

A Presidential Archive of Lies: Racism, Twitter, and a History of the Present

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What histories can be written from an archive of lies? Specifically, what histories of the present can be written from Donald Trump’s Twitter feed? As default press conference and presidential archive, Trump’s tweets break with the past in terms of presidential communication with the public. However, Trump’s political oeuvre is distinguished for additional reasons, including the scale and extent of his public lies and his extreme and derogatory comments about a range of individuals and groups. Both of these include speech that is interpreted as not only (White) nationalist but also racist and misogynist. In this current political moment, scholarly responsibilities include witnessing and analyzing this archive in formation, its contents, the communities it creates, and the sometimes violent work it does in the contemporary United States.

Keywords: lies, archive, racism, history, ethnography, social media, Trump, Twitter

Crisis. Chaos. Turning point. Disaster. All these terms have been used to describe the current political moment in the United States, that of the first years of the Trump presidency. But the story, and the criticisms, are broader and deeper than that of just one man. Instead, the saga opens to debates about Democrats and Republicans, class and race, democracy and authoritarianism, fear and trust, and history itself. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) might explain, it is a story about how the natives—in this case, U.S. citizens—explain themselves to themselves. This is, of course, not a singular story but multiple, contradictory, and contested stories. For some Americans, it is a tale of triumph rather than tragedy. Vocabulary, affect, and comportment divide groups with different political views in seemingly new, stark, and even violent ways. And yet this is not just a story in or of the United States. Similar political divisions, including accompanying rhetoric and acts of hate and violence, are currently found in many democracies around the world—in India under Narendra Modi, in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, and in the United Kingdom under Theresa May. Writing from Oxford, sociologist Gina Neff (2018) argues that “the twentieth century ended in 2016” (p. 127). The year of both the Brexit referendum and the U.S. presidential election, did 2016 mark a new era? If so, how shall we know and name it? How shall we write a history of this present?

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Technology is a primary driver of epochal change. When newspapers were first introduced, political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983) argued they connected people who had never met in person, enabling them to imagine themselves as part of a shared, national community. In the 20th century, the introduction of radio and television extended Anderson's "print nationalism," furthering the project of connecting national "imagined communities" through new forms of technology. New digital technologies—the Internet, being online—are part of current political conflict, connecting friends, families, strangers, journalists, scholars, and politicians. Given the ubiquity of digital technology for people in many parts of the world, including daily participation in it, anthropologists Daniel Miller and Heather A. Horst (2012) argue that the digital is "becoming a constitutive part of what makes us human" (p. 4). However, while digital technologies connect people in new ways, they are more of a rupture than a continuity with what came before. The rupture exists in the content and form of social media.

On social media, people no longer consume news and entertainment as they did with newspapers, radio, and television. Instead they generate media, critically interacting with others online to share information, learn, and validate ideas—in other words, to build community. Coming to know others online involves building affiliative, positive community by recognizing kindred types by, for example, hobby or profession or politics. But something about social media also aggravates and encourages the darkest elements of exclusion in human community, such that the performance of community at times includes negative abuse and violence—flaming, trolling, lying, mobbing, doxxing—often in registers deemed humorous or clever within the group and cruel or unethical outside it. Sometimes such online abuse is (just) political, and sometimes it is racist or misogynist or both, directed at those with whom one disagrees and also to whom one feels superior and thus justified in treating this way. Online social media exchanges have prompted fatal violence in real life in places around the world, including Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the United States. From print nationalism and imagined communities, we now find ourselves in an era of digital nationalism and imagined enemies. This is not a neutral development. Instead, in scaling all the way up to world leaders such as Donald J. Trump, social media has an outsize importance as a political archive of contemporary racism, extreme speech, and lies as aspirational and actionable truths.

A history of the present is a story for the future. Understanding the current historical moment without the retrospective benefit of time can be difficult. As both an anthropologist and a historian, I draw on the theories and methods of each discipline. Ethnography is at the center of my inquiry. I conducted ethnographic participant-observation research on Twitter, including on the Twitter platform but also in the ethnographic ways that conversations on and about Twitter reach beyond the actual website. Twitter as a phenomenon extends beyond social media into domains such as journalism, political protests, and off-line, face-to-face conversations. I also turn to an interdisciplinary group of scholars and writers to help make sense of this conjuncture. This undertaking is, in some ways, to write a "public future of the past," as Jo Guldi and David Armitage (2014) call for in *The History Manifesto*. In another way, it is to be an ethnographer of the present, participating in and observing life as lived online and interpreted and acted on off-line. Writing the history of this present requires the skills and insights of those who crunch data, those who tell stories, and all those who work in the gray space between the quantitative and qualitative. Inside and outside the academy, two points are clear: (1) Trump's presidency may be both the culmination of a century of American "cultural anesthesia," in which the pain of others is dismissed and made publicly invisible (Feldman, 1994), as well as the start of a new era of racism and disconnection; and (2) social media has

ripped clear through existing rules of community and communication, disrupting some conventions long overdue for change and challenging others in dangerous, still unfolding ways. Combining these two issues, we have the “weaponization” of social media, the very technology that “now forms the foundation of commercial, political, and civic life” (Singer & Brooking, 2018, p. 262). In telling the story of the U.S. present at the center is nothing other than a presidential archive of lies.

