisted that he spoke common sense, or truths that everyone knew but were afraid to speak. He asserted that this indicated he was brave, autonomous, authentic, and rebellious. He commanded that details of problems or plans were inessential, and suggested that requests for details represented efforts to obfuscate and neuter. He was magic, he performed, and his audience must trust in his special capacities. His wealth, after all, should be proof enough that he is in command of unusual powers. And finally, in his grammatically simple speech, he substituted himself in for the state.

One of my aims in this article is to demonstrate how analyzing performances in a manner consistent with cultural pragmatic theory contributes to structural hermeneutic research. In this instance, I have argued that a performance style and technique, enacted within a system of signification that is structured by collective representations, and shared codes and narratives, resulted in the production of dimensions of charisma. My interpretation builds upon Smith's by representing Trump's authority as charisma in its formation, and by conceptualizing it as a partially realized interpretive status that remains entirely susceptible to erosion and collapse. Thus my aim has been to represent performance in a semi-durable cultural milieu but in a way that allows for contingency, or for capturing processes of symbolic formation as well as those that may precipitate its decomposition and dissipation. Trump will likely continue to irritate the good versus evil binary in effort to render it the dominant structure of the election's cultural environment. His opposition will face the difficult challenge of countering his dramatic energy by narrating that things are not all that bad. Habermas argues that legitimacy must ultimately be rooted in some rational justification. Yet rationality is not immune to cultural constitution. When the very representatives of the production of facts are vulnerable to delegitimation processes, their symbols – i.e., the results of their theoretically guided, methodologically performed exercises in research – are susceptible to being easily dismissed and ignored.

Political Parties as Solidarity Spheres: The Right Battles Within

In mid-June, shortly after entering the race for the Republican nomination, Trump began a steady March to the top in Iowa, New Hampshire, and national opinion polls. New Hampshire primary voters have picked the eventual Republican nominee in four of the past six elections. Donald Trump averaged a double digit lead over his competitors in New Hampshire opinion polls from early August to early-December (realclearpolitics.com).

During Trump's rise in the polls, elite conservative opinion-makers, such as *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, shifted their interpretations of the candidate from a figure who represented an unwelcome but minor distraction to

one who posed a threat to the Republican Party's very identity. In mid-July, Trump registered his first mention in the Shields and Brooks segment of the PBS Newshour. Brooks spoke briefly of Trump, "I don't think he's going to get any air... he will just be a sideshow... and barely noticed, except for on a really slow news day" (*PBS NewsHour* 2015b).

What is identified, and what kind of work is being done, when commentators diagnose an electorate's mood as "anti-establishment," and make prognoses about how this affect-collective favors particular characters while placing others at a disadvantage? Through these statements commentators introduce and name a character, the electorate; they attribute to it the property of being a coherent collective entity while simultaneously identifying textures and cleavages within it.

In these types of actions, commentators reflect on particular signs they deem indicative of developments within the dramatic field, signs such as event attendance, opinion polls, and monetary donations, and with these they build plots which detail how each of the characters will fare under these particular conditions as we all move forward, from plot point to plot point – primaries, party nominations, general election – in the drama's overarching narrative flow. While this activity is in part descriptive, and based on collective signs broadly accepted as indicative of a reality, it is also performative; that is, it is a significant tool by which commentators enter the drama and affect change within it without appearing to ever step foot on stage.

Put another way, commentators build the steps of the election staircase as we ascend it, but they do not do so in entirely neutral ways. Naming the important elements to which audiences should attend and should accept as indicative of popular trends, emphasizing some signs while downplaying, dismissing, or leaving others unstated: this is interpretive power, which can, under certain conditions, be converted into constitutive power.

In his initial comment, Brooks emplotted Trump in the drama as effectively having no future in it, or by essentially negating him as a phenomenon. Negation proved infelicitous. A month later, with Trump still leading in the polls, and continuing to keep anti-immigrant discourse at the center of the Republican production, Brooks shifted his efforts from Trump the character to the Republican audience, who, Brooks claimed, had been momentarily seduced but would find its way back home:

What matters is that whether the Republican Party rediscovers where George W. Bush was on immigration, where John McCain was on immigration, where a lot of – where Bob Dole – where a lot of previous nominees have been.

And the party has wandered into an anti-immigration or an anti-immigration reform direction as a result of the rise of the talk radio part



of the party. But that part of the party is waning, frankly, and I think it will be very possible for Jeb Bush or Rubio, whoever the nominee is, to be where McCain was and to be where George W. Bush was.

Those are not ancient history of the Republican Party. The party will rediscover that moment (*PBS NewsHour*, 2015c).

