

## Beating Around the Bushisms: Parapraxes, Politics, and Perversion

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**Abstract:** In what has been widely heralded as “[a Freudian slip for the ages](#),” during a speech at his presidential library in late May 2022, George W. Bush once again seemed to reveal more than he intended when he decried “the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq—I mean Ukraine.” While there are no doubt psychoanalytic undertones to numerous events within his administration—from the national castration of the 9/11 attacks to the Oedipal implications behind the renewed hunt for Saddam Hussein—a more careful reading of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* would call into question any clearcut association between this most recent gaffe (or any prior Bushisms) and the clinical concept of symptomatic parapraxes. Rather than attempting to analyze the former president or other political perverts from afar—not because it is an impossible task, but because it is all too obvious—the more interesting avenue this presentation will pursue is the perpetual misrecognition (in Lacanese: *méconnaissance*) of parapraxes by the general public, which receive lapses like these at the level of the Imaginary instead of the Symbolic, and what that failure succeeds in expressing about cultural desires and social repressions. Building off of the Lacanian thesis that such symptoms are not so much invasive irritants or errors as they are psychical solutions holding the subject together and form(ation)s of satisfaction by Other means, the talk will explore the ideological function of misidentified parapraxes, their cathectic role within the current social configuration, and what they say (or missay) about the desires that undergird the struggling American political unconscious.

## **Introduction: Yes SIRS, No SIRS**

The clip was circulated gleefully as “history’s greatest Freudian slip”: This past May, in a speech decrying the ongoing Russian invasion, the president who formerly led our country out from the end of history into this psychotic era of global catastrophe condemned “the decision of one man to launch a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion of Iraq”—quickly correcting his mistake by clarifying he meant “Ukraine” (and then blaming the error on his age). Any practitioner of the couch will tell you, though, that, on the one hand, such mortifying parapraxes are hardly the fault of one’s senility, while on the other, the commonplace couch-*potatoe* analysis of the verbal blunder as a “Freudian” slip (where, in the pedestrian definition, *you say one thing but mean your mother*) has hardly anything “Freudian” to it whatsoever. Yet, in another sense, Bush was right to fault his age—which, of course, is also *our* age: Far more interesting than the misreading of mispeaking as a psychoanalytic symptom is the common misreading itself, the hysterical public reaction to a war criminal supposedly admitting to his culpability, eliciting a laugh from the audience but not the lash from the Hague. Rather than an appropriate level of horror and outrage, embarrassment and censure, just like the meme that followed his presidency of Bush supposedly saying *miss me yet?*, the slip was practically welcomed as a return of folksy and benign Bushisms. After years of marching in the streets, protesting at the polls, and throwing shoes at his podium, how did the country arrive at this moment of social impotency, and what does the nigh joyous (i.e., *jouissance*) reaction to his rhetorical failure say about the state of our fragmented national psyche? What follows will briefly trace the simultaneous untying of the American social and subjective fabric, outlining how the various public responses to presidential gaffes and scandals might be seen to individually and successively track the three-plus-one registers of psychical experience, thereby mapping the peculiarity of American political psychosis.

## **The Setting of the Symbolic Son**

With all the brouhaha of late about stolen elections—whether from Democrats charging the Trump campaign with criminal collusion and foreign interference or from Republicans crying foul about rigged voting machines and corrupt officials—it is easy to forget (and to be sure, such news cycles act to repress) the fact that this century began with a far more clear-cut case of a stolen election, even if at the time much of the blame was laid on hanging chads not being so clear cut after all. The Brooks Brothers riot of that November notwithstanding, one reason that the theft of the Oval Office in 2000 was met with little protest at the time and even less indignation since is because Bush’s election has been understood as part of the normal, nigh autonomous operation of (what we would now call) the American deep state. The son of not just a former head of state but, more importantly for the necessarily invisible workings of the imperial apparatus, the former head of the CIA and CEO to a shadowy oil concern, as emblem of and heir to these pre-existing economic and political networks, the second George Bush was a President of the American Symbolic. As an unwitting and witless link

within the chain of patrician power at the end of history, defined by little else than his sequentiality—including the decision to repeat his father’s war—his determinative association with the Symbolic is why it was more than sheer convenience (and obviously never simple coincidence) that we always identify W. with just a single signifier. The 43rd president and the 23rd letter: Even as he usurped the Executive, W. evidenced the ordinary succession of structural power and the political machinery, which functions automatically and acephaly, such that his numerous notable absences from office—clearing brush rather than his schedule or reading *The Pet Goat* rather than his PDB—were less a dereliction of duty than proof of Symbolic sovereignty, making of Bush a beard at bottom, akin to a mere merkin for the military-industrial complex that really governs the state. Of course, his time in office (when W. was there) likewise was marked on both ends by that other all too crucial complex, that of castration, first when the *jouissance* of the American Century was snuffed out along with the Twin Towers, the great phallic signifiers that they were, and once again with the popping of the ecstatic bubble of economic hedonism. Caught between these crises of castration and within the ongoing decline of Symbolic efficiency, it was his special relationship to the signifying chain (not unlike the one he shared with Tony Blair and the motherland) that simultaneously engendered his characteristic rhetorical paraproxes and risible spoonerisms, as well as caused the public to bristle at these so-called Bushisms. Although there was much to lambast W. over on both foreign and domestic fronts, that he was and remains a war criminal garnered less attention from popular media and fewer books meant for general consumption than his many malapropisms. No doubt instances of such usage flubs and semantic disfluencies are exhibited at some level by all public figures, but it was insofar as W. stood for the workings of the Symbolic that these linguistic interruptions merited an oversized focus, tarring W. with (if not his biggest then) his most long-lasting L.

