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Barack Obama’s Orphic Mysteries

This essay constitutes an effort to explain the state fantasy with which Barack Obama hegemonized an alternative to the biopolitical settlement normalizing George W. Bush’s global war on terror. In what follows, I argue that Obama has not displaced but presupposed Bush’s homeland state of exception as the political imaginary through which he transformed national and international politics. I am interested in particular in Obama’s usage of the racial fantasies that he found condensed in the figure and the film Black Orpheus to achieve his geopolitical aims.

Named after *orphasias*, the dark one, Orpheus is the historical figure credited with teaching Greeks their foundational myths and sacred rites. Orpheus’s lyre is said to have permitted the Argonauts to elude the Sirens. In the most famous of the Greek myths associated with his name, Orpheus descended into the underworld after the death of his beloved Eurydice to plead with its rulers for her release. According to Ovid, Orpheus’s eloquent entreaty on her behalf brought the underworld to a standstill.¹ The arcane rituals associated with Orpheus’s name have entered contemporary political theory to explain the transformation of bare life (\(z\omega\)) into sovereign citizens of the body politic (\(bi\omega\)).² *Black Orpheus* is also the name of a prizewinning 1959 film made in Brazil by the French director Marcel Camus. Camus’s musical retelling of the Greek legend of Orpheus and Eurydice is set in a Rio de Janeiro favela during Carnival.

In this passage in his 1995 autobiography *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, Barack Obama recalled his mother’s reaction to the film *Black Orpheus* to exemplify the racial fantasies he entered political life to supplant:

> The story line was simple: the myth of the ill-fated lovers Orpheus and Eurydice set in the favelas of Rio during Carnival. In Technicolor splendor, set against scenic green hills, the black and brown Brazilians sang and danced and strummed guitars like carefree birds in colorful plumage. About halfway
through the movie, I decided that I’d seen enough, and turned to my mother to see if she might be ready to go. But her face, lit by the blue glow of the screen, was set in a wistful gaze. At that moment, I felt as if I were being given a window into her heart, the unreflective heart of her youth. I suddenly realized that the depiction of childlike blacks I was now seeing on the screen, the reverse image of Conrad’s dark savages, was what my mother had carried with her to Hawaii all those years before, a reflection of the simple fantasies that had been forbidden to a white middle-class girl from Kansas, the promise of another life: warm, sensual, exotic, different.\(^3\)

This revelation took place in 1982, when his mother, while visiting Obama during his student years at Columbia University, asked him to accompany her to a showing of the movie at a theater in Greenwich Village. Rather than sharing his mother’s enchantment with *Black Orpheus*, her twenty-year-old son discerned in the film’s depiction of blacks the racial fantasy underpinning his mother’s over-idealizations of African Americans. In his mother’s eyes, “every black man was Thurgood Marshall or Sidney Poitier; every black woman Fannie Lou Hamer or Lena Horne. To be black was to be the beneficiary of a great inheritance, a special destiny, glorious burdens that only we were strong enough to bear.”\(^4\) After isolating the image repertoire that *Black Orpheus* projected in his mother’s political unconscious, Obama tacitly designated his mother’s elevation of black Americans into political messiahs and Camus’s representations of them as childlike colonial savages as recto and verso images coined in the same foundational racial fantasy.

Obama described his mother, Stanley Ann Dunham Soetoro—“a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism”—as representative of the 1960s American Left.\(^5\) In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama diagnosed the antithetical, let’s call them orphic, racialized images populating his mother’s gaze as having resulted from contrary but interdependent tendencies informing the political imaginaries of the majority of U.S. citizens. He thought that his mother’s exalted images of African American civil rights leaders presupposed opprobrious images of African Americans as an unacknowledged rationale. In *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), Obama identified this recalcitrant complex of contradictory self-representations as responsible as well for the constraints that African Americans imposed on their own social and political ambitions.

Obama grounded this diagnosis on his belief that when African American civil rights leaders internalized the American Left’s quasi-messianic
images of their political movement, they indirectly legitimated demonizing representations of American blacks. As exceptions to these degrading representations, such ennobling images of civil rights leaders only proved the rule of the oppressive imaginary. This structural racial antinomy animated a viciously circular social logic: African Americans who felt oppressed by such humiliating images needed to idealize civil rights leaders as the emancipators from the social imaginary that these civil rights leaders also required as the justification for their rule.

Obama discerned the black messiah/black devil complex as the racist antinomy that underpinned the history of race relations in the United States. This complex of antithetical representations also regulated what was considered possible and impossible for African American political leaders to desire. To transform the orphic machinery that saturated the United States’ social imaginary, Obama added a scenario to the national political drama through which he persuaded the majority of American voters to act on a desire that should have been impossible for an African American leader to realize.

