

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Six, Number Three

‘Hope’ or ‘Joke’? No, Thanks!: Obama as ‘The Joker’ in American Visual Culture

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There is No *Political* Rapport

At the height of Barack Obama’s popularity during his 2008 campaign for the American presidency, the iconic “Hope” image exemplified the fantasy of Obama’s supporters (Fig. 1). Created by renowned street artist Shepard Fairey in a style that recalls everything from propaganda posters to corporate branding, the image appropriates a 2006 associated press photograph, depicting the candidate in flat areas of solid red and blue set against a beige background, implicitly uniting the two ends of the political spectrum in one figure while also erasing the racial identity that posed such a problem for his campaign. The politician’s gaze does not meet the viewer but is calmly fixed on a point located off in the distance, signifying his revolutionary and visionary status. Although the campaign



did not solicit Fairey’s involvement, its subsequent sanctioning of the image and its circulation of it as part of an advertising strategy suggests awareness of its potential resonance with voters. The portrait depicts Obama as hip and youthful, while the simple slogan invites the projection of

voter desires for transformation of a broken political system on to him, who here functions as a sort of fantasy screen on which various “hopes” for the future might be realized. He becomes a political, cultural and quasi-religious icon that appears to transcend typical politics in his calm, contemplative persona.

However, with the aura of his historic inauguration long faded, President Barack Obama’s administration faces perpetual signs of discontent. While Obama campaigned as a post-racial and post-political agent of “hope” and “change” who could unite the so-called Red States and Blue States into national harmony, the intense inclination towards hostility in the groups constituting the re-emerging ideological right—Tea Partiers, Birthers, Tenters, Oath Keepers, militiamen, minutemen, white supremacists, domestic terrorists and countless others—undermines this objective and lodges the impossibility of pluralistic consensus within the core of the political discourse. Instead of the expected negotiation, compromise and agreement, paranoid fantasies of persecution emerge into the public sphere as symptoms of declining belief in the authority of institutions, laws and symbolic mandates.

Within these conditions, the image of Barack Obama as the revolutionary savior capable of repairing American symbolic institutions seems naïve and misguided. Adapting Jacques Lacan’s formulation that “there is no sexual rapport” – no universal formula or common ground guaranteeing the harmony of sexual relations – in the Age of Obama “there is no *political* rapport” between those that desire “change” and their opponents that will result in some fantasized consensus. A radical antagonism splits the political field, making the mediation of extremes through the zero-institutions of the state all but impossible. The current battle is not just between friendly rivals within those institutions, but over their purpose, meaning and very existence.

Alternative forms of visual culture surrounding Obama’s campaign (and later his presidency) cast the politician in a far more sinister light that reflects the irreconcilable nature of these positions. In particular, the dominant strain of this culture represents Obama as the “Joker” from the Batman comic books and films. These images have come to form a nodal point for discussing fundamental relations of mistrust and suspicion between American citizens and their government. Such relations have a number of historical and structural causes related to the process of neoliberal globalization, demographic shifts and regulatory failures, but the ongoing financial crisis undoubtedly serves as a powerful catalyst for the most recent resurgence of paranoid delusions, violent rhetoric and public hostility. The events of 2008 betray corruption, incompetence, inconsistency and perhaps even collusion between government and financial institutions – resulting in speculation, devaluation and widespread unemployment – but the sublime structural complexity of global finance and neoliberal capitalism defies readily available representational paradigms. The reification of these abstract processes into a single

figure offers to resolve this bewildering complexity and to provide a provisional representational mode for explaining what otherwise eludes comprehension.

Images of Obama circulating online and in protests exemplify this desire for simplification, achieved through appropriating forms of popular culture. Instead of rejecting these examples as merely infantile, however, criticism ought to examine what they indicate about the political unconscious of contemporary conflicts. Borrowing another formulation from Lacan, the Obama-as-Joker motif is *ex-timate*: the fictional representation of the politician has a sort of “intimate exteriority” that links social and psychic economies. Thought of in light of *ex-timacy*, the abundantly apparent stupidity of comparing Obama to the Joker – a sadistic clown who promotes social anarchy – betrays unintended truths about how his opponents perceive the composition of the political space as an unstable field full of malevolent persecutors. We move too fast in dismissal of them if we ignore how these images enable the paranoid delusions of his detractors to achieve external form and thus legibility for both conspiratorial thinking and critical analysis alike. In particular, these images enable us to identify the drive to reproduce Obama as an excess to Americanism through discourses of popular culture, nation, race and conspiracy. They thus make visible the terms of the current struggle over the direction of state institutions that defines the emergent Age of Obama.

I will begin with an analysis of the images themselves and then will move on to briefly discuss two instances in which they help explain otherwise bewildering political claims regarding the illegitimacy of Obama’s birth certificate and paranoid fantasies placing him at the head of the conspiratorial New World Order. These instances resonate with what Slavoj Žižek refers to in his book *The Plague of Fantasies* as the “theft of enjoyment.” Žižek argues that one of the functions of fantasy is to construct “the scene in which the *jouissance* we are deprived of is concentrated in the other who stole it from us” (Žižek 1997: 32). Something similar manifests in the Obama as Joker meme. These images depict the leader as an obscene neighbor enjoying at the expense of white conservative hegemony, a potent fantasy that animates the Tea Party movement in its rejection of Obama and his policies. Although the Obama campaign positioned the candidate as the visionary savior of law who would restore confidence in American institutions, these images instead figure him as a depraved clown whose excessive enjoyment jeopardizes the white conservative fantasy of the United States.