An Archive of Lies

What truths can be written from an archive of lies? History often presumes multiple truths or varied interpretations of a shared event. But plural possible truths are not the same as a collection of lies. Purposeful public lies unsettle the grounds of history (Arendt, 1972). Over the 20th and now 21st centuries, the idea that politicians lie is a common one, found across different countries and eras. And yet not all lies are of equivalent weight or consequence, nor are all liars of equivalent stature or competence. Currently, we are witnessing an extreme example of the politician as liar in the form of the 45th president of the United States, Donald J. Trump. Trump’s lies exceed those told by any other contemporary U.S. politician in terms of content, scope, and scale as well as in the normative status they possess among the public. Trump is expected to lie, to alter the facts, to present known falsehoods as truths, and to use extreme speech as a prelude to political policy. He does this in his public speaking and in his prolific public writing on the social media platform Twitter. Twitter is, in effect, an ongoing press conference for Trump (especially so given that his White House rarely holds press conferences). As such, Twitter has become a key site for the conversion of Trump’s lies to social truths as well as to political action (McGranahan, 2017; Ott, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2019). Twitter is thus an invaluable archive of this current moment, a history of the present that is as much ethnographic as it is historical.

As social media platform, Twitter is distinct in its public, nonreciprocal nature. Founded in 2006, Twitter has more than 1.3 billion registered users, 336 million of whom are considered active monthly users, and these users post around 500 million tweets every day. Ninety-five percent of Twitter accounts are public and so are visible to anyone with Internet access. Twitter is archived by the Library of Congress, and Trump’s tweets are preserved in the online Trump Twitter Archive. As a “first draft of the present,” Twitter is remarkably public, social, and egalitarian (Bruns & Weller, 2016, pp. 183, 187). Egalitarian in format, however, does not necessarily mean egalitarian in use or access (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Regardless of whether or how one uses Twitter, the platform has become a ubiquitous part of the political world in the contemporary United States. Communication scholar Dhiraj Murthy (2013) goes even further, claiming, “For better or worse, one thing is clear: Twitter has shaped modern social communication” (p. 153). Widely used by both public figures and ordinary people, Twitter is one of the few places where ordinary people can (attempt to) interact with and contact public figures such as politicians (Bruns & Weller, 2016, p. 183). Of the many politicians on Twitter, Donald Trump is one of the most prolific: @realDonaldTrump has been an active user since March 2009 with more than 41,200 tweets; he follows 45 accounts and has 59.6 million followers (as of April 10, 2019). Trump’s writings on Twitter are unsurpassed in terms of public political statements ever made by a U.S. president. Digital technology makes this possible, as does a May 23, 2018, federal court ruling that, due to First Amendment rights provided for in the U.S. Constitution, Trump may not block users on Twitter. His tweets are thus open to all for reading and response.

Social media matters politically. This is as true for elections as it is for life in the real world, where extreme speech online can have serious, including violent, repercussions. Social media platforms have generated new and important types of political participation and action (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Kuntsman & Stein, 2015; Mottahedeh, 2015; Murthy, 2013; Postill, 2012; Tufekci, 2017; Weller, Bruns, Burgess, Mahrt, & Puschmann, 2014). However, social media's links to political projects might be more historical than many realize. As argued by communication scholar Fred Turner (2018), current social media are built on an earlier politically motivated post-World War II U.S. project to combat authoritarianism by using media to shape democratic individuals. A democratic person was "a psychologically whole individual, able to freely choose what to believe, with whom to associate, and where to turn their attention" (p. 145). This political character sketch was based, in part, on anthropological theories of culture and personality linked to Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and Ruth Benedict. Ironically, argues Turner, when reconfigured as digital social media, this midcentury "democratic" media style suits an authoritarian such as Trump: "Trump has taken the logic of individual authenticity that animated the New Left in 1968 and American liberalism for thirty years before that and put it to work as a new mode of authoritarian charisma" (p. 148). Charisma, as we know, has never relied on truth or kindness for its success.

