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An anthropology of lying:

Trump and the political sociality of moral outrage

ABSTRACT
It has long been a truism that politicians lie, but
with the entry of Donald Trump into the US political
domain, the frequency, degree, and impact of lying
in politics are now unprecedented. An anthropology
of lies does not seek to correct them but instead
asks, How do we understand lies and liars in their
cultural, historical, and political context? Asking
this question allows us to see clearly the work of
lies, including their meaningful and sometimes
violent consequences. By thinking anew about the
anthropology of lying, anthropologists can show the
unexpected ways that community can form around
lies. [*lying, truth, politics, sociality, Donald Trump,
United States*]

Politicians lie. This we know. This we expect. Citizens know this,
and anthropologists know this. But for many of us in the United
States right now—anthropologists included—it feels like we
have surpassed "politicians lie" as a normative or hegemonic
sort of claim. Things feel different. Donald Trump is different.
By all metrics and counting schemes, his lies are off the charts. We simply
have not seen such an accomplished and effective liar before in US politics.

His lies, their content, and their context are as important as the work
they do. Thus, an anthropology of lies must ask not how to correct them
but how to understand lies and liars in cultural, historical, and political
context so that we see clearly the work of lies, including their meaning-
ful and sometimes violent consequences. Lying and liars are found across
time and in all human societies, yet this is a story rooted in a specific time
and place. Put together, this is both an anthropological and ethnographic
project, an effort to think anew an anthropology of lying as well as a politi-
cal ethnography of the US 2016 presidential campaign.

If truth is social, then so too are lies. At a minimum, truth is social in
that facts (e.g., $1 + 1 = 2$, one's hair or eye color, who is president of the
United States) are interpreted in specific social contexts. At a maximum,
truth is social in that we socially categorize certain ideas as factual (e.g.,
ideas about child-rearing or taste or beauty). Similarly, lies, which rely on
fabrication and interpretation, are forms of intentional manipulation and
deception (Arendt 1967, 1972; Bailey 1988, 1991; Barnes 1994; Bok 1979).
What, then, is the sociality of lies? Trump's lies and his relentless dismissal
of facts make him seem authentic to his followers. As he proclaims to the
world, he is real, unlike the fake, insincere Hillary Clinton. He documents
his masculine vitality through a hyperbolic letter from his doctor stating
that Mr. Trump's health is "astonishingly excellent," "extraordinary," and
that if elected he would be "the healthiest individual ever elected to the
presidency" (Blake 2016). He claims that "I alone" can bring change.

Such aspirational lying creates affiliative truths; that is, US citizens'
responses to Trump are both affective and social in creating communi-
ties of both supporters and protesters. Trump's lies galvanize moral out-
rage in (at least) two directions: for some, a moral call for change as a
return to a "great" America, but for others, as an outraged response to
the racism and misogyny embedded in this call. Contradictions lie at

the heart of all cultures, and Trump's rhetoric highlights a great conundrum of US society: who we think we are as a nation.

Lies are never neutral. Instead, as political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1972) argues, they are also calls to action since they are claims to truth. Political lies are acts that create new realities for which contradictory facts need to be eliminated. Discussing the period from World War I through the Vietnam War, Arendt argues that while the premodern political lie hid a known truth, the modern lie seeks to eliminate the historical reality that it denies. Destroyed is thus not (only) truth but also history, with new certainties inserted in its place as truths. How to combat this? One impulse might be to appeal to truth or facts or history, providing context and argument in a dialogic fashion. This presumes, however, the existence of dialogue, of a civil public discourse that now seems quaint and anachronistic. The 21st-century political lie has its own history, which consists of a new global populism and demagoguery, the Internet's immediacy, and social media's selection biases and ability to disseminate hate. This is the moment we are in: the time and place where an anthropology of lies might be of use. But first, a review of a new reality in the United States: high-octane demagoguery, powered not only by false statements, prejudice, and emotion but also by an authoritarian, egotistical disdain for the truth.