“O”-bama or, the “subject supposed to believe”

Understanding this portrait meme and what it tells us about conservative discontent necessitates situating the images within the current American moment of what Eric Santner has

called modernity's "crisis of symbolic investiture." According to Santner, modernity marks shifts in the "fundamental matrix of an individual's relation to social and institutional authority, to the ways he or she is addressed by and responds to calls of 'official' power" (Santner 1996: xi-xii). "We cross the threshold into modernity," he writes, "when the attenuation of these performatively effectuated social bonds becomes chronic, when they are no longer capable of seizing the subject in his or her self-understanding" (Santner 1996: xii). In other words, the "crisis of symbolic investiture" involves the breakdown of belief in the big Other, the impersonal set of rules, conventions, laws, and institutions that form the substance of social exchange. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, the symbolic order that coordinates our social existence only functions insofar as our activity collectively sustains it. The moment subjects cease performing their symbolic mandates – the moment they stop believing through their objective activity – the social bond between those subjects weakens, exposing them to the hostility that the symbolic order otherwise keeps at a safe distance. Recent resistance to the institutions of the state serves as one example of this crisis.

While Santner's work ostensibly concentrates on how this process explains Germany's slide into Nazism, his preface concludes with a reflection on the more immediate historical context of the American war on terror, noting how a disturbing rise in paranoia in the United States coincides with challenges to symbolic authority emerging from "new geopolitical arrangements, ideological investments, and shifts of populations and capital [that] come to fill the vacancy left by the end of the cold war" (Santner 1996: xiii). The Barack Obama 2008 presidential campaign intervened into this crisis by offering a potent fantasy which positioned the candidate as "O"-bama, the "subject supposed to believe" in the symbolic order (the big "O" Other), as the one who could avoid cynicism and return the country to unity after eight years of intensely partisan division.

Through the installation of "hope" and "change" as master signifiers, the fantasy of his campaign promised to repair what had been badly damaged by the state's chronic inability to adequately address the symptoms of American decline. These symptoms have manifested in a variety of forms. The failure to prevent the 11 September 2001 attacks, for example, revealed the weakness in American fantasies of invulnerability, prompting the spectacle of war based in the demonstration of the consistency in American claims of control. Subsequent failures only compounded the appearance of government ineptitude. For instance, not only did the Bush administration callously ignore the tragedy in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but it also stood watch over the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression in 2008. In the name of the so-called war on terror the White House publically embraced the obscene underside of American power through its avowed insistence on circumventing both national and international law in the capture, rendition and torture of suspected terrorists.

Consequently, much of the conversation on the political left focused on unprecedented expansions of executive power and the increasing subversion of American institutions from within. The figure of “O”-bama (coincidentally echoed in his “O” campaign symbol) promised to restore confidence in institutions of investiture and thus faith in the possibilities for the future.

Many commentators have quite correctly pointed out that “hope” and “change” do not appear to signify anything in particular. These vague terms enable voters to project their fantasies into the image of Obama, to realize their desire through their imaginary identification with him. One example of this identification originates on the internet site *Obamicon.Me*. The “Me” at the end of the address signals the unintentional truth of the narcissism encouraged by the site, which allows visitors to create their own Shepard Fairey style portrait image using photos of themselves and adding their own captions to the bottom. The campaign itself exploited this desire to identify with Obama through what Joe R. Feagin and Adia Harvey Wingfield call a “soft racial framing”. Feagin and Wingfield argue that Obama’s “post-racial” message entailed distancing himself from the legacy of the Civil Rights movement represented by Reverend Jesse Jackson and Reverend Al Sharpton, and instead projecting the image of the “cool black man”: “His ‘cool strategy’ enabled him to avoid many of the gendered-racist representations of black masculinity that are part of the white racial frame—the ‘angry black man,’ ‘buddy’ or ‘sidekick’... What he could do was maintain this cool strategy in which he was consistently unruffled, poised and in control at all times” (Feagin and Wingfield 2010: 84). We might add to this list of attributes the more colloquial meaning of Obama as “cool.” In stark contrast to the stodgy demeanor of his opponent John McCain, Obama appealed to youth through his tech savvy and his past drug use, as well as his interest in hip-hop, comic books and basketball. His image as the cool, successful black man functions as a pleasing mirror for contemporary American society.

In addition to this imaginary identification, Obama offers a potent racial fantasy that serves to conceal the inconsistency of the American symbolic order even as his success shifts its coordinates of possibility. Without diminishing the positive dimension of Obama’s victory, we cannot discount the other side of this analysis, which is that Obama’s election brings with it a sort of collective narcissistic satisfaction and fits into a pleasing national narrative that Obama himself never shied away from invoking, even before declaring his candidacy. His introduction to the national stage during the 2004 Democratic National Convention exemplifies this narrative. In a spotlight stealing speech, then Illinois Senator Obama explains the uniqueness of his mixed race heritage and how only in America could he have achieved his level of education and success. Invoking the memory of his deceased parents he declares: “My parents shared not only an improbable love; they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or “blessed,” believing that in a tolerant America your

name is no barrier to success. They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential" (Obama 2008: video). In this exemplary quote from Obama's speech, the ambitious politician lays the groundwork for the fantasy that would drive his candidacy four years later. America is presented as both "tolerant" and "generous," mirroring the image of the country as a land of opportunity in which anyone – implicitly regardless of racial or economic background – can achieve his or her goals. Obama underscores this reading in *The Audacity of Hope*, when, referring to the speech, he claims, "I believe that part of America's genius has always been its ability to absorb newcomers, to forge a national identity out of the disparate lot that arrived on our shores" (Obama 2006: 231). While also explicitly rejecting in this chapter the notion of "post-racial" politics as the end of racism and structural inequality, Obama nonetheless emerges as a fantasy figure proving that the system *does* work and that the notion of American exceptionalism is *not* flawed. Four years later, voters would respond positively to this soothing alternative to ample evidence of America in symbolic and material decline.

