PHARMACOTIC FASCISM: TRUMP, NECROPOLITICS, AND ONTOPOLITICAL VIOLENCE

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Comments welcome.

*Terminological notes*:

The term ‘**pharmacotic’** is my own neologism, derived from the ancient Greek nouns ‘pharmakos’ and ‘pharmakon’.

‘**Ontopolitical’** today remains something of an unstabilized signifier; in this paper I use it both in its currently common meaning, and also to refer more broadly to political conflicts or other political matters having to with political identity and identity construction.

If Donald Trump’s words and behavior since his 2020 election defeat had left any lingering doubts regarding his aspiration to become the leader of an American form of fascism, his speeches on March 3, 2023 at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and on March 25 at the site of the Branch Davidian shootout in Waco, Texas, should settle the matter.

Speaking in his controlled and reassuring voice to his enthusiastic followers who had rallied to hear him after a lackluster first week of the CPAC convention, Trump promised them revenge against their domestic political enemies and perceived persecutors, and referred to the 2024 election as “the final battle” for America. As David Smith reported in the *Guardian*, “before a cult-like crowd, Saturday’s event was a warning against Democratic complacency, an indicator that Trump is down but not out and that, just as in 2016, history could take a perilous turn.” (Smith, Guardian, 4 Mar 2023). Trump “turned back the clock to the darkest elements of his presidency with a fiery address that showed the threat to American democracy is far from over.” “In 2016, I declared: I am your voice,” Trump reminded his enthralled audience. “Today, I add: I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed: I am your retribution!”

Channeling – intentionally or not – the fascist demagogues of interwar Europe, Trump claimed that “for seven years you and I have been engaged in an epic struggle to rescue our country from the people who hate it and want to absolutely destroy it.” Trump then re-launched his attack on the Republican party itself, which he has nearly reshaped into a political organization colonized by what can reasonably be described as a personal cult. “We had a Republican party that was ruled by freaks, neocons, globalists, open border zealots and fools but we are never going back” to the party he upended in 2016. He reminded his followers that

we started a great, great, positive revolution. Nobody’s ever seen anything like it before. It’s called Make America Great Again. We want to make America great again. We will dismantle the deep state. We will demolish woke tyranny, and we will restore the American republic to all of its radiant glory, and with God’s help and your support, we will make America powerful again. We want to have a powerful country. We need to have a powerful country. We will make America wealthy again. We will make America strong again. That’s what we want. We want strength.

Echoing his apocalyptic rhetoric of that year, he asserted that “this is the most dangerous time in our country’s history, and Joe Biden is leading us into oblivion.” “With you at my side,” he promised,

we will demolish the deep state…. We will drive out the globalists. We will cast out the communists. We will throw off the political class that hates our country…. We will beat the Democrats. We will rout the fake news media. We will expose and appropriately deal with the Rinos [Republicans in name only]. We will evict Joe Biden from the White House. And we will liberate America from these villains and scoundrels once and for all!

As religion writer Thomas Lecaque wrote of this speech in *Religion Dispatches*,

This kind of rhetoric is dangerous. It isn’t just the grievance mongering and generic language of violence, it’s a call to holy war—an eschatological vision of the Kingdom of Heaven that awaits them on the other side of what he describes as ‘the final battle.’ This holy war is less Bible and more [Rainbow Kitten Surprise](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlQDMzzbWCY) (“[Purify the palace, purify the streets](https://open.spotify.com/track/1zkkvSLk5Nh4uoyKWwuie9?si=494d4abf9c074494)”)—a call to street violence and purging the “deep state” rather than a reckoning with judgment.