Brooks's framing created a gentle and non-punitive interpretive pathway for the prodigal voter's return. The Republican electorate is constructed as essentially rational. While it was momentarily seduced by the siren song of talk radio, or reality television, the affair has come to a close. Order, whereby the party's central organizing ethos realigns with Brooks's normative ideal of republican conservatism, is in the process of being restored.

A month later, with Trump continuing to lead Republican opinion polls, Brooks shifted to more forceful tactics:

Donald Trump's voters are what they call *low-information voters*. They're classically the kind of people who don't vote in primaries. In some sense, his lead is completely – not completely, but largely artificial (*PBS NewsHour*, 2015d).

Brooks returned to negation: Trump's supporters, Brooks insists, will not play a role in the political drama's central plot points.

A week later, on the *Fox News Sunday* television program, George Will, also an elite opinion-maker on the Right, tried a forceful and blunt approach to dislodging Trump from the representational center of the Republican production. Will embedded the unwanted dramatic element in a counter-narrative, and insisted that it represented something other than it claimed to be. The signs being interpreted as support for Trump did not, in fact, represent a robust anti-establishment mood, or even authentic support for the candidate. Rather, those who were supporting Trump were doing so based on the demands of the dramatic structure; act one necessitates the introduction of a Trump, and that the audience acts out a third version of the carnivalesque and anti-structural, namely, that of "primal scream therapy":

What's going on here is those deemed least qualified to be president are most qualified to do what voters want done today, 160 days before the first votes are cast in Iowa, which is send a message.

That was George Wallace's engaging theme in 1968. He said, "Send them a message," in the end (INAUDIBLE), the pronoun "them" is anything you wanted it to be. So, that's what they're doing.

This is a version of the 1960s fad call primal scream therapy. You're supposed to shout and get rid of all your repressed pain from childhood.

This is particularly so for Mr. Trump and what makes him fragile as a candidate is, first of all, he's a one-trick pony. He consists of saying "I'm rich. Everyone who disagrees with me is stupid and all our problems are simple if you put me in charge.

Second, people haven't yet reminded themselves of the peculiar intimacy we live with our presidents now. They are in our living room every night. They're constantly in the national consciousness.

And third, since we are at the end of this going to send a president, people have to say, "Do we really want to give nuclear weapons to Donald Trump?" – at which point I think things change" (FOX News Sunday, 2015).

Here we see Will name the audience as a character, and narrate how its actions are determined by our location in the dramatic arc; in act one we always hear the primal scream, he suggests.

Will draws to the fore the president's role in political dramas of the twenty-first century, and encourages the Republican electorate to think about having Trump play such an intimate and familiar part in their lives for the next four years. From the merely unpleasant, Will shifts to the cataclysmic, and as if smacking someone's face to restore focus from delusion, he introduces to the story the most potent symbol of presidential power, the nuclear bomb, and insists that people must ask themselves if they want Trump to control such instruments of devastation. In closing Will returns to narrating dramatic structure: "act one, the primal scream phase, comes to a close when people have moved through the steps I have just narrated," he suggests.

Arthur Brooks, president of the conservative think tank, American Enterprise Institute, (no relation to David Brooks), followed Will's comment on the program by reiterating David Brooks' characterization of Trump supporters:

Well, George Will is right. This is a low information, high entertainment, high protest movement. It's summertime. It's the same thing in the movies. It's low information, high entertainment.

And this is what you see. If this persists past Labor Day, it's something for the Republican Party to panic about.



The show's moderator, Chris Wallace, quickly interjected:

Let me interrupt for a moment... because I get e-mails. Maybe you do. But I certainly get e-mails.

And you were saying to me – when you say low information, that just makes people's blood boil. They say this isn't low information. This is a considered judgment. We think the politicians we've elected – you know, the Republican said, give us majority in 2010, 2014, things haven't changed. Barack Obama talked about hope and change. They haven't changed in the right direction.

They say this isn't low information. They've gotten something that you haven't gotten.

In the preceding examples, we see conservative commentators channeling their inner Vladimir Propp or Roland Barthes; they perform a lay structuralism, and through seeking to impose a grammar on the narrative (Barthes, 1977c), they do their structuralism performatively, in hopes of making their interpretations a reality.

While political commentators such as Brooks and Will have tremendous constitutive power in terms of crafting and disseminate their narratives about party, politics, and nation, their voices are not determinative. In addition, the legitimacy with which they wield their power and occupy their roles has eroded considerably in the opening decade and a half of the twenty-first century. David Brooks, in his comment above, named talk radio culture as a malignant interpretive force within the party.