Symbolically, the titles attached to variations of the Shepard Fairey image – including "change", "progress" and, of course, "hope" – functioned as potential quilting points capable of repairing the ruptures in American exceptionalism. If in the crisis of symbolic investiture a given ideological field ceases to function, then this process entails a loss of faith in a certain signifier that in its particularity structures the relationships between all the others. Since the September 11 2001 attacks, arguably, "terror" has performed this function of quilting together the symbolic, elevating the avoidance of terrorism to the level of a mandate and thereby coloring the content of each discrete element in the structure. The seemingly omnipresent threat of terror and the symbolic imperative to prevent it, helped produce widespread belief in authority and faith in institutions. Yet, it is precisely this faith that falters under the current conditions in which time has somewhat ameliorated the shock of terrorism and new concerns over the impotence of the big Other move to the forefront. The signifier of "hope" – of which Obama's personal story is the ideal American embodiment – provides a potential for symbolic identification designed to fix the meaning of free floating ideological elements in a new way. Obama's campaign succeeded because like most successful American presidential campaigns, it presented new coordinates for belief in the nation as a symbolic construct, for what America *means* and why Americans ought to *desire* it. Perhaps this notion helps explain the campaign slogan "change you can *believe* in": Obama presents himself as the exceptional "One" who escapes cynicism and has faith in symbolic investiture – government can work, the U.S.A. is still great, old divisions don't matter – enabling Americans to believe through him and go back to their everyday lives.

Obama as the Joker

However, portraits depicting Obama as the Joker testify to the failure of his political branding. Despite the administration's efforts, once elected president, Obama could not maintain the same levels of faith his campaign once inspired. On the ideological left, progressive bloggers felt betrayed by the president's cozy relationship to Wall Street bankers, the health insurance industry and the military industrial complex, as well as his seeming unwillingness to stand up for progressive ideas in opposition to harsh right-wing criticism. For the ideological right, Obama seemed to embody everything contrary to their construction of white, conservative American hegemony. Consequently, the visual culture surrounding Obama – even before the election – spoke to widespread anxieties pertaining to the meaning of “change.” Although the Obama campaign positioned the candidate as the visionary savior of law who would restore confidence in American institutions, these images instead figure him as an inhuman agent of persecution.

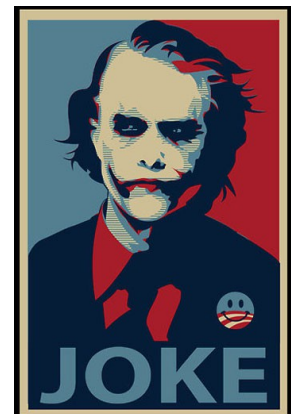
In response to this cynicism towards Obama's narrative, alternative forms of “cultural jamming” emerged which, like Fairey, appropriated already existing images and digitally



manipulated them in attempts at political commentary. The dominant strand of this visual culture consistently makes the comparison between President Obama and the Joker from the *Batman* comic books and films. One such image uses Fairey's “Hope” poster as its raw material, changing the banner at the bottom to “Nope” and using a digital painting program to crudely add black rings around Obama's eyes and a wide red grin to Obama's mouth (Fig.2). Foregrounding the digital vandalism of the original “Hope” image, these changes are meant to imitate the make-up traditionally worn by the Joker character, drawing an explicit comparison with Obama. When combined with the

image, the altered caption makes an ambiguous negative commentary on the Obama campaign. Is “Nope” meant to signal the hollowness of the “Hope” slogan? Or is it meant as a prediction that Obama will never be president? Or is it a negation of whatever Obama *hopes* to accomplish in office?

If the answers to these questions are not entirely clear, then the ideological leanings of its anonymous creator – beyond a vague sense of discontent – are equally as uncertain. Indeed, another variation on the Obama-as-Joker motif makes a similarly enigmatic commentary. In this version, the artist maintains the color scheme but completely supplants the Obama portrait with the Joker from the blockbuster 2009 film, *The*



Dark Knight (Fig. 3). Moreover, it replaces the “Hope” slogan with the word “Joke,” once again suggesting some hidden dimension to the promises of the Obama campaign, some way that it is fooling the public and worse yet, *enjoying* it (a reading supplemented by the addition of the Obama campaign “O” logo rendered with a “smiley face”). There seems to be attempts at political commentary, but both images simply make vague declarations of dissent and illustrate suspicions without identifying any offense in particular. Although it remains difficult to pinpoint the precise intent behind them, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from their common features, however: Obama is not what he seems, the signifier “hope” hides some deep and disturbing truth, and Obama’s persona conceals some sort of sadistic – albeit ill-defined – enjoyment.

Perhaps the most famous example of the internet and protest meme of Obama-as-Joker appropriated a famous image of the candidate from *Time* magazine, producing an aesthetic that even more directly recalls the grittier depiction of the Joker from *The Dark Knight* (the Photoshop altered portrait captures the distinct white skin, green hair and mutilated smile of the sadistic villain) (Fig. 4). In the film, the Joker conspires to take over the criminal underworld, but



he also derives pleasure from attempting to incite anarchy and thus demonstrate to Batman how fragile the social order of Gotham really is. Director Christopher Nolan’s imagining of the character resonates with anti-Obama sentiment through its comments on the precarious nature of social order in times of crisis as well as the cynical lengths society will go to in order to conceal its own moral decay. Slavoj Žižek observes how the plot of the *The Dark Knight* reinforces the notion that only a noble lie can rescue society from its own truth: when the altruistic DA Harvey Dent transforms into the villain Two-Face and goes on a killing spree, both Batman and Lieutenant Gordon conspire to cover up the killings so as to prevent Gotham from losing its one “pure” hero and rallying point. He argues that the central message of this film is that the elevation of “lying as a social principle” is the only thing that can “redeem us” (Žižek 2010: 59). In contrast, the Joker, Žižek states, is the “only figure of truth in the film” in so far as

he does not deny the corruption behind the noble lie but instead embodies its excessiveness (Žižek 2010: 59-60). If we transfer this narrative on to Obama, the appeal of the Joker image to his detractors becomes clearer. The portrait signifies the threat Obama poses to the social order and how this truth has been covered up by the “noble lie” of his campaign. As Gotham district attorney Harvey Dent states, “You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.” Obama lived long enough.

