

Trump L'oeil

Dreaming of the world beyond the concrete walls that encircle Attica, I often fantasized about once again being an American citizen: voting; enlisting support for social justice issues like gender equality, and civil rights. Watching CNN on an eight inch TV during the Democratic National Convention, I teared as I listened to Mothers of Black Lives Matter who lost children. Their unarmed sons and daughters were shot by police during traffic stops.

I had hoped for change in America, for compassion rather than confrontation. Emotionally vested in the outcome of the Clinton versus Trump gladiatorial contest, my moods rose and fell with the polls. I listened to CNN's commentators, cheering Ana Novarro and Van Jones. At times, I snickered at the parade of long-haired blondes defending Donald Trump as revelations of his sexual aggression mounted. I was stunned to discover misogynist women. I heard the national dialogue, fascinated by the polarity of views.

As I waited, often for hours to attend programs and classes at Attica, I watched little on TV besides CNN. I mistook the opinions of commentators for an accurate analysis of America. Like many others however, I failed to see the hurricane on the horizon.

Even as the polls tightened, I held to my conviction that Americans would see through Trump's theater show, his son et lumière. I was sure that the majority of Americans would reject his bigotry, his tactics of ridicule -- belittling women, the disabled, and anyone who disagreed with him.

When I awoke on November 9th at 3:00 AM, my mouth dropped open as I watched President-elect Trump take the stage to bask in victory. I felt nauseous, and scared. I feared America's future, recognizing Trump's power to alter U.S. policy, shape the Supreme Court, and undo the accomplishments of Barack Obama. Shutting off the TV, I fell back on my bunk, foolishly hoping

that the election results were wrong, that I would wake to find a revised electoral count. But sleep did not return.

At eight AM I sat in Attica's cavernous messhall, sick to my stomach, unable to eat. The men around me, although stunned, stirred sugar and fake butter into their grits. As they ate, I remained immobile, my mind clouded by lack of sleep. I refused to talk about Trump's election, as if denial would magically change the outcome. But when I got to my classroom in Attica's antiquated school building, and saw the stricken look on the teacher's face, reality set in. Robotically, I began to correct and grade assignments. But I was unsure of the spelling of simple vocabulary in the ESL homework. My red pen remained poised in midair as I struggled to recall how many 'p's are in sleeping, how many 'l's are in fooled.

The Hispanic prisoners in the class chatted in Spanish about the election's repercussions. Some of them, Mexicans, worried about deportation. I told them I would gladly take their place on Trump's list of undesirables. Angry about Trump's victory, I wanted to leave the U.S. I was disgusted and embarrassed. My own race had championed a bigot, a sexual predator. Van Jones called the election result "whitelash." I feared America would regress in its struggle to overcome prejudice, in its efforts to advance social justice. I would happily live in Mexico, with its idyllic beaches, giant hibiscus, and lush mountains. The view outside Attica's ESL classroom was a concrete wall laced with razor wire. Beyond, barren trees dotted a brown hillside.

The bleak landscape was a harbinger of America's political future. Trump had ingeniously tapped into middle America's angst -- its frustration with gridlock in Washington, its barely subconscious prejudice toward a black President embracing a woman who aspired to be America's commander-in-chief. Yet Trump refuted allegations of prejudice even though in the 1970s he instructed his real estate agents to code apartment rental applications with a 'C' for colored. Denying misogyny, he levied

insults of "bimbo," "fat pig," and "look at that face" toward women. I was amazed and horrified to find that a majority of white women had voted for Trump. He had created an illusion, a trompe-l'oeil, promising to revitalize America with fairness, and respect for established law. Despite a robust economy that had created new jobs for seventy-two consecutive months, Trump promised to bring jobs back to an America he said was devastated by unemployment. However, unemployment was at a 15 year low. Even though not a single terrorist act had been committed on American soil by an immigrant, Trump stoked xenophobia by promising to halt immigration by 'terrorists,' a code word for Muslims. Trump seized on deeply-seated fears to convince Americans that barbarians were at the gate.

In his book Madness and Civilization, Michel Foucault presciently forecast a climate to ^{BE} created by Trump. "Madness, even if it is provoked or sustained by what is most artificial in society, appears, in its violent forms, as the savage expression of the most primitive desires." At Trump campaign rallies, predominately white mobs applauded Trump's clarion call for law and order, and a return to racist stop-and-frisk policies. White men offered to mix cement to form a wall between the United States and Mexico, even though the net migration of Mexicans was an exodus out of the U.S.

Stunned, I watched blonde women defend Trump's caveman mentality, his ignorant "locker room talk" about groping women. Trump created the classic illusion by blaming the victims, calling his female accusers liars. In a shocking display of egotism, he said they were too ugly for him to grope. He implied that he only clubbed pretty women over the head, shoving his mitts up their deerskin frocks. He accused Mexicans of being rapists, and a Mexican-American judge of being too ignorant to rule on the law because of his heritage. Yet none of his bigoted statements toppled Trump Tower.

A master of legerdemain, The Donald broke free of the chains that bound presidential candidates while keeping his audience

focused on sideshows. He said he couldn't release his tax returns because they sat on the desk of an IRS agent.

Yet even men in prison, many of whom don't have a GED, see through the bluster and baloney of Donald Trump. When my classification dropped, I was transferred from Attica to Cayuga prison. While watching the morning news in Cayuga's dayroom, I saw men laugh at the absurdity of Trump's statements. When he insisted that "millions voted illegally" during the presidential election, men around ^{ME} recognized he was trying to discredit Clinton's majority in the popular vote. When Trump insisted he won a record landslide victory in the electoral college, prisoners who weren't even born yet when Reagan won re-election snickered and guffawed.

At Cayuga, I facilitate programs for fellow prisoners. We discuss reality versus delusion when looking at the reasons we came to prison, the false beliefs we clung to when we enjoyed freedom. Prisoners are reluctant to acknowledge ignorance of reality. Yet the consensus in prison classrooms is that Trump is a con artist, just like we were before getting arrested. Trump had promised to "drain the swamp" in Washington, to bring about change. But prisoners recognize his Cabinet picks as a bunch of rich white men, the same insensitive homogeneous makeup that has existed in Congress for decades.

Trump's strident proclamation that he would build a wall between the United States and Mexico also turned out to be an empty promise. Mexico's President Nieto flatly denied Mexico would fund Trump's project. Just thirty days after Trump's inauguration, his administration revealed that the promised wall would be merely a fence. Further, the fence would protect only two-thirds of the border between the U.S. and Mexico. A centerpiece of Trump's campaign dissolved, revealing levers behind a curtain. A savvy showman, Trump had created a tragedy-comedy. Michel Foucault recognized that "theater develops its truth, which is illusion."

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I realized that Cayuga's dayroom formed a section of Donald Trump's audience. But the section was rowdy, refusing to be lulled by the entertainment. Prisoners heckled the actors. They shouted rejoinders to the laughable dialogue that emanated from the White House. The cleverly orchestrated drama turned out to be an infantile puppet show.

The short-lived renaissance that emerged during Obama's presidency -- a rebirth of civil rights and compassion for all Americans, regardless of gender, heritage or orientation -- withered, leaving hopelessness and frustration. In its place, madness fomented. As Foucault predicted, "madness is the great trompe-l'oeil."

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