In early November, George Will took similar aim: he penned a column that he opened with the lines, “Donald Trump is just one symptom of today's cultural pathology of self-validating vehemence with blustery certitudes substituting for evidence. Another is the fact that the book atop the New York Times non-fiction bestseller list is a tissue of unsubstantiated assertions” (Washington Post Nov.5). That book was, *Killing Reagan: The Violent Assault That Changed a Presidency*, written by Bill O'Reilly of Fox News, and his co-author, Martin Dugard. Fox News Channel launched in 1996, and has since established itself to be, in the words of Mark Shields, “the validator... the gatekeeper for Republican, particularly conservative voters.” In other words, it has accrued legitimacy. Will appeared on O'Reilly's television show, *The O'Reilly Factor*, the night following his column's publication. During the heated exchange, Will asserted that O'Reilly was “doing the work of the left, which knows that in order to discredit conservatism it must destroy Reagan's reputation as a president and your book does the work of the American left with its extreme recklessness.”

If one battle line is emerging between members of its commentariat, a second one has formed in Congress. The current boundary wars over and within the Republican Party – were fueled by the party's losses to Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, in which John McCain and Mitt Romney, each of whom struggled to win the party nomination, were interpreted as insufficiently conservative, and as being RINO's, or Republicans in Name Only. The Tea Party emerged within the party in 2009, as a reaction to what its initial members interpreted as an excessive economic stimulus package designed by President Obama to stanch and reverse the effects of the banking and housing crises of 2008. While since its inception the Tea Party has lost considerable momentum as a grassroots movement, it has nonetheless had considerable success in institutionalizing itself in Congress. The Republicans regained control of the House in the 2010 midterms, in fact, due in no small part to the Tea Party movement. It was this victory for the party, one of historic proportions, which moved Republican Representative John Boehner into the position of Speaker of the House. Close curtain.

Curtain rises, just under five years later: The Congressional Republicans who most clearly represent the legacy of the Tea Party, now known as the Freedom Caucus, won a significant victory in the intraparty boundary war's latest flare-up, when House Speaker, John Boehner, resigned his Speakership and was replaced by Representative Paul Ryan in early November. In 2012, when Mitt Romney was being constructed as insufficiently conservative to represent the Republican Party, he made Paul Ryan his running mate in order to signal to Tea Party conservatives that they would be represented in his administration. Ryan, he astutely observed, adequately represented that vibrant tribe within the party.

While use of the term RINO has receded, and the Tea Party movement has lost much of its steam, the party continues to battle over the central organizing components: over what it means when one claims to be a Republican, over what shall be the party's dominant ethos, over what policies and strategies flow from the ethos, and foremost, over who shall stand in for and represent the party as its nominee for the presidency.

The competition for that position is the battle to determine the party's identity. The outcome, and the means by which it is reached, will influence how many Republicans continue to recognize themselves in that identity, and greatly shape the degree to which they feel attached to it and be moved by it. That is, the resolution of this internal battle will inevitably determine the intensity of solidarity the Party's ultimate candidate can generate not only within party members, but in those on its edges, and in those voters who linger in the country's political center. Solidarity is what moves people to disrupt their routines – to get up early, to negotiate bad weather, to stand in line – in order to vote.

Solidarity stems not just from identification with a party, however. It is also fueled by the desire to perform and reiterate difference; it is cultivated, and may be mobilized against, powerful symbols of that which people oppose. In the US, this means symbols of what is undemocratic or anti-American, and for the



Right, the material repository of these meanings and sentiments is Hillary Clinton.

The Two Hillary Clintons

Act one is predominantly devoted to character development. Having been in the national spotlight on and off for a quarter century, Hillary Clinton entered the field in 2015 a symbolically saturated figure. Her body, or her televisual image, is not simply capable of instantaneously activating interpretive frameworks; it is incapable of not activating well established and deeply intuited reservoirs of sense making. She is a collective representation – e.g., “Re–Re–Re-Reintroducing Hillary Clinton,” *New York Times Magazine*, Jul. 15, 2015 – and a deeply divided and deeply divisive one: e.g., “Scandal at Clinton Inc.,” *The New Republic*, Sept. 22, 2013; “Planet Hillary,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Jan. 24, 2014; “Can Anyone Stop Hillary,” *Time Magazine*, Jan. 27, 2014; “Hillary’s Inevitability Trap,” *The New Yorker*, Nov. 17, 2014; etc.

When Mrs. Clinton appears on the television screen her image activates within the viewer’s visual register, depending on their predilection or aversion to the candidate, one of two sign constellations.