In addition to providing new forms of communication and collaboration, social media serves as a platform for argument and antagonism, including hate speech (Jakubowicz, 2017; Jane, 2014; Murthy & Sharma, 2019; Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017; Udupa, 2018). Trump's Twitter feed is one such an example. Hate speech is a legal and ethnographic category. Anthropologists Matti Pohjonen and Sahana Udupa (2017) suggest that hate is not a universal category and thus must be reckoned in particular ethnographic and historical contexts. As a model for doing so, they propose the term *extreme speech* as enabling anthropological investigation into online speech as social practice situated in specific "cultural and political milieus" in which it may or may not be considered "hateful" (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017, p. 1174). For Trump, anthropologists have done just this, considering the ways that his gestures and words are examples of the "mainstreaming of racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic and misogynist hate speech in the public sphere" (Bangstad, 2017, para. 1); see also Bessire & Bond, 2017; Lennon, 2018; Roland, 2017; Scheper-Hughes, 2017). Taking Trump's Twitter feed as a form of extreme speech reveals the ethnographic work of lies in the dissemination of hate speech. In this context, what we are witnessing is not a history of extreme or hate speech but history *as* extreme or hate speech.

Twitter as Presidential Archive

On January 2, 2018, in a move many feared might launch a nuclear war, Donald Trump tweeted that his nuclear button was bigger than Kim Jong Un's (see Figure 1). A continuation of long-standing masculinist tropes and petulant defenses against emasculatory sentiment (e.g., the size of his hands; Hall, Goldstein, & Ingram, 2016), this particular tweet of Trump's was read by many Twitter users as a violent threat and thus in violation of Twitter's policies. However, on reporting the tweet to Twitter, users received automatic rejections claiming that "there was no violation of the Twitter rules against abusive behavior" (Meyer, 2017). This was not the first time Trump had threatened the supreme leader of North Korea on Twitter or insulted him through names such as "Little Rocket Man." Users have repeatedly reported Trump for such perceived violations of Twitter rules. In December 2017, in response to criticisms over the use of

Twitter by hate groups, Twitter changed its rules—including those defining abusive behavior and hateful conduct—to be stricter and more enforceable. The new rules were applicable to all but had a notable exclusion: the rules exempted military or government figures or “newsworthy” behavior deemed by Twitter to be in “the legitimate public interest” (Meyer, 2017). In their rules for threatening and hateful behavior, the executives at Twitter also created a Donald Trump exception. On Twitter, Trump’s threats and hateful conduct are therefore not violations of the rules but are, instead, history.



Figure 1. Donald Trump tweet, January 2, 2018.

Presidential libraries are important sites for the writing of U.S. history. Such archives are formally opened after a president’s term has ended, and they are staffed by professional archivists and are critical for scholarly understanding of “individual presidents and the presidency as an institution” (Stuckey, 2006, p. 138). In the case of Donald Trump, however, one portion of his presidential archive—his Twitter feed—is visible to the public as he creates it. Never before has a president used with such regularity an unedited means of communicating with the public. In understanding the current political moment in the United States, therefore, ethnographic immersion in Trump’s Twitter archive offers unprecedented access to both presidential speech and public reaction to it. Whether on Twitter or in a building housing documents, archives are documentary collections for assembling history or, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) contends, for producing both histories and silences. Yet if archives have long been treated as sources for history, they are also subjects themselves—a particular sort of “epistemological experiment” through which ideas of common sense are normalized (Stoler, 2002, p. 87). In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault (1972) cautions that an archive shapes histories and regularities rather than neutrally preserves them for historians’ retrieval at a future date. Given the particular structure of social media as distinct from a physical archive full of old documents, an attentiveness to the production of history alongside its storage must be paired with attention to the archiving technology (Derrida, 1998). How, then, might we ethnographically assess documents found in archives, including tweets found on Twitter?

Taking Trump's Twitter archive as a history of the present is to consider the conditions of possibility for this moment (Foucault, 1973). I do so via an "ethnography in the archives" approach of assessing the cultural logics that provide conceptual scaffolding for archival data, including systems of organizing and categorizing that data, and thus producing and legitimating it (Stoler, 1992, 2002, 2009). Such cultural logics mark certain stories as important and others as not important, and they can appear to do so in neutral ways rather than in culturally specific ways responsive to particular historic and political concerns. Ethnography in the Twitter archives involves considering the social, political, and historic contexts of tweets.