Although many of his followers described him as a black messiah, Barack Obama did not aspire to become the civil rights leader of oppressed African Americans. And despite the fact that his political enemies assaulted him with racist stereotypes, Obama never described himself as the victim of such efforts. Instead of repudiating this structuring antinomy, Obama’s presidential campaign presupposed the system of racialized images he found depicted in *Black Orpheus*. Unlike the protagonist of Marcel Camus’s film, however, Obama ran as at once the effect of and the limit to these structuring antitheses.

Obama considered the black messiah/black demon complex a structural racist antinomy that could not be historically surpassed. As the horizon that embraced and held the new rules and norms that Obama produced from within its framework, this structuring antinomy constituted the non-progressive backdrop for the changes Obama aspired to introduce into the political order.

An event that took place during the 2008 Democratic primaries supplied then senator Barack Obama with the occasion to turn the black messiah/black terrorist complex into a “teachable moment.” From January through March 2008, right-wing political commentators published selected passages from sermons delivered by Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s pastor at Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ, as proof that the man whose sermons had inspired Obama to write *The Audacity of Hope* was in fact an anti-American terrorist. Rather than defending Reverend
Wright or castigating his opponents, Obama delivered a speech on March 18, 2008, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, titled “A More Perfect Union.”

In his national address, Obama refused to represent his political campaign as an effort to get out of this racial divide. Observing that he had never been “so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy,” Obama described the controversy as a “racial stalemate” that represented the “complexities of race in this country that we’ve never really worked through—a part of our union that we have yet to perfect.” Upon locating the basis for the nation’s racial division in the United States Constitution, Obama gave expression to the desire to achieve “a more perfect union.” Having resituated the racial antagonism within the context of the constitutive gap separating our founding ideals from lived political reality, Obama reasserted the “impossible” desire animating his presidential run as undergirded by the conviction that in “working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.”

This speech permitted Obama to point to a flaw within the social symbolic order—the rift in its perfectible union—that enabled him to represent his extraordinary desire as if it were a universal political responsibility. Instead of remaining subject to these antithetical images, President Obama suspended their rule by positioning himself within the breach in between these antagonistic representations and expressing his intention to achieve a “more perfect union” through them.

Obama first inhabited this rift at the 2004 Democratic National Convention when he refused to identify as either a member of the red states or the blue states so as to declare himself a representative of the United States of America. Obama also ran his presidential campaign from this unprecedented political space. In aspiring to make a more perfectible union out of resolutely antagonistic partisans, Obama could not wholly identify with either one of the parties to the dispute. He occupied the strange position of being simultaneously more than and less than the antagonists. He was more than one because he could not perform as one of the factions he aspired to unify and render their union more perfectible; less than one because that act had to be subtracted from the political order whose union he would render more perfectible.

Once he took office as president, representations of Obama’s governance oscillated between the opposite poles of the aforementioned racial antinomy. Following Obama’s election in 2008, the members of the Tea
Party movement represented Obama as a figure who lacked the state-authorized long-form birth certificate required to certify his status as a legitimate United States citizen and reimagined him as a Muslim terrorist intent on convoking “death panels” to endanger the American people’s biopolitical welfare. Contrarily, “progressive” liberals represented Obama’s election as the birth of a postracial nation. While each of these fantasies drew upon two of the primordial conditions of belonging—birthright citizenship and civil death—inherent to what I have called a neo-orphic political imaginary, each fantasy transposed these elements into utterly antithetical characterizations of Obama’s mode of national belonging.

At the one extreme, Obama’s political supporters characterized him as the most inspired of the nation’s sovereign leaders; at the other extreme, his political opponents cast him as one of mankind’s accursed. In these antithetical formulations, the extimate belonging of President Obama as the sovereign head of state sat in uncanny proximity to the intimate non-belonging of President Obama as what Giorgio Agamben has called homo sacer.  

Obama took up his position within the rift through which he would render the union more perfectible by representing both the faction who extolled him as a postracial messiah as well as the people who had been cast in the role of homines sacri. As homo sacer, Obama belonged to the order by not belonging to it. But in order to exercise the power to render the union more perfect, Obama took up a position within the order as a figure who exceeded existing ordinations. Obama’s oscillation between the positions of the sovereign and the homo sacer enabled him to deploy both of the positions within the structuring racist antinomy—the venerated racial prophet/the demonized terrorist—to his political advantage. Obama reworked the seemingly endless alternation of these antagonistic images into the energies animating the momentum of his political movement.

Although Obama’s historical project has been translated into Christological terms, it operates according to a temporal logic that disconfirms the telos of redemptive historiography. Upon representing the desire for change in terms of his effort to achieve a “more perfect union,” Obama ratified an understanding of history as a series of impasses. Obama may have represented his presidential campaign as a truly “transformative moment,” a change whose time had come, but he invariably situated the change that has indeed come within the context of the never-ending effort to achieve a “more perfect union.”