For those sympathetic to her, her cause, her journey, and her struggle, Mrs. Clinton’s image connotes a figure who blurred and transcended pernicious, restrictive boundaries, who rewrote the role of the First Lady and its relation to the office of presidency, and one who has over the years pursued an ambitious series of professional roles while sustaining family and intimate relationships – all while under the aggressive gaze of the media and public, and in path-breaking fashion. In this register, she is the author of the most ambitious domestic policy proposal since Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society; she survived personal humiliation in the most public of ways while keeping her dignity intact; and she is a former Senator, a former Secretary of State, and she is a legitimate contender for the presidency of the United States.

On the other hand, since her first step onto the national stage, Clinton’s performance of professionalism and womanhood have also been met with and inspired deep suspicion. For a sizeable portion of the American audience, Clinton’s image on the television screen activates signs such as cattle futures, Whitewater, missing documents and Vince Foster; a feminist who privileges her aspirations for power over her personal relationships and personal dignity; carpetbagger and Benghazi; and ultimately, in the late William Safire’s pointed characterization, she represents “a congenital liar.”

The meaning of Hillary for any particular voter varies within and between these two frameworks, of course. One person may see her as a combination of any number of signs within one of these constellations, while another, albeit rarer figure, may see her as a composite of signs drawn from both symbolic arenas. Yet these frameworks formed and crystallized over time, and while they

represent her public identities in particular, many of the signs within the frameworks – such as representations of womanhood, representations of holders of power, and representations of women who hold or seek to hold power – are tethered to categories that transcend her as individual, categories that predate her by many years, and by many generations. With such a saturated symbolic matrix, she is limited in her capacity to perform her character into new terrains of meaning, or to redraw the symbolic boundaries that constitute her.

In late July, when the words “email” and “server” followed her name like insatiable zombies, Judy Woodruff asked Mark Shields and David Brooks on the *PBS Newshour* if they thought the candidate was at risk of being overwhelmed by the story. Shields, the act’s left-leaning character, commented, “the problem it brings back, there’s two Clintons.” He continued:

There’s the Clinton of great boom, the lowest unemployment, the balanced budget, happy and prosperous and optimistic and confident America. And there’s the Clinton memories of the Whitewater and those law firm billing rights that were miraculously discovered in the family quarters of the White House. And all this lack of candor of what the meaning of “is,” all of this comes back, and I just – I think it hurt her in 2007, when she was running against Barack Obama (*PBS NewsHour 2015e*).

The ghosts of the past weigh heavily on the brains of the present. Bill Clinton, too, had a “there’s two Clintons” problem (Mast, 2013). Shields is a savvy commentator and reader of the political field. Yet, while his characterization of Hillary’s split symbolic framework is prescient, it also reveals a slippage whereby Hillary’s character is merged with, and partially subsumed within, that of her husband, his presidency, and a still more amorphous signifier, “Clinton.”

The comment shows that tenacious interpretive structures, formed during the past two and a half decades, will frame each of her performances. Hillary, it is claimed: is secretive, and has deep and dark secrets. She organizes dense bunkers around her, and is compulsively untransparent. The Clinton Foundation is representative of these qualities, and it is built, and has enriched itself and the Clintons themselves, through dubious social connections from around the globe, and with figures from Wall Street.

The scandal framework exists and awaits her; it arrived on stage and started setting up well before the former Secretary officially announced her candidacy. It is effectively predetermined; it will involve an excess of details, embedded in narratives that take investigators and audiences back and deep into hazy state, financial, and social capital networks. Her accusers will overpromise what they will reveal about her, and she will drain the drama of energy with delays, alternately precise and passive language, and by narrating her opposition as continuing to play from that dusty script, “the politics of personal destruction.”



Many of these elements helped to precipitate the creation of the House Select Committee on Events Surrounding the 2012 Terrorist Attack in Benghazi and to compel former Secretary Clinton to testify before the Committee in a public hearing. Clinton's campaign suffered summer doldrums, and her chances for attaining the presidency were imperiled not solely by email and Benghazi investigations but also the "political revolutionary," Bernie Sanders, who, like Trump, performed in a manner and from a script that cultivated dimensions of charisma, though one of a decidedly different variety than that constructed by Trump.

It was candidate Clinton's performances on television in mid-October, in the first Democratic debate and before the Benghazi Committee, which revived her campaign and lent it a modicum of direction after having drifted all but rudderless through the summer. Clinton appeared before the Benghazi Committee on October 22. Three weeks prior (Sept. 29), in a segment titled "GOP Shakeup" on Sean Hannity's *Fox News* (2015) interview program, House Majority Leader, Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), stated that Clinton's campaign for the presidency was struggling because the House Benghazi Committee's investigation had rendered her "untrustable." Representative McCarthy held considerable power within Republican ranks. House Speaker John Boehner was set to vacate his Speakership, and McCarthy had been targeted as his likely successor. Yet in the Hannity interview he spoke lines that nearly parroted verbatim the Clinton team's framing of the Benghazi Committee, namely, that it represented an illegitimate and politically motivated effort to derail her bid for the presidency.