What Does Obama Want?

Of course, the longer cultural history of fools and court jesters in literature suggests that such figures have traditionally confronted power with its obscene underside. According to Paul Taylor, this function affords the comic figure a certain weight of seriousness in popular culture evident in the seventy-plus years of Batman’s conflict with the Joker: “the Joker, daubed in face paint to exaggerate his disfigurement, literally *faces up* to society’s traumatic core: our constitutive dependence upon levels of violence we would prefer to disavow” (Taylor 2010: 164). Taylor’s comments take on new resonance in the context of Obama’s presidency, in which the politician does not choose to embody this disavowed truth of systematic violence, exploitation and corruption, so much as accusers both known and unknown attribute these truths to him. In so far as the Joker comparison points to something rotten in the social order, blending his image with that of Obama draws an analogy that does more to reduce analysis of the capitalist system than it does to open it up. How can Obama – however compromised by corporate money and political power – possibly be responsible for destroying America when he so clearly works to repair its self-image? The interpretive openness of the Joker comparison is essential. If the Joker has no ideological agenda except to overturn order and incite chaos, then subjects can fold any number of possible motives into the figure, projecting their respective political anxieties into it as explanations of Obama’s unknown desires. The use of images rather than text only further enables the remixing of Obama to one’s own ideological fears. Thus, the context in which the images of the Joker are deployed becomes even more important in determining the “truth” each supposedly reveals.

The difficulty of ideologically locating the critiques meant through this association between Obama and the cartoon villain speak to the unexpected origins of the image’s most striking version. The artist of the altered *Time Magazine* portrait is Chicago native Firas Alkhateeb, a senior history major at the University of Illinois (Borelli 2009: unpaginated; Malcolm 2009: unpaginated). As the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* report, Alkhateeb identifies his political views with the ultra-liberal longtime Ohio congressman – and sometimes



presidential candidate – Dennis Kucinich (Borelli 2009; Malcolm 2009). "After Obama was elected, you had all of these people who basically saw him as the second coming of Christ," Alkhateeb said: "From my perspective, there wasn't much substance to him" (Malcolm 2009). While Alkhateeb intended a far-left critique of Obama, a later artist digitally removed the remnants of the *Time* cover and affixed the word "socialism" to the bottom of the image (Fig. 5). Subsequent appropriations prove that communicative capitalism exacerbates the "death of the author" as the circulation of Alkhateeb's original image becomes further detached from its original source and intention. Within a few weeks, this provocative image began

appearing in its altered form, both online and as posters, which position the critique more decisively as a rejection of Obama's perceived desire to institute socialist policies. Evidently, while the portrait has a wide ranging appeal that does not lend itself easily to typical partisan categories, it bears more specific meaning for anti-"big-government" conservatives, and these activists in particular have made the most public use of it during protests declaring their dissent from President Obama's policies. For members of the Patriot movement, of which the Tea Party is the most public embodiment, the ambiguous image represents Obama as engaged in a corrupt inversion of white conservative hegemony, whose position of power only serves as a catalyst for long gestating paranoid fantasies regarding the spiteful intentions of government institutions allegedly conspiring to steal their liberties.

The content of these suspicions are notoriously difficult to pin down, and various attempts to label the image speak to this difficulty, since signifiers seen below the Obama-as-Joker image prove striking in their ideological inconsistency: Obama is supposed to be a socialist, a Marxist, a communist, a fascist, a terrorist, a Muslim – the list goes on (Fig.6). Yet, this apparent inconsistency is actually the hidden strength of the meme, which enables detractors to project any number of paranoid fantasies – meant to explain Obama's malevolent intent – into the image, and thus gentrify what does not make sense about him. The point seems to be the repetition of the always failed



work of substitution where one signifier metonymically slides in to replace another in a never ending drive to name the enigma of Obama's desire. The "Hope," "Nope" and "Joke" series suggests the politician resonates in a multitude of ways, each of which imply a particular imaginary relationship with him ranging from long-awaited savior to sadistic persecutor. While

his supporters see in him a desire for transformative change, for his detractors, Obama must be reproduced as a hideous excess to Americanism.

Obama Joker images allow us to distinguish between at least three registers of Obama's political persona. In his essay "Neighbors and Other Monsters," Žižek contends that there is never just one "neighbor" – our fellow human – but rather, there are always three, each of which corresponds to a register of Lacan's Symbolic-Imaginary-Real triad. According to Žižek, in the *symbolic* the neighbor falls under the "big Other" or "the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence" and enable our communication (Žižek 2005: 143). Next comes the *imaginary* neighbor, or "other people 'like me'—my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirror-like relationships of competition [and] mutual recognition" (Žižek 2005: 143). Finally, Žižek explains, there is the neighbor in the *real*, the "'inhuman partner,' the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic order, is possible" (Žižek 2005: 143). He emphasizes how these are never separate registers so much as they are "knotted" together. "[B]eneath the neighbor as my *semblant*, my mirror image," he writes, "there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be 'gentrified'" (Žižek 2005: 143). From these distinctions emerges three Obamas: the "symbolic" Obama as savior of the big Other, the gifted public speaker and law professor; the "imaginary" Obama of "Hope," the cool, young, African American visionary; and the "real" Obama of a threatening yet enigmatic desire.