The transformative moment of Obama’s election and the structuring
racist antinomy that should have rendered it impossible did not converge to form a postracial American society. They instead collided into each other. Every moment of Obama’s presidential movement also reestablished the antagonism that reimposed the racial divide. The past produced within the grasp of this complex, as he made clear in his 2008 address at the National Constitution Center, “isn’t dead and buried. In fact, it isn’t even past.” In occupying this rift in between antagonistic positions and permanently striving for a more perfect union, Obama took up a site that envisioned American history as an accumulation of stalemates. And he characterized the project he undertook from within this location as making “a way out of no way.”

I have chosen the term “orphic” to describe the structuring antinomy underpinning the United States’ racial imaginary because Obama discerned this recalcitrant structure during a viewing of Black Orpheus. Barack Obama’s election to the presidency did not displace the structural antinomy that he found illuminated in Black Orpheus as a twenty-year-old. But twenty-eight years later, Obama represented the changes he had effected in the United States’ social imaginary within the context of Black Orpheus.

In this passage from an address he delivered on March 20, 2011, in the Teatro Municipal where Black Orpheus was set, Obama represented himself as a figure who would have been unimaginable to his mother, and to the film’s director as well as its audience:

Now, one of my earliest impressions of Brazil was a movie I saw with my mother as a very young child, a movie called Black Orpheus, that is set in the favelas of Rio during Carnival. And my mother loved that movie, with its singing and dancing against the backdrop of the beautiful green hills. And it first premiered as a play right here in Teatro Municipal. That’s my understanding.

And my mother is gone now, but she would have never imagined that her son’s first trip to Brazil would be as President of the United States. She would have never imagined that. And I never imagined that this country would be even more beautiful than it was in the movie.

During his presidential campaign, Obama converted the idealized child/savage colonial orphic machine into the precondition for the emergence of this previously unimaginable figuration. By occupying the rift in between them, Obama created a figuration of (and as) Black Orpheus that would have been unimaginable to the racial imaginary this antinomy regulated.

I examine the historic occasion for Obama’s Rio address as well as the efficacy of Obama’s orphic fantasy at the conclusion of this essay.
I hope to specify the changes Barack Obama effected within the U.S. political imaginary by briefly considering a montage of scenarios—the New Orleans Superdome in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Tea Party movement’s town hall meetings, the memorial service for the Americans gunned down in Tucson in January 2011, the underside of Bush’s homeland security state, the Teatro Municipal through which Obama’s iteration of *Black Orpheus* accomplished this transformation.

*Hurricane Katrina: Awakening Black Orpheus*

Barack Obama located the origins of his movement in the sudden revelation of a nonsynchronizable now-time. This moment took place during a memorial service President George Herbert Walker Bush led to commemorate the life of the great civil rights leader Rosa Parks. While listening to President George W. Bush’s father celebrate her memory, Barack Obama recalled the abandoned and homeless people of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina as the memory that this memorial service had foreclosed from recognition.

As I sat and listened to the former President . . . , my mind kept wandering back to the scenes of devastation . . . , when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast and New Orleans was submerged. I recalled images of teenage mothers weeping or cursing in front of the New Orleans Superdome, their listless infants exposed hoisted to their hips, and old women in wheelchairs, heads lolling back from the heat, their withered legs under soiled dresses . . . . Listening to people’s stories, it was clear that many of Katrina’s survivors had been abandoned long before the hurricane struck. They were the faces of any inner-city neighborhood in any American city, the faces of black poverty—the jobless and almost jobless, the sick and soon to be sick, the frail and the elderly.14

President Bush’s memorialization of this great civil rights leader from the past coincided with the state’s abandonment of the African Americans who had been forced to take up residence in the New Orleans Superdome. Their abject impoverishment and homelessness had not received the state’s notice before Hurricane Katrina, and their hopeless economic condition did not receive representation in the remarks with which the former president commemorated Rosa Parks. Rather than remaining fully absorbed within Bush’s commemoration of Rosa Parks’s historic accomplishments, Obama recalled a constellation of images—of slaves beaten by their masters, of migrant laborers forced into transfer centers,
of Indians slaughtered by the thousands, of Vietnamese families dragged from their huts and shot and burned—that disrupted the commemorative ritual. It was in this eventful moment that Obama resolved to transform the desire for a different America into the object cause of a presidential campaign rather than a contemporary civil rights movement. Obama seized the revolutionary moment that surged up in this space when he linked the image of Katrina with this series of associated images to inaugurate his movement.

The tidal shift in the national self-regard that Barack Obama’s fantasy enabled was not the result of the restriction of his identification to the homeless people of New Orleans. His “movement” was grounded in a much more pervasive sense of dispossession—of citizens stripped of their constitutional rights by the Patriot Act, of parents separated from their children by war, of families forced from their homes by the subprime mortgage crisis—that was already inscribed and awaiting enactment in the script responsible for the production of the Bush homeland security state.