Methodologically, this requires an ethnographic understanding of Twitter as a user immersed in this social media platform; that is, one needs to do participant observation rather than merely read online as a bystander. As with all ethnographic research, such participatory immersion is necessary to understand how the system works. For example, no two Twitter streams are alike, nor are Twitter streams possible to re-create. This has to do with algorithms of content display and the structure of the platform in that each user chooses via follows or content searches what he or she wants to see. My ethnography-in-the-archives approach for this project thus involved my regular participation on Twitter as an active registered user. My personally curated feed showed organically the way discussion of Trump's tweets appeared in my feed, which consisted mostly of academics, journalists, and activists, while targeted searches revealed how Twitter users in general reacted to Trump's tweets. Furthermore, research on Twitter as a pulse of the present moment cannot be limited to the Twitter platform alone. Twitter is part of a social and political ecology of communication and commentary. Journalists write about Trump's tweets; citizens discuss them; and world leaders turn to his Twitter feed to learn about his plans and policy decisions, including his firing of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, his announcement that he was banning transgender individuals from the U.S. military, and his withdrawal from the G7 joint statement in Quebec in June 2018. Trump, his critics, his fans, and the world, move back and forth from Twitter to other spaces of discussion and action. Twitter is thus an expansive, ethnographic space rather than a self-contained one.

An ethnographic space is inhabited, given form and meaning, and brought to life by humans. It is a space of connection and exchange, a place of sharing and policing, and a site where claims and demands may be made. Social media in particular—for example, Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, and Instagram—can be rich sites for the sort of daily rhythms and logics one might expect to find in face-to-face fieldwork. The new online world of fieldwork is not limited to the ethnography of digital communities but includes ethnography in and as part of them (Horst & Miller, 2012; Pink et al., 2016; Postill, 2011; Udupa, 2018; Williams, 2013, 2018). That is, we can do ethnography of specific topics in the digital, online world rather than research only about online communities. In this sense, online fieldwork can approximate some of the best parts of face-to-face fieldwork: the idea of being there, having a presence in a community, sharing space, and life beyond "the research"—all of which involve cultivating an ethnographic sensibility (McGranahan, 2014, 2018). Much of the hanging out, living life, passing time, and coming to know one another that is part of classic ethnographic methods can also be part of fieldwork in social media.

Anthropologists never underestimate what it means to be part of community, to participate in something, to share. On Twitter, Trump's tweets engage the world. In my feed alone, people from numerous countries regularly responded to Trump's tweets, often addressing him directly; these were not world leaders but regular people, ordinary folks such as students, activists, and other engaged citizens publicly

commenting on the tweets of the U.S. president. In so doing, they produced and reproduced Twitter as a shared ethnographic space as well as a historical archive of the present.

If as ethnographic space, Twitter is a site of cultures in formation, then as public archive, Twitter is a site of history unfolding. As with all social formations, Twitter is not static. While being in motion is part of Twitter's very composition in that one's timeline is constantly additive and thus not stable, Twitter itself has also changed over the years. Digital media scholar Richard Rogers (2014) identifies three stages of Twitter: first "an ambient, friend-following medium," then a segue following several natural disasters and political elections to "a news medium for event-following," and finally the emergence of Twitter as an "(archived) data set and anticipatory medium" (pp. xii, xvi, xxi). For active Twitter users, regular use might include all three of these aspects simultaneously rather than as modes bound by platform evolution. On Twitter, as on other social media platforms, community is created around senses of connection. One connection might be shared beliefs, including ones about other people and a politics of legitimate or earned national belonging. Whether one is tweeting #MAGA ("Make America Great Again") in enthusiastic support or sarcastic criticism of Trump, this action is an index of present-day sentiments about race, racism, history, and truth in the United States.

Trump and Lies as Extreme Speech: Three Examples

Lies might often be extreme speech, but they are not always hate speech. As presidential candidate and president, Trump's lies fall into both categories as ethnographically determined in the contemporary United States. For example, his lies about the size of the crowd at his inauguration (largest ever!) and the viewership of his 2018 State of the Union address (largest ever!) are examples of extreme speech but not necessarily hate speech. If online practices of extreme speech "push the boundaries of acceptable norms of public culture toward what the mainstream considers a breach within historically constituted normative orders," hate speech is "vilifying, polarizing, or lethal" (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017, p. 1174; see also Boromisza-Habashi, 2013 Waldron, 2012). Although extreme speech and hate speech both may be inflammatory, they are not one and the same. However, when either extreme or hate speech comes in the form of a lie, there is an additional layer of volatility in terms of expected norms and the breach of them. And when the person articulating lies is the president of the United States, the cultural and political impact of such lies can be large (Alterman, 2004; Hahl, Kim, & Zuckerman Sivan, 2018).