The Obama-as-Joker image captures this third, traumatic dimension of the Neighbor, depicting the candidate's desire as some radical, inhuman otherness that prevents his critics from identifying with him. Once again, the visual allusion to the film proves crucial. In Žižek's analysis, the Joker's relationship to his face in *The Dark Knight* is central to understanding the character's excessive persona. Through-out the film, the Joker offers conflicting stories of how he acquired the scars that give him the appearance of a perpetual smile. There is no attempt to "humanize" him through a sympathetic back story of abuse or misfortune and he thus prevents imaginary mirroring. "[H]e is not a man without a mask," contends Žižek, "but, on the contrary, a man fully identified with his mask, a man who is his mask—there is no 'ordinary guy' beneath it" (Žižek 2010: 60). The cartoon "flatness" of his portrayal resists sympathetic identification by rendering his actual motivations all the more uncertain. Consequently, he is nothing but an "unfathomable abyss" of potential hostility; his pure and unmediated excess is written right across his face in the form of his grotesque, mutilated smile.

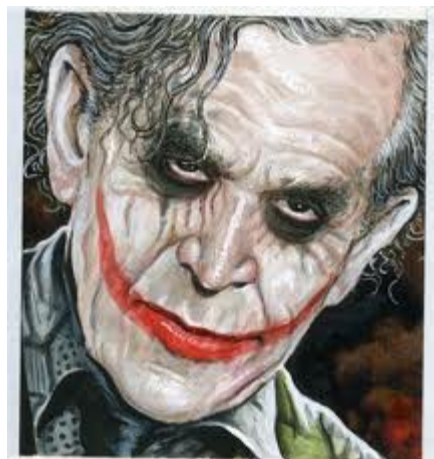
From the perspective of his opponents, the depiction of Obama as a sadistic clown paradoxically does not entail covering up his "human face" with the make-up and scarred smile of the Joker; rather it means revealing his *true* face. In other words, they fully identify Obama with this mask of the Joker. *He is nothing but this mask*. Once again, however, the images

themselves seem to have no determinate content. Rather, the stupidity of the comparison simply points to Obama's excessive desire, signified by the *jouissance* of scars that are also at the same time a broad red smile. In fact, the lack of content in this portrayal – Why is he smiling? What is he enjoying? – suggests the trauma of encountering another human being without the symbolic mediation of a “human face.” “[E]ncountering the other's [human] face is not the experience of the abyss of the other's subjectivity,” Žižek argues. “[T]he only way to arrive at this experience is through defacement in all its dimensions, from a simple tic or grimace that disfigures the face (in this sense, Lacan claims that the Real is “the grimace of reality”) up to the monstrosity of the total loss of face” (Žižek 2005: 147). The disfigurement or “grimace” of the mutilated smile produces the experience of Obama's subjectivity as a traumatic encounter with an unknown and potentially malevolent desire in excess of his policy positions or campaign promises. He comes to embody the suffocating and over-proximate Thing of the neighbor with whom there exists no basis for communication. The multitude of images appropriating Obama's “human face” in order to render his unspecified aggression position him as the enemy of social order insisting within it as an overwhelming agency.

For Žižek, the key question of *The Dark Knight* is, “What does the Joker want?” The Obama-as-Joker meme asks the same question through the parallel it draws between the candidate and this character: *What does Obama really want?* However, these images force us to introduce a further psychoanalytic twist to this question, because every question regarding the desire of the Other is always already a questioning of one's own desire. In other words, the Obama-as-Joker images latch on to the comic book character's excessive appearance in order to articulate the truth of their creator's social, political and economic desires, and not the other way around. For the ideological right, the altered pictures – no matter what ideological signifier is attached to them – simply formally reproduce Obama as an undefined excess “outside” or “beyond” traditional American values. Concordantly, the multiple fantasies purporting to explain Obama's hidden desires inevitably depict him as a traumatic foreign intrusion on the conservative white imagination of the United States. The question of what Obama wants thus rebounds on the critics themselves: what do these images betray regarding their political fantasies?

Reverse Minstrelsy

The constellation of racial discourses surrounding the Obama Joker suggest – contrary to his careful political positioning as a symbolic savior – that his mixed-race



heritage signals a threat to traditional white hegemony less problematic for his blackness than how his racial background troubles whiteness. As the Obama Joker suggests, beneath politician's "post-racial" exterior, his opponents perceive a vexing racial otherness. These perceptions lean on the presumption of Obama's racial deception. For instance, in his memoir, *Dreams From My Father*, Obama describes his childhood strategy for dealing with racial exclusion in terms of wearing a multitude of masks that allowed him to more fluidly navigate his own complex heritage (Obama 1995 [2004]: 53-4), an admission which prompted the hyperbolic talk show host Rush Limbaugh to claim that Obama used masks as a "tactic for fooling white people" (Limbaugh 2009: unpaginated). In the same paragraph, Limbaugh pours effusive praise on the Obama Joker caricature, glowing that "whoever put this poster together is pretty smart because there are some similarities here to what the Joker did in that movie and what Obama is doing to this country" (Limbaugh 2009). Although Limbaugh does not explicitly make the connection, his invocation of the Joker image alongside the misplaced criticism of Obama's racial "passing" points to the mutually reinforcing dynamic between cartoonish representation and racially charged discourse. As if in negative confirmation of this truth, Limbaugh vehemently insists that racism has nothing to do with it, citing a similar image of George W. Bush as the Joker, created for the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2008 (Fig. 7) (Limbaugh 2009). Of course, race is the defining difference between these two images and the troubled history of representing African Americans in popular culture places the Obama Joker images in a significantly less playful light than Limbaugh implies.