McCarthy's performative ineptitude was staggering. For three minutes Hannity and Rep. McCarthy took turns expressing their frustrations with the inability of House Republicans to enact their agenda. At the four minute mark, the two slipped into a dialogue and give-and-take cadence more suggestive of a buddy comedy than a "news" interview.⁸ McCarthy displaced Hannity from the role of interviewer and began to play both roles, interviewer and interviewee, and interjected: "The question I think you really want to ask me is, how am I going to be different (from Boehner as House Speaker)?" Hannity joked, "I love how you ask my questions. But go ahead, that is one of my questions. Go right ahead." McCarthy – lively, engaged, and very much energized – laughed sharply and briefly, and continued as if he were speaking to a close friend:

I knew you'd want to ask it. What you're going to see is a conservative speaker that takes a conservative Congress that puts a strategy (in place) to fight and win.

⁸ See Norton (2011) for a structural hermeneutic interpretation of the Fox News show, *The O'Reilly Factor*, which demonstrates how this genre of television programming legitimates their partisan assertions and conclusions.

His speech slowed and became more measured, and his pronunciation became clearer, lending it the effect of sounding more intentional. He paused deliberately after each sentence, and stressed particular words, punching them up for emphasis:

And let me give you one example. Everybody thought Hillary Clinton was unbeatable, right? But we put together a Benghazi special committee, a select committee. What are her numbers today? Her numbers are dropping. Why? Because she's un-trustable. But no one would have known any of that had happened had we not fought and made that happen.

McCarthy played the role of the politically motivated villain seamlessly and with glee. Failing to anticipate the dramatic implications of the role he had conjured forth into the interview and inhabited with enthusiasm, McCarthy had performed away a great deal of his constitutive power. No longer considered a reliable narrator of the GOP cause, McCarthy was also no longer considered a tenable candidate for the Speakership position.

It was a gift to former Secretary, as it radically altered the dramatic landscape she was set to enter when she would sit before the Benghazi committee. Prior to McCarthy's ill-considered intervention, tension had escalated in advance of Clinton's "long awaited appearance." Expectations for conflict and heated exchanges had grown, as had anticipation of possible new revelations, new plot points and character developments, that might add fuel to the narrative fire. McCarthy's comments deflated expectations, however. Most significantly, they allowed Clinton to enter the production in a far more favorable role, one significantly easier for her to play. Prior to McCarthy's blunder, Clinton would have needed to use her performance before the committee to staunchly defend herself but without appearing excessively defensive, evasive, or secretive. She also would have needed to move onto the offensive but without appearing too aggressive. As an actor, she would have entered the stage, the ornate meeting room of the House Ways and Means Committee, with a sense that the stakes of her performance were enormous. In terms of style and technique, her task would have been exceptionally challenging, and with television cameras instantly capturing whatever she happened to perform in the moment, she would have had little room for slippage.

In terms of character, prior to McCarthy effectively declaring that the investigation was politically motivated, Clinton would have entered the stage as a figure of suspicion, as if an accused figure on trial. She would not have been bound in handcuffs or wearing the orange jumpsuit that signifies prisoner, of course, but she would have entered the drama playing a defendant's role. In this position her status, or the symbolic weight conveyed by titles like former



Senator and Cabinet Member, would have been destabilized, even if partially. And the characters sitting opposite her would have had greater space to represent themselves in the drama not even as her equal but as having authority over her.

After McCarthy's gaffe, however, any dimensions of suspiciousness Clinton's character retained were matched by an equal measure of victimhood. No longer reduced to mere suspect, she was able to perform the role of a senior statesperson, one worthy of deference, and one capable of commanding respect without being met with a snicker or raised eyebrow. She was able to play the role that she had played effectively many times in the past, one of devoted public servant who was being dragged through a degradation ceremony, a show trial, by politically motivated opposition.

She played it superbly, and was helped tremendously by a talented supporting cast. Republican members of the committee pressed and prodded the former Secretary, used sarcasm to dismiss her responses, and employed props such as stacks of paper meant to give material form to the emails Secretary Clinton had sent and received via her private server. They aimed for damning symbolism, or to turn emails and a computer hard drive into a smoking gun. Instead the props registered as merely mundane, and the investigative efforts as petty.