[*MY APOLOGIES FOR THE AWKWARD CUTTING AND PASTING IN THIS SECTION! - LG]*

Trump followed up the CPAC speech with a series increasingly violent social media postings referring to Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, who is currently investigating Trump and who is Black, as “human scum” and a “degenerate psychopath,” a “[Soros backed animal](https://truthsocial.com/users/realDonaldTrump/statuses/110053176405923271),” who is “[doing the work of Anarchists and the Devil](https://truthsocial.com/users/realDonaldTrump/statuses/110073389232042855)” and who “truely (sic) hates the USA.” Trump threatened death, destruction, hatred, chaos, and turmoil if he is arrested. As Lecaque points out, “most of these are terms that have been used by authoritarians in the past to mark their political enemies as less than human—be it the Manhattan DA, people of color, queer people, Democrats, or everyone to the left of Donald Trump—one of the [characteristics of genocidal speech](https://religiondispatches.org/marjorie-taylor-greenes-genocide-rhetoric-creates-a-permission-structure-for-the-right-but-permission-to-do-what/). This is the rhetoric of violence, the call for stochastic terrorism.”

As Mark Leuchter, professor of religion at Temple University [points out](https://twitter.com/MarkLeuchter/status/1637796881462861825?s=20), these tweets turn the call to protests into something more than just a political act:

by making the upcoming arrest a matter of eschatology: violent demonstrations for Trump are part of God’s war against evil, and if you don’t fight, your soul will perish…. And this is the crux of it—the call to holy war is a rhetoric that weaves in and out of the campaign in this moment…. It’s a rhetoric of eschatological violence, an apocalyptic framework that encourages violence against their political opponents…. Waco is a campaign stop, but it’s also an emblem of anti-government violence, and an especially potent one when combined with repeated messages about the tyranny and violence of their opponents. Mass protests might not materialize, but the call to stochastic terrorism, motivated by religio-political ideology, is pouring out of the Trump campaign this week, and we should be worried about it.

Then, two weeks later, Trump officially launched his 2024 campaign symbolically at the location and on the 30th anniversary of the 1993 Branch Davidian siege in Waco, Texas – a location regarded by the many in the American right as a sanctified site of sacrificial murder carried out by the liberal state. It was in retaliation for Waco that Timothy McVeigh and his rightist militia supporters carried out the Oklahoma City federal building bombing in 1995 – the most deadly terrorist attack in US history prior to 9/11 (Gumbel and Charles, 2012; Clyde Haberman, NYT, “Memories of Waco Fuel Far-right Groups”). Employing what religion reporters Annika Brockschmidt and Thomas Lecaque called “apocalyptic, violent, genocidal rhetoric”, Trump began the rally by posing hand over heart while speakers blared a song he recorded with the “J6 Prison Choir” to raise funds for the legal fees of those who participated in the Capitol insurrection. Trump’s speech was “a far-right grievance mongering given a language and a target for its violence” in which

Democrats are not merely opponents, they are “demonic forces.” Every antisemitic dog whistle you could ask for is used—“globalists,” blending with Ted Nugent’s complaints about supplying Ukraine by calling President Zelensky (who is Jewish) a “homosexual weirdo,” and the unending use of “Soros backed” to describe opponents.

Brockschmidt and Lecaque’s comments on the song and speech are worth quoting at length, for their relevance to the topic of this paper: [AGAIN, APOLOGIES FOR THE HASTY CUTTING AND PASTING – LG]

The song itself is a compilation of Trump reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and the choir singing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” harmless enough if not for the official endorsement of the insurrection and the repeated claims of their false imprisonment, horrible treatment, and status as patriots—i.e., martyrs to the cause. The audience had previously been asked to stand and place their hand on their heart—not in a salute to the nation, but to honor the martyrs of the insurrection.

Fascists need martyrs—they need blood to sanctify the ground they walk on, and to call for even more sacrifice from supporters. Trump hasn’t explicitly spoken of “[Blutzeugen](https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/anfaenge-des-ns-regimes-wie-muenchen-zur-brutstaette-fuer-den-nazi-terror-wurde-1.2455050-2)” yet, of “blood witnesses,” as the Nazis called their “martyrs,” or of a “baptism of blood,” as Hitler and his cronies called the Nazis regarding their failed coup of 1923. But he doesn’t have to at this point to make the parallel more obvious—because Ashli Babbitt has long become a martyr of the movement, [as Jeff Sharlet has shown](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2023-03-23/jeff-sharlet-predicts-fascism-in-america-hes-still-an-optimist), as have the still-living insurrectionists behind bars (who can, conveniently, still record propaganda songs).