For one, the Joker images depict Obama as engaging in a sort of reverse minstrelsy in which he parades around in "white-face" make-up, and his broad red smile gestures towards his enjoyment at the expense of traditional power structures. This smile cannot help but recall the appearance of actors such as Al Jolson, a white man who painted his face black and performed with exaggerated red lips meant to caricature the appearance of African Americans. Thus, the images raise the historical specter of the minstrel show, in which first white performers and then, after the Civil War, black ones, would wear the cartoonish make-up and speak in the hyperbolic speech patterns of racist black caricatures. While the shows themselves have officially died out, Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2000) raises the question of whether these obscene stereotypes persist in the contemporary mass media in which black actors, comedians and hip-hop artists continue to perform their blackness, largely for white spectators. The concerns of the minstrel show, as Lee's film seems to argue, persist into our current moment, a reading that the Obama Joker pictures corroborate. That mutilated red smile – an exemplary "partial object" – gestures towards the otherness of blackness within whiteness that cannot be easily domesticated. The association of Obama with the Joker, a comic book cartoon with his own set of exaggerated

features similar to that of minstrel performers, potentially activates this ugly tradition in new ways.

According to Sianne Ngai, this history of minstrel performance in American culture renders all popular attempts to “animate” blackness instantly suspicious: “the affective ideologeme of animatedness foregrounds the degree to which emotional qualities seem especially prone to sliding into corporeal qualities where the African-American subject is concerned, reinforcing the notion of race as a truth located, quite naturally, in the always obvious, highly visible body” (Ngai 2005: 95). The projection of animatedness implied by the Obama Joker images naturalizes and corporealizes fantasies of Obama’s obscene racial difference and its supposedly destructive effect on white social norms in ways that resonate with the attitudes of minstrelsy, even while refusing their previous form. In this case, popular culture becomes an alibi for perpetuating the association between blackness and emotion, which appears everywhere from the African-American blues tradition to the cultural fascination with images of the angry black man. The use of the Joker here seems consistent with Ngai’s claim that “two-dimensional animation became one of the most culturally prominent technologies for the revitalization of extant racial stereotypes, giving new ‘life’ to caricatures that might otherwise have stood greater chance of becoming defunct or inactive” (Ngai 2005: 109). The Joker’s personality is also marked by animated exaggeration, a flair for theatricality in dress, gesture and voice that could just as easily describe racialized attitudes towards blackness. The original *Batman* (1989) film makes these associations abundantly clear through the constant linking of the Joker with the music of Prince, a choice which in the current context seems like more than simple commercial calculation, blending the stereotypical representation of the terrorist with that of the black pimp.

At the very least then, one can say that although the Joker appears in “white-face” his character marks something decisively *non-white*. Trading the wearing of black face for accusations of white-face, the Obama Joker speaks to mutations in the articulation of minstrelsy as a racializing ideology. Under the conservative white gaze, Obama’s mixed-race background manifests as an aberrant whiteness shot through with the same troubling racial characteristics often attributed to blackness in minstrel shows. If the demographics of the United States are shifting towards a majority non-white nation, then the Obama Joker inflects historical anxieties regarding miscegenation in which the obscenity of “one drop” or more of black blood throws the stability of whiteness as the universal marker of American national identity into question.

Huffington Post contributor Michael Shaw articulates this paradox in terms of racial performance: “Regarding the image specifically, I’m interested in...Obama in chalky white face. Besides the allusion to the President as a psychopath and more insidiously, a man behind a mask, does the chalk exploit race by suggesting the man is playing at being white?” (Shaw

2009: unpaginated). Shaw picks up on the implicit charges of reverse minstrelsy signaled by the depiction of Obama in “white face,” suggesting that he is “playing at being white”. Perennial accusations of widespread *anti-white* racism by conservative activists support Shaw’s interpretation. Citing affirmative action and welfare programs they feel to be disproportionately benefitting American minorities, conservative’s sense of unjust persecution leads many of them to conclude that they struggle against an epidemic of discrimination imperiling both their economic success and their white culture, whether in the forms of affirmative action or political correctness.

Within the logic of anti-white racism, Obama conducts a minstrel performance mocking whiteness, both polluting its apparent purity but also enacting a negative confirmation of the natural association of whiteness with moral authority. Nowhere is this narcissism more apparent than with movement evangelist Glenn Beck, who uses this farcical specter in order to compare Tea Party protestors to American crusaders against discrimination like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Media Matters 2009: video). Developing this logic to its extreme, Beck even held an event on the steps of Lincoln Memorial where King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech forty-seven years earlier. “This is going to be a moment that you’ll never be able to paint people as haters, racists, none of it,” Beck said on his show: “This is a moment, quite honestly, that I think we reclaim the civil rights movement” (Associated Press 2010: video). This dubious alignment of the Tea Party with the American Civil Rights movement, however, fundamentally relies on the disavowal of its own racism, and the projection of anti-racial attitudes on Obama through the reversal of minstrelsy’s apparent object of racial derision. Even if racism is not the ultimate cause of anti-Obama discontent, the racial dynamics of this image do help the discontented talk about why they feel he does not belong in the United States and cannot be trusted. As the Obama Joker meme suggests, the politician only acts the office long reserved exclusively for white men, manifesting in this uncanny portrayal of an aberrant whiteness.

Another persistent strain of criticism points to how this apparent excessiveness is both spatialized and racialized in political discourse. On 26 April 2012, President Obama had to take the unprecedented step of releasing a copy of his long form birth certificate to prove he was born in Hawaii and is thus a United States citizen. The paranoia constructing Obama as an aberration within the United States finds the most literal expression in the so-called “Birther” movement which insists the politician was actually born in Kenya, rather than the U.S., thereby disqualifying him from serving as president. Despite the ample evidence refuting these claims, the theory continues to be a potent tool for delegitimizing the administration. In this form of paranoid delusion, Obama’s “excessive” position relative to social order, indicated by the Joker comparison, maps geographies of inclusion and exclusion on to the space of the nation. Since Obama does not mirror normative conceptions of American (white) identity, he must be expelled

from national borders, making his intrusive presence all the more unbearable. The insistence of his opponents that he must be from Kenya only underscores this desire to push him outside of the national center. Birtherism is thus how this expulsion is spatialized in an attempt to prop-up the national white imaginary.