Desire takes off when its object cause embodies or gives positive existence to the void that animates desire. Obama stood in the place of all of the figures who, in having been removed from their mandated positions within the social order, now lacked a place. The odd man in, Obama embodied the excess of confusion and need introduced by the desire for an alternative into objective reality. As the placeholder for all who could not be constitutively included within the social order, Obama became the object cause for those disparate desires, and the object cause as well of the missing America through which those desires became imaginable.15

The mirrors that Obama added to the U.S. political culture did not merely reconfigure the existing field. They also took the ground out from under the already positioned field, and they brought an entirely different field into view. In the acceptance speech that Obama delivered at the Democratic National Convention on August 29, 2008, the third anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, he associated his presidential campaign with the audacious hope for this alternative future. In his victory address at Grant Park, he associated that hope with the encompassing aspiration to achieve a more perfect union.

The Tea Party Captivity

Obama’s standing as a transformational object, his capacity to produce what could be called a surplus effect of potential change, constituted the
genius of his presidential campaign. It also organized the profound sense of loss that emerged once the movement for change was supplanted by specific presidential policies. Obama’s policies necessarily alienated particular constituencies even as they gratified the desires of others. His election brought audacious hope into intimate relationship with radical despair.

Despite the apocalyptic pitch surrounding Obama’s run against John McCain, McCain had been gathering strength every week until an event took place that utterly changed the political terrain. After the financial meltdown, Obama became the beneficiary of a whole set of desperate needs and demands. The turning point in the campaign took place when Obama exploited the subprime mortgage crisis to persuade the majority of Americans to divest their credibility in Bush’s global war on terror and reinvest it in the ambition to make a transgenerational dream come true.

The 9/11 of the economic order also incited the emergence of a populist movement that embroiled Obama’s presidency. One month after his inauguration, powerful Republican lobbies and Fox News began to promote the Tea Party movement. The movement included financiers and cynical politicians as well as members who had suffered real economic and emotional losses in the wake of 9/11 and the financial meltdown.

Obama organized his presidential campaign as a populist grassroots movement that cohered around two aims: to bring an end to President George W. Bush’s unconstitutional state policies—abridgment of civil rights, preemptive strikes, renditions, internment of detainees at Guantánamo Bay—and to oppose the war in Iraq. The Tea Party movement produced a mirror image of Obama’s grassroots populist movement, which had as one of its purposes the mimetic redescription of what Obama’s campaign had called audacious hope as the achievement of a terrifying reality. In the contest that ensued, the architects of the Tea Party appropriated the organizing components of Obama’s successful grassroots campaign—its antiwar initiative and its status as a constitutional movement—as models and targets.

Just as Obama overwhelmed opposition to his presidential campaign by building on the fantasy of a new, as yet unimaginable America, so too did the Tea Partiers build their own fantasy. After the trauma of the financial collapse, the Tea Party constructed the fantasy of an autonomous political sphere—reimagined within the representational matrix of the post-Reconstruction South—whose members were organized around a Contract from America. Whereas President Obama governed through the propagation of the desire to achieve a “more perfect union,” the Tea Party
members construed themselves as having seceded from Obama’s union and forged an alternative.

The primary context for the Tea Party’s interpretation of the economic collapse was the global war on terror. Its effectiveness as a political bloc depended on two basic factors: the extent to which the weakening of the global war on terror’s conventional articulations led social elements to enter a “crisis” state of unfixity, and the extent to which the Tea Party’s new articulations borrowed from and reworked traditional frameworks. The participants in the Tea Party movement identified their opposition to Obama’s changes in financial and health care policies with the Boston patriots’ iconic revolutionary act of dumping crates of tea overboard to protest the British tyrant George III’s unfair taxation. But Tea Partisans redeployed figures instituted to conduct George W. Bush’s global war on terror—illegal aliens, detainees, U.S. intelligence interrogators, terrorists—as the underpinning for lurid fantasies that supplied imaginary explanations for real economic and emotional distress.

In calling the Tea Party a fantasy, I do not mean that we need only to expose its phantasmic myth about the cause of the financial collapse to reveal the underlying truth. Following Slavoj Žižek, I would argue that instead of offering an escape from reality, fantasies actively construct social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic dimension. Fantasies produce a figure, the subject who is supposed to believe in them, as the precondition of their credibility. Political commentators who believe they can dismantle the power of the fantasy by exposing its factual inaccuracies believe that credibility rises and falls with the truth of the factual state of affairs. Racism proliferates through its exponents’ contempt for factual accuracy.