It was a moment that took the new Trumpist version of the Lost Cause—i.e., the “Stolen Election,” which functions as the Trumpist “stab in the back” myth—to new theological heights, having remnants of the faithful coming together, honoring their martyrs, and vowing that vengeance shall be theirs.

There are nods to Trump’s 2018 relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, to the ongoing fight against ISIS, and to the claim that Iran has attacked the US in 78 locations—an unsubtle nod to rhetorics of Christian violence. And throughout, the claiming of a meme, “They’re not coming after me, they’re coming after you, I’m just standing in the way.”

Trump has now even managed to top his own authoritarian fever dreams styling himself not only as future president and bringer of justice who will right the supposed wrongs suffered by his supporters, but he’s also the arbiter of divinely sanctioned vengeance, the purveyor not merely as any dictator would claim, of justice, but of retribution.

In retribution, there’s a promise of suffering, of inflicting pain on those who have supposedly wronged you and your kind. It fits darkly with the pleasure that the [jackboot](https://lucid.substack.com/p/victim-and-avenger-the-fascist-roots?utm_source=direct&r=rls8&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web) relishes in when inflicting suffering on his enemies—because, as Trump told his crowd, it isn’t loss or victory at the end of this 2024 election season. The fascist only knows extremes: either, they vanquish their enemies or their own existence is wiped out.

And this is where the “death culture” aspect comes in. Trump’s message to his supporters is that it isn’t just the election on the line, everything is on the line: body, mind, soul, nation, identity. It ends in total victory or total defeat. And if this doesn’t induce echoes of the darkest periods in recent history, it might be time to read up on the history of fascism and the language it uses.

At the same time, Trump’s claims of rampant killings of Americans which supposedly go unpunished and his claims that “the Biden regime” is just like “Stalinist Russia” is on track with Marjorie Taylor Greene’s hallucinatory claims of Democrat-sent [death squads](https://religiondispatches.org/marjorie-taylor-greenes-genocide-rhetoric-creates-a-permission-structure-for-the-right-but-permission-to-do-what/) roaming the country and killing conservatives. It’s the lie of violence through the political enemy to justify atrocities in the future and re-style them as either preventative violence or, even better, as acts of self-defense.

The “[accusation in a mirror](https://religiondispatches.org/marjorie-taylor-greenes-genocide-rhetoric-creates-a-permission-structure-for-the-right-but-permission-to-do-what/)” is not for nothing one of the warning signs scholars of genocide point to. If his 2016 inauguration speech spoke of “American carnage,” Trump has escalated this message to “American retribution”—with himself as the avenger willing and able to destroy the political enemy.

It comes back to choosing Waco as a site for the rally. Trump’s rhetoric has gotten more apocalyptic, taking pre-existing calls for violence and amping them up. He’s taken the mantle of martyrdom as he launches his campaign, hammering home the messages that his followers are persecuted, that violent insurrection was righteous, and that the J6 prisoners are the true patriots.

It likely won’t lead to mobs in the streets. But with this rhetoric Trump is playing with the same fire that inspired far-right networks who were in the 90s activated by Ruby Ridge and Mount Carmel. And if the government is the enemy, if Trump’s enemies are inhuman, if the stakes are the very survival of America and the end of the world, this is fuel for the next domestic terrorist incident.

No one who is familiar with the rhetoric of interwar fascism can fail to hear its echoes in these and numerous other provocations in the past few years by Trump and his increasingly bellicose White Christian Nationalist followers.

This paper seeks to theorize these emergent fascist tendencies identified with Donald Trump and his followers, particularly within the White Christian Nationalist movement. It adumbrates a novel theoretical approach interweaving aspects of the ‘pharmacotic’ account of colonial and postcolonial violence set forth in Achille Mbembe’s influential book *Necropolitics* with the conceptual framework developed in my own earlier work on pharmacotic politics and pharmacotic war.[[1]](#endnote-1)

From the perspective of this paper, it is the obsessive construction, demonization, and persecution – initially politically, later through open violence – of internal existential threats and enemies, along with the paradoxical, simultaneously politically revitalizing and toxic effects of this desire that defines fascism.