Yet, these Birther fantasies are not restricted to questioning Obama's legitimacy, but prove exemplary of simultaneous anti-immigrant discontent. In this context, Obama, a world traveler, becomes the ultimate "illegal alien" stealing what rightfully belong to U.S. citizens. Thus, Birtherism also betrays the obvious racial component to this sense that Obama is a dangerous outsider that threatens America. Like the illegal immigrants targeted by Arizona's draconian "papers please" law – who are paradoxically constructed as both so lazy as to live off the dwindling welfare state and so industrious as to steal everyone's jobs – Obama is supposed to be depriving white America of its prosperity. And, like the illegal immigrants executed by self-styled "Minutemen" who – without the official sanction of government institutions – patrol the United States border with Mexico, Obama must be resisted violently, if necessary. The figure of Obama Joker simply condenses this multitude of foreign enemies into a single figure for social symptoms – unemployment, falling wages and standards of living, among others – that seem to have no other explanation. In all of these cases, the Obama Joker images frame Obama through fantasies of racial excess that have real world effects on the neoliberal management of racialized populations. Since the national body is coded as a white space, Obama's mixed race body manifests an otherness internal to that whiteness, a stumbling block in the American imaginary that his opponents use to explain the country's decline, effectively externalizing the cause for the current liberal capitalist crisis.

Monstrous Doubles

The failure to internalize this cause – the mounting contradictions of neoliberal globalization enabled by the policies of the liberal democratic state – produces the monstrous double to Obama as destructive agent: the conspiracy theorist. Parallel to the racial inflection infused in anti-Obama criticism, the culture of conspiracy theories attempts to explain what makes Obama so oppressive in the coded terms of government "overreach." Defenders of the image in the conspiracy community explicitly link Obama to wider anxieties regarding plots against America, a move which mirrors the fear of foreign contagion, except this time rather than framing it as coming from below – illegal immigration – they see the contagion coming from above – the so-called New World Order. In their criticisms, these anti-government crusaders increasingly

resemble the very threat they claim to be fighting, which, as we shall see, manifests in their own fondness for wearing the Joker make-up.

The discourse on Obama in the conspiracy community inevitably returns to the argument that Obama serves as a front-man for a shadow government composed of the banking sector, the military and the ruling elite. In an article titled “Obama as Joker Explained,” *Infowars.com* contributor Kurt Nimmo critiques charges of racism leveled against users of the portrait and presents a counter-argument connecting Obama to conspiratorial plots against the American people. “It is of course incomprehensible for most liberals,” writes Nimmo, “to believe Obama represents the most violent and sadistic force in the world — the United States government long ago taken over by the aforementioned bankster cartel or mafia” (Nimmo 2009: unpaginated). Defending the appropriateness of the Joker image, he argues, “Obama is the current and transitional face of this high-tech murder and economic violence machine.” Although Nimmo condemns conservatives equally for their ignorant charges that Obama is a “socialist,” his article nonetheless hinges on evoking clandestine conspiracies of a cartel of “fascists,” “monopoly men” and “determined eugenicists” united under the banner of the “New World Order.” In this rudimentary cognitive mapping, the political system itself – embodied in the figure of the Obama Joker – assumes the role of a sadistic enemy pulling the strings behind the scenes.

Nimmo’s comments are symptomatic of the faltering belief in the American symbolic order, which, as Santner notes above, leads to a proliferation of paranoid discourses. Indeed, Nimmo’s anxieties speak to long gestating suspicions regarding the trustworthiness and effectiveness of the American state. Although occasionally glimpsed in American history by the presidential candidacy of Barry Goldwater, the formation of the militia movement and the Oklahoma City bombing, Nimmo’s platform of *Infowars.com* attests to how the most recent resurgence of paranoid delusions is mediated by transformations in communication technology. Major news outlets have long excluded the paranoid fringes of American society, forcing proponents of such ideas to become savvy manipulators of alternative media that bypasses traditionally processes of vetting and verification. While recent trends seem to reverse this exclusion as television and newspapers begin to imitate more popular media, the internet currently provides the ideal haven for these theories and thus contributes to the break-down in the big Other that informs anti-Obama sentiment.

Jodi Dean’s recent work usefully engages with this “decline of symbolic efficiency” in the context of online conspiratorial communities. In the final chapter of her book *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Dean confronts the social psychosis manifesting in the 9/11 “Truther” movement, which claims that the official accounts for the causes of September 11 are part of a vast government conspiracy aimed at concealing how the event is an “inside job”

perpetrated at the highest levels of power. Through her analysis, she reveals that the culture of conspiracy theory produces “certainty” through repetition, intensity and affect in response to perceived holes in the symbolic order (Dean 2009: 156). With Nimmo and others, we are confronted with these tactics of argument in relation to Obama, where, in a dizzying reversal, the absence of evidence for his ties to the New World Order simply confirms the truth of the conspiracy theory: look how well the evidence has been concealed from the public; it must be true. Counter-intuitively, Dean argues how, rather than collapsing the theory, for conspiracy theorists, the circulation around absence is the entire point. “Enjoyment is produced by the very drive to link, connect and document, by the specificity and detail,” she contends, “establishing connections without ever reaching its goal” (Dean 2009: 150). The conspiratorial drive for “truth” thus lacks any teleology other than reproducing its own conspiracy theorizing, endlessly connecting the dots across multiple events, people and media platforms.