Because state fantasies construct a perfect order, they are always accompanied by symptom figures onto whom all the imperfections of the existing order must be projected. There would be no system without the symptom as the element that stitches up the inconsistencies of its ideology and gives consistency to being. But the symptom figure does not exist in the social symbolic order. As the embodiment of elements that cannot be integrated within that order, it demarcates that order’s limits of tolerance and coherence. After 9/11 the terrorist was a symptom figure who facilitated the stitching up of inconsistencies in the entire ideological system. “The terrorist” summed up, gave coherence to, and offered a solution to a range of popular concerns.

When President Obama redescribed the global war on terror as “overseas contingency operations,” he dismantled the most powerful consoli-
dating framework invented since the cold war. After he removed the figure of the symptomal element—the universal terrorist—that had brought into coherence a whole range of internal political forces, the entire system of managed fear that this symptomal element had organized began to come apart. In the wake of the financial disaster in 2008, the Tea Party movement put Obama into the place of the symptom figure he had removed. For Tea Partiers, Obama was the most visible symptom of the loss of the American way of life. Obama was thereafter made to occupy the position of the figure that he had eradicated.

In the wake of the Obama administration’s dismantling of Bush’s state fantasy, the paramilitary movements and the Christian fundamentalists that President Bush had aligned with the imperatives of the homeland security state have reemerged with collective fantasies of their own. The Tea Partiers who disrupted town hall meetings, demanded that Obama give proof of his U.S. citizenship, propagated rumors of death panels, plotted the “teabagging” of Obama, demanded state secession, declared Obama the Antichrist, issued ultimatums, refused to permit their children to listen to the president’s schoolroom address, and brought their guns to anti-Obama rallies have refused to give up their psychic attachments to the global war on terror.

The Tea Party movement was constructing fantasies associated with birth and death at a moment when the social contract, partially as a result of the financial meltdown, was undergoing a complete redescription. Obama’s bailout of financial institutions and his proposed changes in the health care contract quite literally affected Americans’ most intimate sense of secure belonging—jobs, health, and home. The Tea Partisans produced a retroactive relation between Obama’s changes in health care policies and the financial crisis. Exercising a retroactive causality, they represented Obama’s health care legislation as the definitive cause of the financial catastrophe.17

The deep psychic hold—the haptic uptake—of the birther/deather fantasies derives from their working at the most intimate level of both the body and the psyche of those who are taken up by them. Both fantasies are underpinned by a logic of psychic reversal for which revenge supplies the rationale. If Barack Obama’s election constituted reparation for the wrongs performed against minoritized populations in the historical past, then, this fantasy has it, he intended to do to the majority of United States citizens what had been done to the historically oppressed. These beliefs cannot be answered by fact because they have inscribed persons within an order made in the image of fears that have become their reality.
The birthers’ propagation of the belief that Obama lacks a valid birth certificate reimagined him as an illegal immigrant. The deathers conjuring of scenarios in which President Obama convoked death panels to decide on their continued viability identified U.S. citizens as equivalent to the detainees targeted for coercive interrogation in the war on terror. These conjoined fantasies tacitly constructed President Obama as himself a “terrorist,” an enemy of the state whose health care policy threatened the biopolitical security of the homeland. That fantasy began to experience uptake when the town hall meetings in which Obamacare was discussed became sites for the acting out of the fear and the rage.

By dissociating their project from Obama’s “now,” the Tea Party undermined his strategic use of the collective desire to form a more perfect union as the basis for “change.” Obama could not answer the explicit racism that was built into the Tea Party movement’s imagined secession without identifying himself as the leader of a civil rights faction. It took an event that reawakened a series of past events from within the United States’ transgenerational trauma to undermine the Tea Party movement’s stalemate.

On January 8, 2011, a lone gunman shot Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and eighteen of her associates and constituents in a political rally in Tucson, Arizona, fatally wounding six of them. This traumatizing moment recalled a series of assassinations—of presidents and presidential candidates and charismatic civil rights leaders: Jack and Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. 18

President Obama’s memorial service in Tucson recalled the “transformative moment” of his campaign when memories of the helpless figures huddled in the New Orleans Superdome overtook his consciousness during the memorial service for Rosa Parks. When President Barack Obama traveled to Tucson on January 12, 2011, however, he did not do so as a representative of the civil rights movement or to commemorate the achievements of a dead black leader. This time a scene of catastrophic political violence became the occasion for an African American president to serve as the nation’s designated mourner. The persons who had been shot in Tucson were neither presidents nor civil rights leaders. They were mostly white Americans performing everyday political activities. Obama’s Tucson address produced an answer within the real world to the Tea Party’s fantasies about death panels and Obama’s un-Americanness.

The town hall meetings that members of the Tea Party members had
turned into shouting matches over Obama’s health care policies supplied the scene with its biopolitical unconscious. The lone gunman’s rage, his violent hatred, his taking the law into his own hands—all of this recalled the modus operandi of the Tea Party movement. President Obama could not directly assign the movement responsibility for the shootings without reducing himself to one of its political antagonists, but his commemorative remarks conjured Tea Party demonstrations as their phantasmic context.