As a presidential candidate, Trump's lies astounded some and energized others, politically mobilizing citizens around different interpretations of moral outrage. As president, Trump's lies have continued unabated. In his first year as president, he made over 2,000 false claims, achieving this 11 days prior to the anniversary of his 2017 inauguration. As with gossip, the repetition of lies over time produces a sort of possible truth. Repeated lies produce affiliative truths, which people ascribe to for social and political reasons and which generate action as well as affiliation (McGranahan, 2017). As a public figure, candidate, and president, Trump has repeated numerous lies: Obama was born in Kenya; "we are the highest taxed nation in the world"; denials of the official death toll from Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico; and, among others, the false claim that three of four domestic terrorists in the United States are foreign born. All of these are false claims, and yet they have taken on the force of truth for many Trump supporters. For some people, then, these are not just possible or even probable truths; they are truth. Given this acceptance, any history

of this political era in the United States must address anew the question of how falsehoods can generate actionable social truths.

Specific lies of Trump's provide examples of an ethnographic reading of extreme speech and hate speech. Responses to the following three lies from Trump's first year as president were prominent in my Twitter feed and on Twitter in general and were also widely discussed in other media domains.

Lie 1: Obama and Other Presidents Did Not Reach Out to the Families of Fallen Soldiers (October 16, 2017)

In a statement at a White House news conference, a reporter asked Trump why he had not spoken publicly about four U.S. Special Forces soldiers who were killed in Niger almost two weeks earlier. Trump claimed he had written (unsent) letters to the families and would be calling them later that week, adding, "If you look at President Obama and other presidents, most of them didn't make calls. A lot of them didn't make calls. I like to call when it's appropriate" (Landler, 2017, para. 3). Trump's statement was easily proven false by reporters of numerous publications, and Twitter was soon ablaze in indignant responses, including replies from members of Gold Star families (i.e., families of soldiers who died or were killed while serving in the armed forces). The response that generated the most attention was from Delilia O'Malley, the sister of a fallen soldier (see Figure 2). On her Twitter account, O'Malley claims she is a "Lifelong Republican who opposed Trump. Painfully disappointed in the weak, spineless leaders of my party. #DonTheCon Country over Party." Almost four months after her initial tweet on October 16, 2017, O'Malley's tweet had 7,928 replies, 183,951 retweets, and 499,951 likes. The replies ranged from insults to support, with insulters often accusing O'Malley of being a member of the "liberal left," an accusation she repeatedly and energetically challenged. Retweets also often included commentary in one political direction or the other, almost all in the service of building political truth with or against O'Malley's sentiment and not, as one might presume, in the direction of asserting the truth or falsity of Trump's statement. Instead, at issue among most Twitter users is asserting political affiliation through endorsement or critique. The content and context of such social activity is key to ethnographic investigation.



Figure 2. Delilia O'Malley's tweet to Donald Trump, October 16, 2017.

Confirming the public perception of Twitter as a domain for addressing Trump is a statement from Euvince Brooks, father of Sergeant Roshain E. Brooks, a U.S. soldier who was killed in Iraq. As reported in *The Washington Post* on October 18, 2017, Brooks explained that his response to Trump's claim was, "I said to my daughter, 'Can you teach me to tweet, so I can tweet at the president and tell him he's a liar?'" (Lamothe, Bever, & Rosenberg, 2017, para. 41). Prominent in both of these examples, one an actual tweet and one a desire to tweet, is the public claim that Trump is a liar. Both of these individuals are ordinary citizens—one who is active on Twitter and one who is aware that Twitter is a place for active political participation, including for addressing the U.S. president. Others, including politicians and military officials, joined in proclaiming Trump's statement a lie, while Trump's press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders claimed it was a "fact." Herein lies a core insight of the Twitter archive: amid the range of voices calling Trump a liar, he and his agents never concede that point. Instead, they shuffle the context of the original claim, or Trump deflects responsibility for it: "That's what I was told." Such language as this and the phrase "a lot of people are saying" serve to provide deniable cover if needed (Johnson, 2016). The use of such qualifiers creates confusion, purposefully generating irrational fears that circulate accompanied by a possibility of violence.

Violence is not merely a possibility in Trump's United States. At a presidential campaign rally in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 1, 2016, Trump encouraged the crowd to eject protesters, proclaiming "Get 'em out of here." Crowd members then physically abused the protesters, who later sued Trump in federal court and won. On April 1, 2017, a federal judge ruled that Trump incited violence against the protesters at the rally. There are also correlations between Trump's tweets and public violence. Quantitative research by economists argues that Trump's anti-Muslim tweets correspond to rises in anti-Muslim hate crimes in the United States (Müller & Schwarz, 2018). Pairing such quantitative findings with ethnographic and qualitative research enables scholars to gain a fuller understanding of the impact of Trump's public speech.