While Dean concentrates on the Truther movement, the current conjuncture reveals the consistency of this pseudo-discourse across the temporal divide of September 11, and its effective exploitation of internet technologies which contribute to the breakdown in consistent shared truths into the Obama administration. The continued success of Alex Jones, prolific conspiracy theorist and founder of *Infowars.com*, exemplifies the capacity for such ideas to metastasize within these conditions. Jones originally emerged as a key figure in alternative media through his radio show and website, and then Truther documentaries such as *TerrorStorm* (2006), but he quickly shifted into anti-Obama paranoia with his film *The Obama Deception: The Mask Comes Off* (2009). This documentary argues that Obama is the “puppet” or “pitch-man” for a shadowy and vast conspiratorial network which Jones claims to reveal by removing – in language approximating Limbaugh’s screed – the “mask” Obama wears to fool the American people. (However, carefully side-stepping accusations of racism, Jones presents the notion of Obama’s blackness as an asset to those for which he works through the two African American voices presented in the film, hip-hop artists KRS-One and “Professor” Griff of the group Public Enemy.) Beneath this blackness, again Obama’s face opens on to financial, military and government groups enjoying at the expense of average Americans. The “mask” of the title again serves as a metaphor in the dialectic of concealment and revelation that structures the conspiracy community’s claims to knowledge.

In Jones’ career as professional conspiracy theorist we can witness the metonymic sliding from one object of suspicion to another without much evidence to link them. Instead, he implicitly promises conspiratorial *jouissance* enabled through the distribution, networking and circulation of paranoid knowledge. Perhaps fittingly then, Jones has emerged as one of the most vehement supporters of the Obama Joker, promoting the image as part of a video contest in which he asked people to visit his website, print off a high resolution version of the portrait,

film themselves posting it around their town, and then upload the video to YouTube. In a curious piece of performance art titled “The Joker Talks to Police about Obama,” Jones – his own face painted up as the character depicted in *The Dark Knight* – posted a video in which he explains the resonance of the image and tries to distribute it around Austin, Texas (Jones 2009: video). Attempting to channel the Joker’s maniacal personality and obnoxious laughter, he drives from location to location, handing out his fliers. At one point, he approaches a group of police officers who rebuff his offers and advise him to step away from their vehicle. When Jones returns to his own car, he derides them in his best “Joker” impression and claims he only retreated because he is a “slave” to their authority and an uncritical “worshipper” of president Obama. This moment exemplifies the anti-authority theme of the video in which Obama is at various times associated with genocide, the New World Order, socialism, fascism, the mafia, foreign banking elites and various other obscenities. For Jones, Obama appears to represent the threat posed by all forms of government, law and authority and he frames Obama’s followers as incapable of critical thought like his own.

Yet, this spectacle betrays unintended truths about the confrontational form of politics he advocates. Jones’ peculiar decision to paint his own face in the Joker’s make-up, as well as the tacky advertising strategy of writing his web address below the Obama Joker portrait, indicate an *identity* between his own strategies and those he accuses President Obama of promoting. Repeated scenes of Jones pointing to the Joker portrait while he wears the same make-up and spits out his bitter invective create an uncanny doubling. In these moments, anti-government extremism betrays its own potential role as an attack on institutions. The connection between this excessive reaction and the so-called Patriot movement is made more explicit by the design on Jones’ t-shirt in the video, which features a coiled snake with the phrase “Don’t Tread on Me” printed below. This image is reminiscent of revolutionary war flags used by Patriot groups to symbolize their opposition to “tyranny.” The coiled snake warns outsiders to keep their proper distance or prepare for violent confrontation. Taken as a whole, this motif recalls the dangers represented by the collapse of the symbolic space and the perceived over-proximity between neighbors which results. Jones’ video indicates not only an imaginary rivalry with Obama as the embodiment of a vast conspiracy, but also identification with the negation of social order that the Joker represents, instrumentalized to his own ends. “Therein resides the truth of the paranoiac stance,” writes Žižek: “it is itself the destructive plot against which it is fighting” (Žižek 2006: 21).

The results of this paranoiac stance have become abundantly clear in American political discourse. Once disavowed xenophobia, paranoia and ignorance erupt in local town hall meetings, in the conservative media punditry, and even at the highest levels of local, state and federal government decision making. The obscene sources of enjoyment that have always secretly animated modern conservatism seep into the groundwater of public political discourse

and thus anxieties that Obama will enact severe gun control laws, that FEMA will inter “patriots” in concentration camps, that liberals collude with the UN in clandestine conspiracies to overthrow the American government, are gradually normalized as topics for serious discussion, wrapped in the protective blanket of “small government” rhetoric. Obama and his administration make a fatal error if they think these tensions can be ameliorated through consensus building. If Obama is the sadistic villain, the abject outsider to what counts as “American,” then his policies will appear excessive from the start, no matter how moderate or well reasoned. The externalization of these paranoid delusions in the form of violent resistance threatens to fundamentally alter the coordinates of American political space and signals an imminent struggle over who is included or excluded from the symbolic community and what solutions to current problems are available for discussion in the future.

The current political discourse is split like the personalities of *The Dark Knight* villain Two-Face between repairing the appearance of faltering symbolic institutions – represented by altruistic Gotham district attorney Harvey Dent – and indulging in the *jouissance* of endless destruction – like the Joker. These are also the two-sides of the Obama phenomenon which we must resist (Fig. 8). The answer to the forced choice between “Hope” and “Joke” must be resolute: “No, thanks!” A successful political response to this threat will reject the politics of conspiracy but also confront the structural inequality of the neoliberal economy for which these fears of foreign intrusion are



merely symptoms. It must defetishize Obama as either savior or persecutor as well as rethink and rearticulate what really constitutes structural “change” in the Age of Obama. The point is not just to save the institutional framework within which decisions are made, but the struggle to redefine that framework itself.

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