In Tucson, Obama turned the Tea Party into the spectral accomplices within a scenario in which he executed two significant acts of dissociation: of his movement from that of the Tea Party and of his biopolitics from an armed terrorist’s thanato-politics. The memorial service also enabled Obama to use the images with which the Tea Party movement had demonized him to recover the position in between irreconcilable antagonists. Holding the space of the rift in between the Tea Party and its victims, Obama characterized the Tucson shootings as symptomatic of the need for a “more perfect union”:

That process of reflection, of making sure we align our values with our actions—that, I believe, is what a tragedy like this requires. For those who were harmed, those who were killed—they are part of our family, an American family 300 million strong. We may not have known them personally, but we surely see ourselves in them. In George and Dot, in Dorwan and Mavy, we sense the abiding love we have for our own husbands, our own wives, our own life partners. Phyllis—she’s our mom or grandma; Gabe our brother or son. In Judge Roll, we recognize not only a man who prized his family and did his job well, but also a man who embodied America’s fidelity to the law. In Gabby, we see a reflection of our public spiritedness, that desire to participate in that sometimes frustrating, sometimes contentious, but always necessary and never-ending process to form a more perfect union.19

As the representative of what it means to be alive within a vital body politic, Obama fashioned his address to rejoin the order of facts with the order of feelings in a now restored political order. The phrases from his memorial address quite literally displayed Obama’s care. They removed each of the persons Obama commemorated from the oblivion of a mass shooting, celebrated each as part of a national family, as a representative of the nation’s shared need for political forms of life, and as deserving of our collective memory.

In attending to Americans who had been attacked while participating in a collective form of political life, President Obama renewed the state’s

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relationship to the health and welfare of the national body politic. Each 
time he restored a wounded form of civic life, he separated it from the Tea 
Party’s violence. By turning this “quintessential American scene” into the 
dialectical image that brought back to memory all those other scenes of 
political violence, Obama also disclosed the nonsynchronous temporali-
ties that haunted our contemporary moment.

The biohistorical event that took place in Tucson provided President 
Obama with an actually existing space in which he could remediate the 
rift in the body politic. The care he showed for the wounded in Tucson 
gave him access to the most intimate levels of biopolitical life—where the 
zoë of ontologically vulnerable individuals was conjoined with the bios 
of the body politic.

Obama’s commemorative remarks drew a tacit parallel between the 
U.S. citizens who lost their lives in New York and Washington, D.C., on 
September 11, 2001, and the citizens who were subjected to a comparably 
senseless violence in Tucson. But comprehending the significance of this 
moment to Obama’s political imaginary requires drawing a distinction 
from the events on which his predecessor had legitimated his biopolitics.

When he inaugurated the emergency measures of the homeland secu-
rity state, Bush cited the traumatic power of the events that took place 
on 9/11 as justification. The homeland security legislation turned the 
state of exception into a juridical political apparatus that inscribed the 
body of the people within a quasi-permanent biopolitical settlement. 
This biopolitical arrangement first subtracted the population from the 
forms of civic life through which they recognized themselves as a free 
and equal citizenry and then positioned these life forms—the people, 
their constitutional rights and liberties—into nonsynchronous zones of 
protection.20

President Bush’s emergency measures set the citizens whose rights and 
liberties the homeland security state protected in an antithetical relation-
ship with the detainees and illegal combatants whom it reduced to the con-
dition of sheer naked biological life (homo sacer). Stripped of the rights 
of citizens and prisoners of war, these persons were reduced to the status 
of unprotected flesh (zoë) whose lives the state could terminate accord-
ing to decisions that were outside juridical regulation. In order to pro-
tect the entirety of the law against attack, the state subordinated its own
laws to this urgent eschatological mission. The vacuum opened up by the vanishing of objective reality into this singularity was filled in by the mythologized reality in which the emergency state erected its eschatological version of Realpolitik.

The citizens who had been shot and killed in Tucson held a biopolitical status equivalent to that of the figures whose radical dislocation had been normalized by President Bush’s state of exception. They had suffered the loss of the social textures of the biopolitical lifeworlds into which they were born. Outside the protection of all particular laws, their bodies were abandoned to a field of violence. At the most intimate level of their being, they had been given over to a terrorizing power that conditioned them absolutely.

The distinction between Barack Obama’s mode of governance and George Bush’s turned on their different relationship to the state of exception. In Theses on the Philosophy of History, Walter Benjamin asserted that when the state of exception becomes the rule, “we must arrive at a concept of history that corresponds to this fact. Then we will have the production of a real state of exception before us as a task.” During his presidential campaign, Obama connected his perception that under the Bush administration the state of exception had indeed become the rule with the imperative to undertake the production of an alternative.