For context, consider the following symptomatic proto-fascist trends and events:

* The aggrieved brooding among increasingly precaritized segments of the wealthiest and most powerful ethnos in history -- white European and American *Herrenvolk* – and the unsettling susceptibility of many to the Great Replacement Theory cited in the El Paso shooter manifesto [[2]](#endnote-2)
* The mobilization in recent years of increasingly volatile right-wing groups and movements by majority-elected ethno-nationalist governments and populist demagogues, from the US to the Philippines, Israel, Brazil, Hungary, Russia, India, and elsewhere -- leaders whose rhetoric and tactics are designed to delegitimate liberal democratic politics and then to capitalize politically on the resulting general destabilization, creating the conditions for an alternative ethnonational ontopolitical nucleation in relation to which all other political formations increasingly find themselves forced to realign;
* The intensification of enthusiasm for populist leaders the more willing they are to openly violate liberal democratic norms of public discourse and civility; to overtly and unapologetically lie and dissemble; to take illogical and even self-contradictory positions on vital public matters and advocate blatantly unworkable, unfeasible, and counterproductive policies; to call for cruel and punitive measures for dealing with critical social conditions and problems;[[3]](#endnote-3) and to gloat over the suffering of the opponents and victims of their actions -- all because in doing so they demonstrate to their followers that they rank those followers’ interests above the social and political well-being of the country and the norms of the community as a whole, and that they will not hesitate to break the rules of liberal public discourse and undermine democratic norms and institutions to protect themselves and their followers from their real and imagined enemies;
* The related proliferation of white nationalist and other right-wing terrorist groups and the associated increase in the number and scale of mass shootings carried out at schools, synagogues, mosques, and other public spaces, and increasingly directed at racialized others whom they describe as “invaders,” including children, racial and religious minorities, and other vulnerable and easily targeted groups and populations, along with escalating police shootings of young Black men; the widespread preparation for an anticipated race war (as in the broad tacit support among white Americans for the use of lethal violence by both police and armed private white citizens against Black men, as against the NRA’s hypocritical but revealing refusal to endorse Black and Latino gun owner groups[[4]](#endnote-4));
* The facetious dismissal, denial, and downplaying of rightwing leaders’ complicity in these trends and their screening behind a transparent charade of flippant rhetorical dismissal, deception, and masquerade, aided by conservative media’s relentless, wildly exaggerated depictions of the dangers faced by white Americans from racialized others, gender non-conforming LGBTQ+ persons, foreign terrorists, immigrants, and leftists
* Increasingly obvious but still publicly unspeakable manifestations of jouissance at the willful and gratuitous cruelty[[5]](#endnote-5) of both government policies and right-wing violence against innocents (e.g. the predictable evasions of responsibility for school shootings and rightwing extremist terrorism by conservative gun rights supporters, the increase in gun purchases and contributions to the NRA after such shootings, Trump’s family separation policies and his proposals for the forcible collection of DNA from asylum seekers, alligator-filled moats, calls for shooting migrants in the legs, and recently reported accounts of Trump proposing while President to attack North Korea, Mexico, and other countries and blame third countries, etc.);
* The religious sanctification and sacralization of this violence, cruelty, and mendacity by White Christian Nationalist sects, not limited to the theopolitical rhetoric surrounding the War on Terror, the cosmic struggle against Islam, and climate change denial, but also seen in the Pharisaic enthusiasm of white Evangelicals for Trump himself despite his most un-Christian life, beliefs, and character; the bizarre, theologically creepy and tendentious support on the part of anti-Semitic right-wing Revelation-inspired “Christian Zionists” for Israel’s persecution, oppression, and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (tens of thousands of whom are Christians); or the networks of collaboration and affiliation between Evangelical Christians and white supremacists, white nationalists, and white gun rights organizations;[[6]](#endnote-6)