Demagogus trumpensis: The trumpery of Donald Trump

Does it matter that Trump lies? Don't Hillary Clinton and other politicians lie too? In the election, much ink was spilled over these questions. Again: lying in politics is nothing new (Jay 2010), yet journalists repeatedly claimed that Trump's lying eclipsed all others'. Three newspapers' fact-checking operations found Trump's false claims to far surpass those of any other candidate in the 2016 presidential election: the *Tampa Bay Times*' PolitiFact, the *Toronto Star*'s #TrumpCheck, and the *Washington Post*'s Fact-Checker's Pinocchio Count. As Daniel Dale (2016) of the *Toronto Star* wrote,

> Every politician sometimes gets things wrong about complicated issues, sometimes practices evasive dishonesty. Trump gets things wrong all the time, pointlessly, about almost everything, and almost never corrects himself. Even if he's not intentionally lying, he's habitually erring. At [the] very least, it suggests a serial carelessness with the facts and a serial resistance to conceding error.

What does such serial carelessness with facts look like?

The Unauthorized Database of False Things said by Donald Trump found that, from mid-September to early November 2016, he made on average 20 false claims a day

(Dale and Talaga 2016). In the three presidential debates, Trump made 104 false claims versus 13 made by Hillary Clinton (Dale and Talaga 2016). PolitiFact's Truth-O-Meter presents similar findings for both Trump and Clinton: each made false statements, but Trump's far exceeded Clinton's or, for that matter, those of other leading politicians in the Democratic and Republican parties. PolitiFact ranked public statements by Trump, Clinton, President Obama, House Speaker Paul Ryan, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell as either true, mostly true, half true, mostly false, false, and pants on fire (blatant lies). The ranking as of January 12, 2017, is shown in Table 1. Trump's statements are 69 percent mostly false, false, or pants on fire, versus Clinton's 26 percent. Each of the other politicians has a lower percentage of false statements than Trump, and all except Trump have more true statements than false ones.

Euphemisms abound for Trump's language: falsehoods, unsubstantiated claims, exaggerations. Or as his counsel Kellyanne Conway said with regard to White House lies about inauguration crowd size: "alternative facts." Some news outlets call his false statements lies, others refuse to do so. Trump's biographer Tony Schwartz coined an oxymoron to describe Trump's habitual, strategic, and unapologetic lying: "truthful hyperbole," which is "a way of saying, it's a lie, but who cares?" (Mayer 2016). Many people do. Unlike a bullshitter, a liar rejects the authority of the truth (Frankfurt 2005; see also da Col, forthcoming). Trump traffics in all sorts of manipulation and deception, but his false statements are not bullshit meant to cover what he does not know. Rather, his lies aim to rewrite or scramble history.

Lies can have violent repercussions. Racist lies, or those based on derogatory views of a specific group, convert prejudice to truth and in so doing can enable violence, be it symbolic, structural, verbal, or physical. Trump's statements sometimes grow into general and even universal statements out of single or specific incidents, amplifying the behavior of one or some to a truth about all. Examples are Trump's comment in June 2015 about Mexican immigration to the United States: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . . They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." Or his November 2015 suggestion that "thousands and thousands of people were cheering" in New Jersey as the World Trade Center collapsed on 9/11. A day after he made this comment, ABC news anchor George Stephanopoulos asked Trump about this, noting that there was no evidence for the statement. "It was on television," Trump said. "I saw it. . . . There were people over in New Jersey that were watching it, a heavy Arab population, that were cheering as the buildings came down" (Carroll 2016). During and after the US presidential election, violence rose against numerous groups, including both Latinos and Muslims. In the month following the

Table 1. Percentages of five US politicians' public statements that as of January 12, 2017, were true, mostly true, half true, mostly false, false, or pants on fire (blatant lies)