The presidential campaign correlated the real state of exception with the revolutionary potential of Obama’s movement. At the level of the law, movement personified the sheer anomic or constituent power—neither constituted by nor constituting state power—of what Benjamin referred to as pure or revolutionary violence. The revolutionary violence animating Obama’s movement supplied its members with a warrant for undermining Bush’s state of exception in the name of an alternative order of legality that Obama’s election as president would bring into existence.

But after his election, Obama did not abolish the state of exception that George Bush had normalized. He instead used the Bush state of exception as the backdrop for his restoration of the normal constitutional democracy. In so doing, President Obama restricted his production of the “real” state of exception with the restoration of the constitutional rights and liberties from which President Bush’s homeland security legislation had dissociated United States citizens.

Earlier I described the use to which Obama put the nation’s structural racist antinomy in generating the momentum of his political movement. During his term as president, Obama turned this racist antinomy into the dynamic jointure through which he reconnected the body politic with
their constitutional rights and liberties. Rather than supplanting this racist structure, Obama positioned himself in a rift between its antagonistic representations so as to represent two dialectically opposed iterations of the people—its sovereign citizens as well as its *hominis sacri*. In his Tucson address, Obama turned the torsion produced by his oscillation between the two poles of this racist antinomy—sovereign leader, *homo sacer*—into the dynamic jointure through which he reconnected the body politic with its constitutional rights and liberties. This structural antinomy became the vital portal through which Obama’s rules and norms inhabited the U.S. body politic.

In Tucson, Obama entered a site of generalized violence in which the exception had become the rule. But the Real state of exception he inaugurated at this site entailed his reperforming the constitutive rites on which the United States was founded. At this Real state of exception in between the nation and the state, Obama reaffirmed the foundational premises of the United States’ social contract at the very site on which a terrorist had forcibly removed U.S. citizens from the condition of national belonging. In reinstating the power of the state as the guarantor of their rights, Obama first reinstated the wounded within the condition of common humanity, then he brought them out of the realm of civic death and reconnected them with their constitutional rights and liberties.

In an effort to elucidate the role that fantasy played at this event, permit me to recast the symbolically efficacious action President Obama performed in Tucson as the prototypical mystery that Black Orpheus enacted within Bush’s underworld. When Barack Obama traveled to this devastated place, he acted on the attributes of the figure mythologized as Black Orpheus. Standing in between the state and persons whom a terrorizing assassin had reduced to precariously vulnerable biological life, Obama’s Black Orpheus, as the plenipotentiary of the U.S. body politic’s vital political energies, performed the state’s foundational orphic mystery. In the rift between these vulnerable mortalized biological life forms (what Giorgio Agamben calls *zoê*) and the immortal citizen-bios, Orpheus acted on the charismatic dimension of the state, the extralegality (*lex animata*) animating the law’s effectivity. Oscillating between speaking as the sovereign and as representative of the *hominis sacri* threatened by a gunman’s terrorizing violence, Black Orpheus personified the jointure between natural life and the law through which they became once again entwined with the Constitution. No longer bare life, the wounded recovered their participant capacities at the jointure of life and law through the intercession of Black Orpheus.
In this essay I have tried to elucidate the state fantasy Barack Obama instituted to replace George W. Bush’s homeland security state. The “Black Orpheus” fantasy has enabled me to explain how Obama dissociated his biopolitical initiatives from the Tea Party’s and differentiated his governmental rule from Bush’s homeland security state. But in representing President Obama’s biopolitical imaginary primarily in terms of the Black Orpheus fantasy responsible for hegemonizing it, I have risked a dual mystification—of the particulars of President Obama’s mode of governance as well as of an analysis of its workings. Obama may have wanted us to envision his administration through the visage of Black Orpheus. I cannot conclude this discussion of Barack Obama’s state fantasy, however, without asking what this fantasy mystifies.

I can begin to answer this question by returning to the Teatro Municipal that was the point of departure for this excursus and reading the opening phrases of President Obama’s address from a slightly different perspective:

Now, one of my earliest impressions of Brazil was a movie I saw with my mother as a very young child, a movie called Black Orpheus, that is set in the favelas of Rio during Carnival. And my mother loved that movie, with its singing and dancing against the backdrop of the beautiful green hills. And it first premiered as a play right here in Teatro Municipal. That’s my understanding.

And my mother is gone now, but she would have never imagined that her son’s first trip to Brazil would be as President of the United States. She would have never imagined that. And I never imagined that this country would be even more beautiful than it was in the movie.