These trends and events have in common a structure of constructive, constitutive group self-reassertion through processes of projection, scapegoating, demonization, and sacrificial violence. The political function of human sacrifice has been the subject of a great deal of research in recent years.[[7]](#endnote-7) Politically motivated human sacrificial violence can take many forms, from ancient mass royal court burials to ritualized mass killings of prisoners of war (as in the Iliad), the do ut des sacrifice of kings or royal family members to end droughts or famines, the sacrifice of virgins and daughters to guarantee military victory (Iphigenia, Jephthah’s daughter[[8]](#endnote-8)), early modern witch trials and public executions, the public torture of regicides,[[9]](#endnote-9) lynchings, the death penalty in some modern liberal democracies, and numerous other manifestations. Such sacrifices can have many different political purposes, from collective atonement to the establishment of orders of dominance and maintenance of social and political hierarchies. This paper focuses on one form of apotropaic[[10]](#endnote-10) human sacrifice -- the ancient Ionian pharmakos ceremony -- and employs it as a model or template, or more precisely as a Deleuzian diagram or abstract machine, for theorizing the relations between the demonization and scapegoating of internal others and the emergence of aspirational fascist leaders and movements.

The fear of loss of control, disempowerment, and even “replacement” on the part of white American *Herrenvolk* today manifests as collective versions of the classic ego defense mechanism formations noted by Freud and theorized in greater depth by his daughter Anna Freud. These include denial, repression, regression, fantasy, projection, reaction formation, introjection, and displaced aggression – all of which were evident in the public rhetoric, policy choices, and semiotic self-presentation of Trump and his administration, and have only become more patently visible in the years between the attempted coup following his 2020 election defeat and his recent, unrestrainedly fascistic speeches at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and in Waco.

The psychic remedies favored by those fearing “replacement” commonly involve purification, cleansing, expulsion, purgation, and deportation, as well as both real and symbolic acts of human sacrifice, along with intensifying obsession with territorial control, borders, boundaries, and walls. This can be seen most obviously in the recurring tropes of Trump’s anti-immigrant rhetoric and the fetishization of his border wall, but were already visible earlier in his “birtherist” campaign to remove Barack Obama from office as foreign-born, his Muslim ban, his opposition to “birthright citizenship,” the “Confronting Violent Extremism” program, the expulsion of immigrant recruits from the US military, his threats of civil war should he lose the impeachment battle or the 2020 election[[11]](#endnote-11) (and now the 2024 election), calls for deprivation of citizenship as a punishment for defying the president and for the firing of NFL football players protesting police violence against African-Americans, and telling Congresswomen of color to “go back to the countries you came from.”[[12]](#endnote-12) As Nancy Pelosi put it, “Make America Great Again has always meant ‘Make America White Again’ ”.

In sum, then, we have the outlines of an emergent fascist resonance machine[[13]](#endnote-13) gathering around the themes of Herrenvolk identity reinforcement through cleansing violence, assaults on liberal democratic norms and institutions, obsession with borders and walls, and the persecution, punishment, and expulsion of objectively innocent but ontopolitically guilty “others”.

**PHARMACOTIC NECROPOLITICS**

The peculiar nature of Trumpian fascism can be usefully theorized using ideas drawn from Achille Mbembe’s recent book Necropolitics, read alongside my own earlier writings on pharmacotic political structures and dynamics. Both of these perspectives theorize the construction of internal enemy others through sacrificial scapegoating processes that function simultaneously as both politically unifying and invigorating drugs, and as toxic poisons to the body politic. As both Mbembe and I (along with a number of other political theorists) have noted, this paradoxical dynamic is captured in the ancient Greek concept of the ‘pharmakon’, which meant both medicine, poison, and addictive, performance-enhancing drug. This term was related to the word ‘pharmakos’, which referred to the victim in an expiatory human sacrifice ritual. Bringing these two concepts together, the concept of pharmacotic politics describes a political dynamic involving the active construction and demonization of political enemy others in order to unify a political movement, party, faction, or entire polity around the common hatred of and desire to expel or eradicate that designated enemy.