	True	Mostly True	Half True	Mostly False	False	Pants on Fire
Donald Trump	4%	12%	15%	18%	33%	18%
Hillay Clinton	25%	26%	24%	14%	10%	2%
Barack Obama	21%	27%	27%	12%	12%	2%
Paul Ryan	15%	21%	24%	28%	9%	4%
Mitch McConnell	10%	28%	17%	24%	21%	0%

Source: Data compiled from Truth-O-Meter, PolitiFact, www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/

election, the Southern Poverty Law Center documented over 1,094 incidents of hate crimes, such as public verbal and physical attacks on individuals, swastika graffiti on both public and private property, and hate mail sent to mosques (SPLC 2016). Trump's inflammatory rhetoric inspired and also incited people to violence from across the political spectrum. As a result of unprecedented violence against minority groups, Human Rights Watch (2017) listed Trump's election to president of the United States as a major threat to human rights in its *World Report 2017: Demagogues Threaten Human Rights.*

The repercussions of this rhetoric are also legal. Consider this headline from December 6, 2016: "Trump's Lies about Voter Fraud Are Already Leading to New GOP Voter-Suppression Efforts" (Berman 2016). During the presidential campaign, Donald Trump repeatedly claimed that the election was "rigged." He and his supporters threatened not to accept the results if he lost, and his followers widely repeated his charges of election fraud, some even going so far as to personally monitor their local voting stations. Following the election, Trump claimed his Electoral College victory was "a landslide" and that he also won the popular vote: "In addition to winning the Electoral College in a landslide, I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally."[1] Both claims are false, but for some groups they have taken on the power of truth. One month after the election, and contrary to readily available factual evidence, 29 percent of US citizens polled believed Trump won the popular vote, as did 52 percent of Republicans polled (Oliver and Wood 2016). Instead, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by over 2.8 million votes, or 2.1 percent of the total vote, according to figures as of December 18, 2016 (Oliver and Wood 2016). As for the Electoral College, Trump's victory ranked 44th out of 54 US presidential elections since 1804 (Jacobson 2016). A political victory, but not a landslide.

The anthropology of lying

We can trace an anthropology of lying back to Zora Neale Hurston (1990). In *Mules and Men,* she wrote of "telling lies" as a part of African American social life, of sitting around trading stories, spinning fantastic yarns, and embellishing one's narrative such that it would be a high compliment to accuse someone of telling lies. Narrative anthropology has continued in this fashion, studying the craft of storytelling and appreciating cadence, emphasis, pacing, and audience (e.g., Bauman 1986). "Lying" here is in the service of craft and is a culturally and socially endorsed aspect of the performance of narration in many societies. Stretching the truth and exaggerating is a key part of Trump's repertoire (Hall, Goldstein, and Ingram 2016). Long before Trump was a political candidate, he was a reality-TV character, playing himself on *The Apprentice* beginning in 2004. Spectacle is entertainment and can involve deception, using smoke and mirrors to turn the mundane into the believable fantastic. There is pleasure in spectacle, and for some, in deception too. In politics, however, the stakes are higher than on reality TV. We have moved into new territory, where lying can have more severe consequences.

The anthropology of lying has largely focused on the practice as a culturally specific form of intentional deception. In his article "Tarahumara Prevarication: A Problem in Field Method," Herbert Passin (1942) considered all the possible reasons for lying among the Tarahumara of Mexico, including suspicion of external authorities (such as colonial officials, missionaries, and anthropologists), as well as individual personality traits. For him, lies are "more than simple caprice and willfulness. They indicate certain orientations of the culture and loci of conflict and affect" (1942, 235; see also Salamone 1977). For Georg Simmel, lies affect people's ability to interact: "All relationships of people to each other rest, as a matter of course, upon the precondition that they know something about each other" (1906, 441). According to Simmel, relationships, and thus life, depend on "faith in the honor of others" (446), making lying at the institutional level an especially important issue for social relations in the time of modern states, whatever their politics. Media rhetoric and spectacle played a key role in Trump's rise as a politician, and they were strikingly similar to those used to mobilize the masses in the former Soviet Union (Kendzior 2016). Medicine is another domain wherein the work of lies is often particularly evident. In France, for example, doctors' lies are designed to produce something, whereas patients' lies are intended to prevent something; in each case, a potential discrepancy exists between intentions and