At the outset of these remarks, I described Barack Obama as having become unimaginable to Black Orpheus’s repertoire of racist representations, and I interpreted Obama’s recollection of his dead mother as a reprise of Orpheus’s efforts to call Eurydice back from the underworld. But if these lines do indeed refer to the Black Orpheus Obama personified in achieving the presidency, the Eurydice to which they now allude cannot be restricted to Obama’s mother. Eurydice would necessarily include the members of the grassroots political movement that Black Orpheus’s eloquence persuaded to elect Barack Obama. In the ancient myth, Orpheus discloses his hubris when he disobeys Hades’s order not to look back as his song releases Eurydice from the underworld. When he looks back at
the political movement Black Orpheus promised to lead out of President Bush’s underworld, it is President Barack Obama who has now become unimaginable to Eurydice. The chief reason he has become unimaginable to Eurydice now has less to do with Black Orpheus’s breach of the racial imaginary than with President Barack Obama’s failure to realize the transformative change he promised.

During the presidential campaign, participants in Obama’s movement bombarded President Bush with demands that he end state policies that violated the United States Constitution—preemptive strikes, the opening of the detention center at Guantánamo Bay, unauthorized domestic surveillance—and would undermine the legislation spelled out in Bush’s Homeland Security Act. Rather than moving the nation out of Bush’s underworld, President Obama renewed the surveillance provisions of the Patriot Act, ordered his attorney general to initiate juridical proceedings against persons illegally detained at Guantánamo Bay, and increased the use of preemptive strikes abroad.

President Obama signed an executive order authorizing the bombing of military bases in Libya on March 19, 2011, the anniversary of the exact day when George W. Bush had initiated his campaign against Saddam Hussein. He enunciated the rationale for the bombing in the same March 20 speech in which he recalled his initial viewing of Black Orpheus. In his address at Teatro Municipal, President Obama placed the mask of Black Orpheus over foreign policies that the members of his political movement would never have imagined him undertaking.

In the body of his address President Obama constructed a series of dubious rhetorical analogies—correlating the “universal” human aspirations for freedom and socioeconomic justice informing the “Arab Spring” with his own grassroots movement, with his “humanitarian” intervention in Libya, as well as with his neoliberal trade agreements with Brazil—that would have been comparably unimaginable. President Obama’s efforts to transpose the truly revolutionary movement taking place in the Middle East into a mirror image of his disbanded grassroots political movement rivaled the cynicism evidenced in the Tea Party’s appropriative maneuvers. President Obama named his military campaign in Libya “Odyssey Dawn” so as to draw it into the imaginary orbit of the “Arab Spring,” and he deployed technologies—drone missiles and special ops units—to remove those who were killed or disfigured from the field of visibility. But after the visage of Orpheus is removed, Eurydice discovers that she still remains in Bush’s underworld.

During his campaign, Barack Obama took pride in his ability to take
up positions in between hostile factions so as to negotiate the desire of each for a “more perfect Union.” But President Obama’s rifts solidified into recalcitrant political deadlocks. I concluded my book *The New American Exceptionalism* with the observation that I did not know whether the audacity of hope Barack Obama had aroused was a sign of political renewal or a symptom of radical despair. It may be that we have entered a now-time in which radical hope and audacious despair have achieved a more perfect union.

## Notes


2. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), Giorgio Agamben derives *homo sacer* as a term of art from Roman law that can be translated as the “sacred” or the “accursed” man. In Roman law, *homo sacer* describes a person who is banned, may be killed by anybody, but may not be sacrificed in a religious ritual. The *homo sacer* was banned from society and denied all rights and all functions in civil religion. The genealogy of Agamben’s *homo sacer* can be traced back to the Orphic mysteries, whose ceremonies rested on a crucial distinction in Greek between “bare life” (*zoē*) and a qualified mode of life (*bios*).


4. Ibid., 51.

5. Ibid., 50.


7. Obama, “Perfect Union.”

8. For a brilliant description of the role the proximity of the sublime and
desecrated bodies of the sovereign played in fashioning the fiction of the “king’s two bodies,” see Eric Santner’s remarkable volume *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).


11. Obama, “Perfect Union.”

12. Ibid.

13. For this address, see http://www.whitehouse.gov/ (accessed 28 May 2011).


17. The fantasy work that the Tea Party performed was evidenced on October 30, 2009, when Representative Virginia Foxx, a Republican member of the House of Representatives from North Carolina, articulated her opposition to “Obamacare” by explicitly linking health care legislation to the war on terror: “I believe we have more to fear from the potential of that bill passing than we do from any terrorist right now in any country.” See http://thinkprogress.org/politics/ (accessed 11 February 2010).

18. When I first heard that a political figure had been critically wounded in a political rally in Arizona, a stronghold of the Tea Party movement, I immediately feared that the president had been shot.

19. For the transcript of Obama’s Tucson speech, see http://www.whitehouse.gov/ (accessed 28 May 2011).

20. I elaborate on this account of Bush’s biopolitical settlement in mythopo-


22. For an analysis of the relationship between pure revolution and constituent power, see my discussion in The New American Exceptionalism, 207.

23. “Whether that state of fantasy is a sign of the audacity of hope or a symptom of cultural despair is a question that remains to be answered.” Pease, The New American Exceptionalism, 213.

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