Lie 2: Trump's Retweeting of Anti-Muslim Videos Posted by Britain First Ultranationalist Activists (November 29, 2017)

Trump is often most active on Twitter early in the morning. While some journalists have correlated his tweets with the right-wing morning TV show *Fox and Friends*, the morning of November 29, 2017, was noteworthy for a different reason: Trump retweeted three videos posted by Jayda Fransen, a leader of Britain First, an ultranationalist, racist group in the United Kingdom. These were all anti-Muslim videos with sensationalist titles: "Islamist mob pushes teenage boy off roof and beats him to death!" "Muslim destroys a statue of Virgin Mary!" and "Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches!" Twitter users immediately responded, either by retweeting the videos in support or commenting on the dubious, racist source and titling of the videos given that the "Muslim migrant" was actually a Dutch-born and -raised citizen, and the other two videos were filmed four years earlier rather than being of-the-moment news as the tweets implied.

The falsehoods and extreme Islamophobia of the videos were only part of the story. Another result was the diplomatic incident prompted by Trump's apparent support of a racist hate group. In a public statement, British prime minister Theresa May denounced Trump's action: "It was wrong for the president to have done this. Britain First seeks to divide communities by their use of hateful narratives that peddle lies and stoke tensions. They cause anxiety to law-abiding people" (Baker & Sullivan, 2017, para. 9). In

keeping with his regular use of Twitter to publicly communicate with world leaders, Trump replied to May on Twitter (see Figure 3). This deflection of attention from his retweeting of racist videos to “Radical Islamic Terrorism” was paralleled by Sarah Huckabee Sanders’ official dismissal of the untruthful videos by stating that “the threat is real.” The anti-Muslim messaging remained intact.



Figure 3. Donald Trump tweet, November 29, 2017.

Several weeks after this incident, Twitter introduced new rules for hateful conduct, and Britain First leaders, including Jayda Fransen, were banned from the platform. In late January 2018, in an interview with British journalist Piers Morgan, Trump claimed he had not known who Britain First was at the time of his retweeting of the videos. He offered Morgan a highly qualified possible future apology: “If you are telling me they’re horrible people—horrible, racist people—I would certainly apologize if you’d like me to do that.” Despite this offer, Trump did not apologize.

Lie 3: Trump’s Claim That Certain Countries Were “Shitholes” (January 11, 2018)

In a meeting with several U.S. senators about immigration, Trump referred to El Salvador, Haiti, and several African countries as “shitholes” when asked why we needed more immigrants from these countries. He suggested instead that Norwegians immigrate to the United States. Responses from the global community were immediate, including many responses on Twitter. Politicians around the world condemned the remarks, but most powerful were individual testimonies on Twitter. Individuals recounted their struggles and accomplishments—degrees held, languages spoken, awards granted, and professional titles—and ended their tweets with the phrase, “I’m from a #shithole country.” These public statements—many of which were replied to, retweeted, and liked thousands of times—built antiracist community in response to Trump’s immigration policies, from the Muslim ban to his negative comments on “chain migration” (i.e., family reunification policies) to his efforts to “build the wall.” Counter to these responses, however, were ones supporting Trump’s statement about “shithole” countries, including from individuals who claimed they escaped such places for life in the United States. Either way, the new availability of the term *shithole country*

as an epithet is at best a form of extreme speech and at worst a form of hate speech. The online nature of the responses and their reproduction confirm Pohjonen and Udupa's (2017) observation that hate speech is as much a subjective and ethnographic term as it is a legal one.

Finally, despite many witnesses who claim Trump used the term *shithole*—and did so more than once—Trump later denied using the term. In other words, he lied to deny racist behavior. Across these three examples, and deeply embedded in the behavior on and off Twitter that preceded them, is an intertwining of lies, bluster, and discrimination or dismissal of some sort. This is not presidential politics or even renegade political language as we have known them before (Lempert & Silverstein, 2012, 2017; Silverstein, 2003, 2017). Instead, this marks a significant historical event, a “breach” as Foucault would have it, that has not merely captured the imagination of people around the world but also generated action and reaction (Foucault, 1991, p. 76). A history of this present must capture both this generative/reactive sense as well as the form and tenor of Twitter as Trump's favorite media through which to speak. The opposite of a #shithole country, of course, would be a “great” one. For some, key to the nationalism that underlies the notion of making America great again are racist ideas of who constitutes a proper American. As Kevin Young (2017) writes in his book *Bunk*, the term *American* has become “the ultimate euphemism” (p. 466); in the mouths of many, both on and off social media, American is shorthand for White.