### **The Imaginary Hope**

For all its obvious, superficial novelty, the election of Obama, of course, was widely heralded as something of a return to rhetorical normalcy for the presidency. After the absence of a coherent, unifying head of office throughout the ruptures that marked the previous decade, from 9/11 to Guantanamo to the financial crisis, Obama was enthusiastically welcomed as a President of the American Imaginary. Here was someone who, although he may not *look* the part, at the very least, to much of the country and the wider world’s great relief, once again *sounded* the way that we expect a modern leader of state should—that is, so long as you ignore (and not everyone did) how his actual name sounded. Gone were the recurring gaffes of his predecessor, the unbecoming redneck smirks and embarrassing malapropisms that had tarnished the country’s international image, replaced by an orator so smooth in his delivery, so charismatic in his presence, so thoughtful in his rhetoric—combining the authority of a Churchill with the approachability of a King—that the global community embarrassed itself in response to the mere emergence of his image, awarding him the Nobel Prize just for appearing

on the scene. Not only might he heal the social division of a belligerently paranoid and economically anxious country—the War on Terror being, at bottom, a war against no foreign combatant but rather a deep feeling within ourselves, and Obama conversely assured us that there were no red states or blue states, only the United States—but in his person, as a Black man elevated to the most important, visible, and powerful position in the world, he signified for many the overcoming of the rift at the very heart of the American enterprise, embodying the Ideal-Ego of a post-racial society. With this very real weight of the national Imaginary on his shoulders, especially in our era of panoptic screens and heightened spectacle, it is all the more remarkable that he survived both his terms with so few major gaffes or scandals (to say nothing of the fact that he survived them at all)—excepting, of course, the media cycle of conservative outrage at that ill-advised tan suit (heavy is the head that wears the crown, made all the heavier by the shoulders that eschew the padding, I suppose). Even so, the manufactured Republican opposition to Obama affirmed his status as the President of the Imaginary: No doubt he was eloquent—they might say “articulate”—but he failed to fit their stereotypical image of a president, hence why so much of their ire was directed at his optics and his body: Not just being the wrong color, but wearing the wrong color suit, saluting with a cup of joe in hand, resting his feet on the Resolute desk (and no doubt adding salt to the wound, Obama also failed to fit their stereotypical image of a Black man—oh the audacity of it all!). Perhaps most telling, however, is that after eight years in power, the social fractures his election had promised to suture, the racial animosity and economic stratification and culture of incivility, had only widened and worsened, his gaffeless talk of hope and change having produced little of either at the end of the day—still, compared to what came next, I would have gladly voted for the guy a third time.

### **The Real Carnage**

If with Obama, Americans (and Republicans in particular) had, one way or another, become fixated on the presidency as it is reflected on and reflective of the screen, the looking glass of the days of our lives, then it is little wonder that we next elected the familiar face of a TV and Internet personality—be careful what you wish for, after all, because you just might get it. For all his mendacity, his accusations of (in both senses) fake news, his manipulation of alternative facts, his reveling in post-truth, his outright denial of reality, Trump was truly the President of the American Real. Such a claim may be scandalous and bewildering for the pearl-clutching twitterati of the “this house believes science is real” ilk—as if science is a matter of belief and has some sort of monopoly on the truth (though in the era of neoliberal Big Pharma, the truth of science has become its monopolization)—but for a Lacanian, the opposition between the truth and the Real is hardly strange. No doubt despite his own execrable intentions, it was Trump’s perverse proclivity for denying reality, his narcissistic compulsion to refashion the objective world according to his own objectionable designs—born of being born with a silver spoon in his bloviating maw, an oral fixation belied by his social media logorrhea—that