Critically, the panel members slipped into moments of internal bickering, which escalated periodically into shouting matches. Offering a highly effective counter-performance, Democratic committee member, Elijah E. Cummings (Maryland), played the role of an exasperated bystander witnessing a ridiculous act of persecution. Through his dialogue and hand gestures, Cummings



Figure 3: Representatives Trey Gowdy, left, and Elijah E. Cummings, right, arguing during Hillary Clinton's appearance before the House Select Committee on Benghazi, on October 22, 2015. Screenshot from <https://www.c-span.org/video/?328699-1/hillary-clinton-testimony-house-select-committee-benghazi-part-1> (Color online).



Figure 4: Hillary Clinton watches on as Representatives Trey Gowdy, Elijah Cummings, and Adam Schiff argue during her appearance before the House Select Committee on Benghazi (Oct. 22, 2015). Screenshot from <https://www.c-span.org/video/?328699-1/hillary-clinton-testimony-house-select-committee-benghazi-part-1> (Color online).

disrupted the Republican production by claiming to represent common sense. His performance allowed viewers to identify with a representative of critique operating from within the production itself. “He is the reasonable one, I would be like him,” those sympathetic to Clinton could think to themselves (Figure 3).

As the committee members slid into episodes of in-fighting, Clinton was able to perform a character of rationality and patient bemusement, as if she had been forced to participate in a silly spectacle (Figure 4).

Yet Clinton also found moments to perform registers of poignancy, moments created by another sympathetic and skilled supporting cast member, Democratic committee member, Adam Schiff (CA). After specifying who the villains were on stage, Schiff shifted the drama’s tone from the professional and bureaucratic into the realm of the private sphere, toward friendship, camaraderie, loyalty, and loss:

it is the actions of the committee that are the most damning of all, because they have been singly focused on you... I know the ambassador was a friend of yours, and I wonder if you would like to comment on what it’s like to be the subject of an allegation that you deliberately interfered with security that cost the life of a friend (Ambassador Chris Stevens) (*Washington Post* Staff, 2015).

Schiff’s set up effectively softened the lighting, shuffled the other committee members toward the stage wings and into the shadows, and allowed the former Secretary to inhabit center stage, solo. Clinton replied:



Figure 5: Hillary Clinton expressing sorrow before the House Select Committee on Benghazi (Oct. 22, 2015) over the loss of former US Ambassador to Libya, Chris Stevens. Screenshot from <https://www.c-span.org/video/?328699-1/hillary-clinton-testimony-house-select-committee-benghazi-part-1> (Color online).

You know, I've – I would imagine I've thought more about what happened than all of you put together. I've lost more sleep than all of you put together. I have been wracking my brain about what more could have been done or should have been done (ibid).

Softening her tone, the former Secretary conjured images of extended contemplation, and hit notes of grief and loss. Her performance forcefully disrupted the investigative and prosecutorial script the Republicans had been both playing and denied to be playing (Figure 5).

Clinton's performance was highly effective. Her standing in national polls increased, and online commentary indicated that her performance before the Benghazi Committee was an important contribution to lifting her formerly enervated campaign. The "top comment" to a Slate.com story titled, "Democrats Just Can't Muster That Much Enthusiasm for 2016" (Newell, 2015), read:

I feel better about it after seeing her performance in the GOP committee that is 'looking into benghazi' or whatever they say. – by Open Range

Much of the drama of the transfer of presidential power remains to be performed. Candidate Clinton's challenge is less to change herself than to identify and perform a coherent arrangement of signs drawn from within the positive side of her framework outlined above, and to do so consistently; this represents her pathway to authenticity, to the extent that her current symbolic

constraints will allow this interpretive category to form and coalesce around her.

The Dramatic Field at the Close of Act One

Yet the dramatic field in which Hillary Clinton will perform her second act will contain two other leads, both of whom had successfully generated dimensions of charisma about their characters. With the slogan, “Make America Great Again,” Trump conjured 1950s America, and cast himself in this imaginary setting as outsider figure, one akin to the Fonzie role.

He projected a character that is neither consistently nor coherently anti-authority, but one that is capable, willing, and sometimes even eager to stand up to authority figures, be they of a government, entrepreneurial, or civilian variety. The character showed an appetite for momentary thrills and a capacity for chaos, and that he was unapologetic about his tendencies toward self-aggrandizement.

Sanders, too, cultivated degrees of charisma. Like Trump he performed narratives of threat, but his were about threats to dignity and purpose rather than the sting of being laughed at or the stain of humiliation. He too performed a quasi-anti-authority character, but his was anchored in a coherent and recognizably intellectualist script about economic exploitation. His villains were systemic – “the system is rigged against us” – inasmuch as they were particular people or social roles, Wall Street bankers and “the one percent” notwithstanding. Sanders appeared to aggressively disregard his costume, hair, and appearance more broadly. In so doing, he has performed the binary of style versus substance – an interpretive schema, not a social fact or law – whereby an excess of one is interpreted as indicating a necessary decrease in the other. Having presented himself as clearly not interested in style and appearance, he must be all about substance and depth, the costume connoted.