The Right to Be Racist, or, Making America the 1950s Again

There are many ways to tell the story of Trump's ascendancy in U.S. politics (Campbell, 2018). Trump's Twitter feed narrates this story using language that speaks to his far-right base (Stolee & Caton, 2018). It is a story of class and status. It is a story of resentment, frustration, outsider success, and a desire for change. Depending on the community in which the argument is situated, it may also be one of disenchantment or disengagement or disenfranchisement. There are many ways to vote no on the status quo. Trump's election was one of them. But, as Trump himself often stated, his campaign was not only about rejecting something but also about building something (and not only a wall). What he promised to build was a return to an earlier era, a time when America was great and when one had the right to be racist and misogynist. As anthropologist L. Kaifa Roland (2017) explains, this is about claiming wealthy White masculinity as an expected and desired default of being American:

Wealthy white masculinity has always mattered in this country, while other bodies have required various forms of evaluation—extreme vetting, if you will—before their merits as fully American could be determined. Such ghosts from America's past have never left, and they are being reembodyed in Trump's restored America. (pp. 441–442)

This aspect of Trump's campaign message remains active in his Twitter archive. Nativist and masculinist claims to the country and to morality persist in this familiar but newly recharged version of America.

A romantic view of the 1950s Cold War era appears to be that to which Trump nostalgically wants to return the nation. This was the triumphant post-World War II period—a new era in terms of nuclear weapons, feel-good Americanism, and the shifting of global authority. It was also a new period of U.S. empire, but in that anti-imperial, decolonial moment, it was not called empire (Collins & McGranahan, 2018),

just as U.S. society was racist, but we did not necessarily call it racist. As such, the phrase “nostalgic racism” conjures a time when what is now pointedly and publicly called racism was not (Goldstein & Hall, 2017; Maskovsky, 2017). Nostalgia for a domestically celebrated version of mid-20th-century U.S. power, with its unapologetic masculinity and Whiteness, is the “again” of Donald Trump’s “Make America Great Again.” The 1950s were the era of *Leave It to Beaver*, *I Love Lucy*, *American Bandstand*, and *The Mickey Mouse Club*; of pretenses to good, clean fun and whitewashed presentations of race in the media. The civil rights movement was under way, but this was before its height in the 1960s. For some, the 1950s was a time of the consolidation of Whiteness.

Who is White in the United States? The answer to this question changes over time, and the postwar era was a time of massive change (Brodkin, 1998; Jacobson, 1999; Omi & Winant, 2014; Painter, 2011; Roediger, 2006). During World War II, service in the U.S. military brought together individuals from different backgrounds in new ways. After the war, these shared experiences helped elevate some ethnic groups to new racial categories. Some Europeans, for example, came to be newly seen as White, or whiter than before. Not all soldiers, however, were afforded such new categorizations, and they returned from war to a United States that was just as racist as ever. Making America the 1950s again might thus be to deny some individuals full participation in U.S. society and to be morally and legally okay with that. For example, full voting rights and protections for all citizens in the United States were not granted until 1965. Midcentury racism partnered with misogyny as normal and acceptable aspects of society. Civil rights victories in the 1960s and changes in the 1970s marked a radical shift. New policies of desegregation such as school busing and the new legality of interracial marriage with the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision changed social practices and beliefs. Resistance to such changes was epitomized in the blatant racism of the all-too-real TV character Archie Bunker, who played a “lovable bigot.” To whom is a bigot lovable? Only to other bigots. Only to those who need to find an excuse for racism.

Racism is an ideology of fear as much as of superiority, exclusion, and ignorance. Currently racism as White fear is manifest as White supremacist nationalism. Along with Trump’s tweets, the presence of White nationalists in his administration—Stephen Bannon and Stephen Miller, for example—endorses and encourages this fear. So, too, did Trump’s statement following a White supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on August 12, 2017, in which many people protested against such racism: “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence on many sides. On many sides.” Trump’s making of White supremacists’ actions commensurate with those of antiracist activists is not a neutral statement. Instead, as with his tweets on presidents and fallen soldiers, anti-Muslim videos and “shithole” countries, this statement exists in a social ecology of others he has made or implied about race, nationality, and value.

Historical precision, and truth in general, were not key to Trump’s presidential campaign, nor have they been a component of his administration. What Trump offered and the Trumpists bought was a feeling of disaffection with the status quo and a shared project of returning to a different status—that of a proud White past embodied in 1950s nostalgia. This is an America of the imagination, the era of Donald Trump’s childhood, and a time when at least some Americans imagine their social or financial or racial status was better or more secure than it is now. Twitter has emerged as a key site for the dissemination of these ideas as well as for their normalization. Taken together as an archive, as an aggregate of the cultural pulse of

some U.S. (and global) citizens right now, the ideas reveal the extent to which extreme speech, including racist and even White supremacist speech, has newly surfaced as possible and defensible in the world. In thinking ethnographically of this project as a history of the present, it is important to remember this is not about documenting a revisionist history but identifying and analyzing contemporary efforts to shape a revisionist future.