Mbembe’s postcolonial theory of necropolitics goes a long way towards accounting for Trumpism, grounded as it is in the mass psychology of a white settler Herrenvolk population’s obsessions with loss of privilege and replacement by racialized others. Writing within the legacy of Frantz Fanon’s political and psychiatric work, Mbembe’s book pivots around what he identifies as “the Platonic concept of pharmakon – the idea of a medication that acts at once as remedy and as poison.”(p. 2) For Mbembe, the outcome of the violence of colonization and decolonization including the recent wars of terror and terrorism, counterinsurgency, conquest, and occupation, has been that war and race have become established as “history’s two privileged sacraments.” “The sacramentalization of war and race in the blast furnace of colonialism made it at once modernity’s antidote and poison, its twofold pharmakon.” “This transformation,” Mbembe observes, “has liberated movements of passion that are increasingly pushing liberal democracies to don the garb of the exception, to perform unconditioned acts in faraway places, and to seek to exercise dictatorship over themselves and against their enemies.” The result is a political tendency to count “whatever is not oneself for nothing” – a “race for separation and de-linking, a race being run against a backdrop of simple anxiety of annihilation.” “Nowadays,” Mbembe writes,

a good many individuals are beset with dread, afraid of having been invaded and being on the verge of disappearing. Entire peoples labor under the apprehension that the resources for continuing to assume their identities are spent. They maintain that an outside no longer exists such that to protect themselves against threats and danger the enclosures must be multiplied. Wanting not to remember anything any longer, least of all their own crimes and misdeeds, they dream up bad objects that return to haunt them and that they then seek violently to rid themselves of. (Mbembe, 2-3, 43)

Confronted with these constructed perils at home and abroad, borders and walls become “the primitive form of keeping at bay enemies, intruders, and strangers – all those who are not one of us” (p. 3), leading to “the desire for apartheid and endogamy that harry our epoch and engulf us in the hallucinatory dream of a ‘community without strangers’. (6)

One result of this is that, for Mbembe,

war is determined as end and necessity not only in democracy but also in politics and in culture. War has become both remedy and poison – our pharmakon. Its transformation into the pharmakon of our time has, in turn, let loose gruesome passions that are increasingly pushing our societies to exit democracy and, as was the case under colonization, to transform into societies of enmity. (3)

“[T]he law of blood, the law of the talion, and the duty to one’s race – the two supplements of atavistic nationalism – are resurfacing.”(6)

The “hate movements” produced within these societies of enmity come to be “invested in an economy of hostility, of enmity, and multiform struggles against the enemy” that contribute to “a significant raising in the acceptable levels and forms of violence that one can (or should) inflict on the weak, on enemies and intruders (anyone considered not to be one of us).” The “security state” that Mbembe says arises from this “thrives on a state of insecurity, which it participates in fomenting and to which it claims to be the solution. If the security state is a structure, the state of insecurity is a kind of passion, or rather an affect, a condition, or even a force of desire.”

To fully explore the many ways that Mbembe’s rich and powerful book illuminates key elements of Trumpian fascism is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will limit myself to outlining an interpretation of Trumpism as a variety of pharmacotic necropolitical fascism, while acknowledging the many parallels with and influences of Mbembe’s thinking.

**TRUMPIAN FASCISM AS NECROPOLITICAL PHARMACOTIC POLITICS**

This paper sketches out the elements of a necropolitical theory of the peculiar form of “hyphenated fascism” represented by what William Connolly has referred to as Donald Trump’s “aspirational fascism” (Connolly, 2017). It situates Trumpism within an emergent pharmacotic political moment rooted in a number of 21st century political developments noted above, including deepening political polarization rooted in widespread structural economic and social precarity and uncertainty about the future, the politically toxic effects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the long shadow of the Great Recession of 2008-14, the resurgence of White Christian Nationalism as a nucleating organizing ideology, the saturation of the country with private arms – overwhelmingly held by white conservatives -- and the increasing salience of the dangers of global climate change. The rise of Trumpian aspirational fascism has been precipitated by the takeover of the popular base of the Republican Party by Donald Trump and his acolytes, followed by the Covid pandemic, the Black Lives Matter uprisings, the Constitutional crisis triggered by Trump’s attempted coup d’etat following the election of 2020, and now in Trump’s recent endorsements of and explicit calls for political violence, mass political disruption, and rejection of the rule of law, in his speeches announcing his bid for re-election in 2024.