These conditions leave very little dramatic space for another variety of charisma, and few alternative archetypes of outsider or anti-establishment characters, as well. Early on the Clinton campaign sought to cultivate gender as indicative of the candidate representing an outsider or rebel, given the US’s legacy of all male presidents. In this context, it found little purchase.

To the contrary, Hillary Clinton was effectively placed in the role of administrator and establishmentarian. The drama developed tropes of a high school contest for authority. Trump affected a “greaser,” outsider character, one who could part the hallways of students and teachers with his swagger of unpredictability and potential menace. Sanders wandered the hallways slightly less conspicuously, but the ruffled copy of the *Daily Worker* under his arm cultivated curiosity and some intrigue. Candidate Clinton was left representing a character somewhere between a hallway monitor and a student council representative with her eyes on class president.



As a consequence, her performances of expert knowledge and bureaucratic, managerial skill reiterated her position within a character type that has been decidedly unpopular to date. This character formation sits precariously vis-à-vis the plots she will face in the general election. In this symbolic contest, her private email server will be more easily constructed as representing either gross oversight or simple duplicitousness and deception. How could the aspiring student class president fail to know the rules, after all? Likewise, should she be interpreted as guilty, a failure to punish her would clash with American democracy's narrative of egalitarianism before the law. What has been given little voice in the public, political discourse to date (as of Dec. 2015), is the degree to which the standards for judging candidate Clinton's choices and actions have been much stricter than those applied to her male competitors.

Candidate Clinton's success in the Benghazi performance is perhaps most revealing of her character bind. The emotions she expressed in response to the loss of her comrades garnered considerable press attention and favorable commentary. Thus her performative success came foremost through her demonstrations of loss, grief, empathy, and compassion. Selecting and deeming her emotional moments noteworthy, praiseworthy, and broadcast-worthy, reiterated that the central features of her campaign character were the opposite: those of an administrator or establishmentarian, or one who interprets through policy and data, and who is only capable of acting based upon metrics of "triangulation."

At the close of act one, these candidates' characters had formed into collective representations of authority types. The men had cultivated quasi-charismatic personas, though of two very different stylized varieties, while Clinton had been relegated to the role of administrator, establishmentarian, or worse still: a figure of traditional authority, i.e., "coronation."

Conclusion

Political campaigns are about the production of meaning, and their outcomes are determined to a large extent by how well their leads, the candidates, perform these meanings to citizen-audiences. Candidates seek to craft the meaning of their campaign's foremost symbol, themselves. Yet a candidate's capacity to control her own meaning – the constellation that comprises her own character – is limited. Candidates perform about themselves but also about each other, and a vast and complex network of commentators, from news reporters to late night television hosts to talk radio hosts to bloggers, engage in the meaning production as well, though with widely varying degrees of constitutive power.

Meaning is produced by these figures engaging in the act intentionally, but candidates' meanings are also shaped by non-intentional, or structural elements, as well. As a field of candidates forms, the collective dimension of the field

affects the interpretive schema of similarities and differences between the candidates. In the battle for party nominations, for instance, a reformist candidate on the Left may be rendered merely centrist when a socialist steps to the stage, while a staunch conservative may morph into a “progressive republican” when a reactionary xenophobe enters the drama. The effects of structure and form are further heightened in the general election, when all parties’ final candidates face one another. Their characters bear the residue and scars of the prior twenty months of meaning work, and in the end, voters may be motivated by the simple binary logic of “anybody but someone from the other party.”

Finally, events introduce to the drama a dimension of contingency that can scatter meanings and re-order the dramatic field. Though events are narrated and folded into the drama’s existing plots, they have a reconstituting power as well, such as the ability, for instance, to turn an audience’s “anti-establishment” mood into one in search of reassurance, and attuned to signs of experience and a measured temper.

The terrorist attack in Paris on 13 November, for instance, effectively scuttled Ben Carson’s moment atop Republican opinion polls. Soft-spoken in style but vocal about being religiously devout, the neurosurgeon was increasingly being interpreted as an alternative to the brash stylings of Donald Trump. Carson’s star began to rise in August 2015, and continued to trend upward through the next two months when he caught and even surpassed Trump in the polls in early November. Carson had risen despite developing a reputation for bungling questions about foreign affairs, however. When ISIL terrorists murdered and maimed hundreds of people on the streets, in cafes, and in the performance venues of Paris, the redolent symbol of a terrorist attack on the homeland was re-introduced, and with considerable energy, into the presidential competition’s dramatic field. With the stage’s backdrop replaced by a battle scene, Carson’s understated presentation of self combined with his flubbed performances as an aspiring “commander” to render him an untenable alternative to Trump and the other contenders. Carson’s polls numbers began to slide immediately after Paris, and show no signs of recovering as of early-December.