Conclusion: History and Hate in an Archive of Lies

The normalization of extreme speech, hate speech, and racist speech is the history of the present in the United States. Trump is not the only purveyor of such speech, but given his public prominence first as a reality TV figure and businessman and second as U.S. president, his role in articulating, spreading, and entrenching extreme and vitriolic speech and endorsing and enabling others' such speech and accompanying actions is, to quote Twitter executives, "newsworthy," and thus constitutes history. Trump's Twitter archive is essential to the crafting or, less neutrally, the manipulating of cultural dispositions toward certain ideas about belonging, race, and the nation. Some are repelled and repulsed by these ideas, and others are compelled and even relieved by them. Ethnography in the Twitter archives dispels easy notions that this is, in U.S. political parlance, a "liberal versus conservative" fight. It is not. It is instead a cultural breach in the terms of what it means to be a good American. Posts on Twitter reproduce this breach every day, highlighting that transgressions in the current political moment are not merely of differing interpretations of the Constitution or nationalism, for example, but are also in the domain of codes of conduct.

On February 5, 2018, Trump claimed that members of Congress who did not stand to applaud him at various points during his State of the Union speech the week prior were committing treason: "They were like death and un-American. Un-American. Somebody said, 'Treasonous.' Yeah, I guess why not? Can we call that treason? Why not? I mean they certainly didn't seem to love our country that much." Responses on Twitter were fast and furious, including from politicians and veterans. One prominent reply was by U.S. representative Tim Walz, whose Twitter bio reads as follows: "Teacher, Football Coach, Command Sergeant Major Proudly Representing Minnesota's 1st Congressional District; Ranking Member of House @VetAffairsDems." On the same day as Trump's statement, Representative Walz tweeted: "I didn't serve 24 years in the uniform of this country to be called treasonous for simply disagreeing with your disastrous policies, Mr. President." Their disagreement is not only about politics. History never is.

To write history from an archive of lies is not about only factual truths. It is not, for example, to end with the question of whether Trump really used the term *shithole countries*. Instead, writing history from such a source is to investigate the responses and actions that are generated by such lies, extreme speech, and hateful conduct. For example, regarding the anti-Muslim videos Trump retweeted, the point is not simply whether they were real or timely, or even that he retweeted them from a known racist, White supremacist organization, but rather that a cultivated fear of "Radical Islamic Terrorists" precedes and follows his action as justification for it. Recall Sarah Huckabee Sanders: the videos may not be real, but the threat is. Ethnographically, Trump's action consolidates several cultural logics in motion in the United States: anti-Muslim sentiment since 9/11; the mainstreaming of nativist, anti-immigrant sentiment in U.S. public discourse; and support for both of these is a joint claim about who is American (White people) and who cannot ever truly be American in quite the same way (most others). This is a narrative of triumph over one

of resentment. Making "America Great Again" is a nostalgic and racist narrative that, in emanating from the White House, legitimates these sentiments as desired and possible futures.

We must be historians of the future and ethnographers of the present. We must witness hate now so as to write its truths later. There is precedent for what a history written from lies and hate looks like: Holocaust denial. The scholar Deborah Lipstadt (1994, 2005) has devoted much of her career to writing about Holocaust deniers, even successfully defeating a libel case against her in the United Kingdom by leading Holocaust denier David Irving. As Lipstadt (2005) writes in her book *History on Trial*, to combat such denial is not only to insist on historical accuracy but also to fight against the derogatory and bigoted beliefs of White supremacy that underlie lies and denial: "I fought . . . to defeat a man who lied about history and expressed deeply contemptuous views of Jews and other minorities" (p. 289). Those lies, she writes, were painful and enabled continuing acts of hate in the present. We are now in a similar moment. Lies of a political leader are enabling fear and the hate of an other as an imagined enemy, including the sorts of violent actions that often accompany such hate (Das, 2001). As scholars, we need to use the tools available to us to make sense of this present now so that in the future we may make sense of it from other temporal perspectives. New digital technologies such as Twitter present an opportunity to do so. Twitter and other forms of social media are not just means of communication but also historical archives and ethnographic spaces laden with unconventionally transformative possibilities for research and action. Here, in this space, in this archive, is where new scholarly responsibilities lie.

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