implications (Fainzang 2002, 128–30; 2016). The hope of the lie is not always its reality. Nonetheless, as Michael Gilsenan argues, lying is an important part of everyday worlds in Lebanon in that "it is part of the language by which men set up what they hope are socially authentic and legitimate grounds for conduct" (2016, 523). Trump's lying does just this: it stakes a claim to authenticity and legitimacy while denying the same to political rivals. It is more than denying history; it is a rearranging of society.

Affiliative truths and moral outrage

If, as Arendt argues, political lies create new realities, then what Trump's lies created in the 2016 US presidential campaign was a new political community. Just as print capitalism fostered a new form of nationalism in the early 20th century (Anderson 1983), so too have social and online media generated new forms of political community in the early 21st century, such as the incivil society incited via "outrage rhetoric" (Berry and Sobieraj 2014). Many of these new communities are online, opt-in, and based on interests and identities. They tend to be self-validating, producing and reproducing beliefs and desires. People's use of digital technologies accomplish such communal validation by flattening out all media such that they appear equally valid on one's phone or computer screen, while enabling a highly insular world of news—fake or not—that is shared by a community (Viner 2016). This new type of sociality sometimes includes an acceptance of what political comedian Stephen Colbert called truthiness—"something that seems like truth—the truth we want to exist" (Colbert 2005).

Here and now is where affiliative truths and aspirational lies operate. Trump's lies can be aspirational: we're going to build a wall, Mexico is going to pay for it, America is going to be "great" again, and so on. The category of aspirational lies includes things such as lying about one's height or weight, or how much one actually smokes, drinks, or exercises. Expanded to the level of a national "we," these lies become community-forming. They are truths to which one may affiliate via belief and feelings. The divisive nature of Trump's lies incites people to act against as much as for: against immigrants, against Muslims, or against "tolerance" of anyone defined as an Other. This political moment in the United States is one in which stereotypes can become lethal, in which "my fear of the Other is transformed into the notion that the Other is fearsome" (Das 2001, 56). Rumors can displace the subjectivity of the everyday, displace the humanity of the Other, as the imaginary becomes real and rumors potentially contribute to fatal violence (Das 2001). Although rumors are different from lies, some of their work is the same: fear drives action. Lies also displace the sense of humanity between people. The sociality of lies brings people together, but in so doing, distances others. Affiliative

truths need not always be violent. But when they mark others as fearsome, affiliation to groups can bring violence. Is this the future of Trump's America? Will such lie-fueled violence become normalized?

Arendt reminds us that "the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness. Moral outrage, for this reason alone, is not likely to make it disappear" (1972, 6). As the 2016 US presidential election bore out, moral outrage did not make lying politicians disappear. Despite the indignation of some over Trump's insulting of and lying about Mexicans, Muslims, Jews, judges, families of soldiers who died in action, fellow presidential candidates, and women, among others, he won the US presidential election. He won in part by tapping into a different sort of moral outrage, into feelings of anger and loss, of being left behind and defeated economically and perhaps culturally as well. Both senses of moral outrage are present in the contemporary United States—outrage over the masculine bullying and repercussions of Trump's lies, and outrage over perceived nostalgic losses of white masculinity as power in the United States. Those outraged over "political correctness," for example, were emboldened by Trump's perceived outsider status and success, as well as by his refusal of truth and other forms of supposed weakness. In Trump's world, for example, it is OK to grab a pussy but not to be one. This crude formulation, in which a derogatory term for women's genitals has a secondary meaning as a weak, emasculated person, is both offensive (at least to some) and telling in an ethnographic sense. It is to position oneself as the supposed opposite of both women and one's enemies: strong, certain, and in charge.