empowered his time in the Executive to expose the Real state of the States. Gone was his predecessor's rhetoric of Imaginary unity, idealism, and the promise of a Pax Americana, now made impossible and replaced with prejudice by Trump's marshaling of a deep-seated and long-standing American Carnage, his brazen and cretinous stoking of the inveterate contradictions and social divisions that prior presidents at least pretended to sublimate. With his bald-faced enjoyment of the suffering his administration inflicted upon others—the cruelty is the point, after all—Trump dispensed with the conventional picture of America as a shining city on a hill to instead evoke a dystopic vision he simultaneously enacted; hence, rather than a misguided nostalgia for a midcentury fantasy of picturesque and uncastrated WASPiness, one should understand the slogan “Make America Great Again” as a call for the return of the Real, a reopening of the violent and exclusionary unconscious racial and economic trauma that undergirds the American dream. While on the one hand, this intuition of the Real simultaneously marked Trump's appeal to his cult-like supporters (who identified with his rhetoric as if he had some divine capacity to read and speak their minds) as well as the disgust of his similarly cult-like detractors (scandalized by what his inauguration said about their country and what his impious imperiousness disclosed), on the other hand, the sheer shock of the Real shielded the teflon Don from what would be, for any other public figure, an apocalypse of gaffes, indiscretions, and scandals. It is little surprise, then, that nothing came of the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape and that the two impeachments were bridges to nowhere: Because what you see is what you get with Trump, because he defied the Imaginary expectation that political corruption is necessarily clandestine and democracy only dies in darkness, such transgressions were simply too Real, too close to the sickness at the heart of American society, for the ordinary Symbolic repercussions meted out by our public institutions—for if someone were to really punish Trump for his lying, for his double-dealing, for his self-absorption, for his vile mistreatment of the subaltern, they would have to upend the entirety of the American order, disassembling our Symbolic machinery and laying bare our Imaginary to get to the Real root of hegemonic carnage.

### **Let's Go, Sinthome**

After two decades of unfettered social trauma—from one repressed stolen election to the fantasy of another, from the castration of *jouissance* at the end of history to the political elevation of the Id run amok—now finding itself in the midst of a deadly global pandemic, a vicious national presidential campaign, with the streets of every major city teeming with protests against the racial violence of an ascendant fascist police state, and over the past few years having come too close for comfort to the Real, no longer able to recognize its own narcissistic image in the mirror, with the filter bubbles of the Internet having eradicated the efficiency of the country's underlying shared Symbolic structure, the American psyche (like this long sentence) was as tired as it was in tatters, the knot of our social fabric seeming to have come completely undone. For the first time in a long time, faced with the authentic

possibility of its own impossibility, perceiving the looming potentiality and eventual inevitability of its own dissolution, when America next went to the polls, it elected for its representative on the world stage not another dynastic link to the pre-existing machinery of power to reassert that the country was returning to its normal operations, nor another charismatic poster child of the American dream to rehabilitate the national image both at home and abroad, nor another term with the festering wound of the Real left open and salted—the gods forbid!—but rather, we opted for a sundowning and dyslogic professional politician haunted by the ghosts of war, blue-collar abandonment, and the carceral state. In an effort to hold the country together, we elected someone who in his own person embodied the defects and contradictions that had led ineluctably to our crisis, someone who could (in the most fundamental way) meet the needs of this moment because his own failings correspond to this moment—or said otherwise, we elected Biden to function as President of the American Sinthome. To identify Biden with this final formulation of Lacan’s teaching is to suggest the his presidency represents much more than a mere symptom of our social ills—which a naïve commonplace psychology would interpret as a maddening expression of underlying problems that need correcting—but instead that his term in office organizes a collective *jouissance* (particularly through the consensual hallucination of cyberspace) that staves off, if only temporarily, our general civic collapse. Known throughout his public life for sticking his foot firmly in his mouth, what separates the response to Biden’s perpetual rhetorical blunders from those of his predecessors—the mockery of Bushisms, the outrage at Obama’s audacity, the foreclosure of a Real estate mogul’s repercussions—is a bipartisan love for the president as sinthome, whether as (in a properly Hegelian trajectory) the Onion’s caricature of boorish Diamond Joe or in the chants of “*Let’s go, Brandon!*” or the sublimation of Dark Brandon. In lieu of positing-slash-posting POTUS as a Symbolic idiot, Imaginary icon, or Real god-emperor, the memes of Biden-cum-Brandon evidence an enjoyment and not an enjoinder of his public flailings and failings. Seen as sinthome, it becomes legible why (as critics on both sides maintain—a ideological commonality that topologically eradicates the bipolarity of left versus right) only a doddering avatar of American decline, whose herky-jerky body of speech parallels the body politic writ large, is equal to the task of managing imperial sundowning.

## **Conclusion**

More, of course, remains to be written—particularly as to what preceded the Borromean lineage I have presented and how America at the end of history led to our contemporary (perhaps post-temporary) psychotic and social breakdown (the short answer: “It’s neoliberalism’s general foreclosure, stupid!”\*)—but insofar as we find ourselves in an ideological knot where politics are not allowed to take place, Lacanian theory takes a special position in identifying, tracing, and untangling the neoliberal flows of *jouissance* that structure our American imbroglio.

\* Neoliberalism's general foreclosure: Just as the signifier fails to adhere to the signified, with neoliberalism, the regulation fails to be enactable—see, for instance, the dismantling of the regulatory state through the gutting of the EPA