The stage’s backdrop shifted again on 2 December, when the battle field of Paris’s Bataclan theater was replaced with the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. Again, ISIL sympathizers, though this time a married couple, murdered and maimed dozens of Center’s workers and service recipients. A twitter user tweeted, “@realDonaldTrump his poll numbers jump every time instances like this occur.” Candidate Trump retweeted it. This time he was being accurate.

Political power and the practice of politics in the US are in flux and poised to undergo considerable transformation. Party boundaries are straining and threatening to collapse under a strength of forces not seen since the era of the Civil Rights movements and Watergate. Elites’ power to diagnose and



characterize the social and natural worlds is diminished, and voices of experts - be they of the political, media, social-policy, or scientific variety- are increasingly being met with suspicion, resistance, and even disdain. These signals of stress are accompanied by another powerful indicator of flux: sizeable portions of the citizen public are demonstrating not only a tolerance for candidates who bend the norms of political and civil discourse but a will to celebrate such transgressive performative acts.

Variations within notwithstanding, act one revealed an angry audience in an anti-establishment mood. As the first act is drawn to a close, a sizeable portion of the electorate on the Left was rallying around the theme of political revolution. A large proportion of the Right, on the other hand, was attributing legitimacy not to figures with political experience or policy expertise but those who foreground their personalities and who routinely deploy exclusionary and apocalyptic discourse.

Boundary troubles, destabilized structures, genre defying performances are the dominant characteristics of the 2016 presidential election drama's opening act, and they indicate that creative and destructive energies are at play.

In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx (1990) set out to explain why France, at one moment seemingly poised to usher in new and more egalitarian forms of social relations, instead succumbed to Bonapartism and reverted to its old dictatorial ways. He opened his investigation of the creative and destructive energies at play in the 1848 French revolution with a powerful characterization of why revolutionary zeal yielded to the symbols, language, and images of the past:

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language (ibid, 15).

It is hard to imagine a more cultural explanation of the forces shaping a revolution's dynamics and trajectory. While Marx started his narrative with this lament, he did not begin building his explanatory framework from its insights. It was prose for Marx, not epistemology.

In this article, I used Marx's brilliant observation to launch an interpretive, cultural pragmatic investigation into the initial stages of a democratic transfer of power, or act one of the 2016 US presidential election. I assembled an interpretive framework from the works of Barthes, Geertz, and Alexander, and trained these tools on key performances in the autumn of 2015, and on the

interpretive frameworks audiences brought to bear on them in a process by which they attribute dimensions of legitimacy to particular actors.

Barthes specified the structure and logic of Pierre Poujade's discourse to explain the populist's effectiveness, and to identify its impact on voters who would make decisions within these symbolic conditions. Poujadism, Barthes argued, delegitimated interpretative complexity and expert knowledge, and in their place nurtured a discourse of simple calculation and a romanticized common sense. Barthes concluded that Poujadism thrived to the extent that it denied alterity and difference, and that it is in this restrictive and simplified discursive environment that the seeds of fascism bloom.

This encourages us to pay particular attention to the structure and logic of Trumpist discourse. As a narrative, "we're going to build a wall" has tremendous semiotic efficiency and power. It communicates and constitutes much while demanding little interpretive effort. It classifies in simple ways: we will do the building to keep them out; it will keep our friends safe from those enemies; it will keep us pure, and prevent foreign dangers from infiltrating and polluting our body politic. As a single signifier, "wall" packs an immediate and powerful punch. It is tangible, accessible, and intuitive. A wall's materiality imposes itself on a person, and asserts its physical superiority over one's body. Discursively, it imposes itself on the mind. A wall not only closes off space, it strangles open inquiry. It replaces openness to inquiry with retorts and celebrations of common sense. And yet for all its symbolic power, and for the considerable performative success it has met with, experts assert that a real, material wall would not be effective at its stated purpose. How do we account for the performative success of a sign whose material referent is determined to be a failure?

Geertz's work shows that meanings operating in the setting have the capacity to explain the unanticipated success of obvious lies, gross exaggerations, and expedient elisions, and that by discerning them we can unpack and resolve apparent contradictions between solidarities and interests.

At the moment of writing this final sentence, Donald Trump has been named the Republican Party nominee, and Hillary Clinton is poised to fill the Democratic position to represent the party in the general election. In this paper, I have endeavored to show how the symbolic struggle in act one created circumstances and relationships that made it possible for one of these candidates to play a hero's part in November.

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