Moral outrage is not likely to make political lies disappear. Although Arendt's claim remains true, we must also ask, *whose* moral outrage? Feminist outrage over Trump and sexual harassment did not necessarily register among all groups as a moral issue. For some, "locker room talk" is an expectation and a desire. The United States is not a singular cultural field, and thus it is not organized around a singular morality. In addition, like lies, morality is not neutral. In some communities, beliefs and truths and facts are always reckoned on a moral scale; in others, beliefs may be seen as moral, but facts or truths are not, or vice versa (Adams 2005). An anthropology that pays attention to such moral calculations is in a position to make arguments about the work of lies in cultural, political, and historical contexts. In this time of refusal and resistance (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2014), anthropologists should insist on rich ethnographies of communities and their beliefs and politics, such as the now almost mythical Middle America, rather than accept shorthand versions or stereotypes of them (Walley 2017). If to refuse is (in part) to reject hierarchy and insist on a level playing field, this would include (perhaps) refusing elite-led society and welcoming political change led by outsiders.

Ethnographic witnessing and anthropological truths

In her reading of Arendt, literary scholar Cathy Caruth suggests that the response to the modern political lie is not truth telling or factual correction but bearing witness "from *within* the world of the lie" (2010, 92). Witnessing the denial of history from inside a lie is to document the process of erasure, to study what is present and what is absent, of what replaces the erased. Anthropology has a role to play here. As Ruth Behar states, "Anthropology is the most fascinating, bizarre, disturbing, and necessary form of witnessing left to us at the end of the twentieth century" (1997, 5). Anthropology, with its ethnographic methods and ethnographic theories, offers a way of bearing witness from inside worlds. As a method, ethnography is an embodied, empirical, and experiential field-based way of knowing centered around participant observation, or long-term immersion in a community. As a theory, ethnographic analysis starts on the ground, with the concepts that ground people's lives, worldviews, actions, and words in ways particular to that community. Within anthropology, an ethnographic approach is a detailed, up-close investigation of both the subjective and objective aspects of cultural life, that is, of the many ways humans organize, live in, and give meaning to the world.

Anthropological ethnography thus has the exquisite potential to get us *inside* the world of contemporary political lying. We can do this through ethnographic research with communities at all levels of society, including those who support Trump as well as those who recoil from him. An ethnography of lying in the age of Trump thus might involve research in news rooms, on social media, in national and state legislatures and political offices, with evangelical Christian communities who protest Trump, with white supremacists, with white working-class communities in Middle America (those who voted for him and those who did not), with wealthy white Republican women who voted for Trump, with Mexican American citizens in Arizona who voted for him, as well as those who fought his candidacy, and with the large number of US citizens who did not vote at all. Casting the ethnographic canvas wide avoids the myth that racism (and other–isms) belongs only to certain people such as lower-class whites, and instead uncovers how racism is historically built in to the "civilities of respectable, educated white women and men" (Stoler 2016, 253). Ethnographic research in a broad array of communities now can inform a new anthropology of lying as it unfolds. Witnessing in this sense is to see and experience from the inside of a community, to gain an experiential sense of its logics and rhythms, and to be able to mark and explain how truths and fears and lies combine to eliminate certain histories in favor of felt or desired beliefs.

Trump's restructuring of the US political world will happen under historically and culturally specific conditions involving people who resist and refuse along with those who willingly accept and participate. All these people, their communities, leaders, and governments are subjects in and subject to an unprecedented world of lies as violent potential. As this world unfolds and spins, so too must a gritty, unforgiving anthropology of lies, one that challenges our own disciplinary and other truths.

Note

1. Donald J. Trump, Twitter post, November 27, 2016, 1:30 p.m. http://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump.

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