These political forces are congealing and crystallizing into a concrete political assemblage informed by an abstract machine or diagram that I call ‘pharmacotic politics’. In Deleuze’s ontology of assemblages, an ‘abstract machine’ or ‘diagram’ articulates a space of universal singularities, or possibilities for the capacities of components of an assemblage to affect and be affected by other components, thereby giving rise to the emergent properties and the distinctive identity of that assemblage. In his book Foucault, Deleuze uses the term “diagram” as a synonym for what he calls an “abstract machine” distinguishing it from what he calls a “concrete machine”, or what Foucault calls a “mechanism.” [[14]](#endnote-14)  Foucault’s panopticon is perhaps the best known example of a diagram. The diagram or abstract machine “is like the cause of the concrete assemblages that execute (effectuent) its relations; and these relations between forces take place ‘not above’ but within the very tissue of the assemblages they produce.” [[15]](#endnote-15) The diagram or abstract machine “acts as” (agit comme) a “non-unifying immanent cause” of the emergence of the relations among the elements of an assemblage or concrete machine. Like a map, it “is coextensive with the whole social field” – i.e. it is simultaneously immanent in, and an abstraction of, the combinatory functions and relations of forces operating within a given historical social formation or other assemblage. The diagram or abstract machine is the “map of relations between forces, a map of density, or intensity, which proceeds by primary non-localizable relations and at every moment passes through every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another.” [[16]](#endnote-16)

The concept of pharmacotic politics is a diagram in this sense. It diagrams the ontopolitical reconstitution of the political identities of dominant groups whose ontopolitical power is perceived as threatened. The pharmacotic political reconstitution of dominant group identity and restoration of their hegemony operates through the identification, demonization, marginalization, isolation, castigation, punishment, and ultimately expulsion, elimination, liquidation, or eradication of the ontopolitical enemies of the embattled dominant group. The theory of pharmacotic politics seeks to disclose the formation of actual concrete political assemblages through the operation of this diagram in particular unfolding political moments.

The term “pharmacotic” is derived from the etymologically related ancient Greek words ‘pharmakos’ (the victim in a form of ritualized human sacrifice) and ‘pharmakon’ (which, as Mbembe notes, meant both medicine and poison -- as well as addictive narcotic, hallucinogenic substance, magic potion, and what we would call a performance enhancing drug, among other significations). The theory explores how certain kinds of political violence are structured like the pharmakos ritual, and are simultaneously politically salutary, medicinal, toxic, and addictive for the body politic. Such ‘pharmacotic violence’ can provisionally resolve conditions of political stasis within a community, by temporarily unifying the polity around the ontopolitical identity of the politically hegemonic group or groups, thereby reconciling opposing political factions and neutralizing or silencing opposition groups. But such scapegoating violence can also inflict long-term political derangement as the state grows ever more politically, culturally, economically, institutionally, and psychologically dependent on the stimulus of pharmacotic violence (and pharmacotic war -- external military operations directed against demonized foes combined with internal scapegoating and demonization of vulnerable groups) to fend off or overcome future political stasis.

The ancient Greek term stasis referred to internal conflicts within the polis, ranging from factional tensions and disagreements to sedition, rebellion, and civil war. For both Aristotle and Thucydides, stasis primarily meant factional strife -- usually among aristocratic factions, but also between rich and poor -- severe enough to threaten the polis with civil war.[[17]](#endnote-17) For Aristotle, it meant a struggle to control or change the regime through violence or deception.[[18]](#endnote-18)  Thucydides famously describes the details of a polis riven by stasis that has dissolved conventional social norms and bonds, polarizing the citizenry into irreconcilable factions, and reducing the population to wickedness and savagery.[[19]](#endnote-19) Greek poleis were subject to multiple natural, social and political ailments and disorders that could give rise to stasis. But although stasis could be precipitated by natural or anthropogenic disasters, such as drought, plague, famine, or military defeat, it was understood to be rooted in the common characteristics of human nature and psychology as these were shaped and mobilized politically within specific kinds of political constitutions or regimes.

In the same way that Deleuze describes Foucault’s panopticon as ‘diagramming’ the relations of power in a disciplinary society in which individuals internalize those relations by subjecting themselves to a field of visibility, the sacrificial pharmakos ceremony , and the various functions it performed in Athenian democracy, serves as a diagram for later practices involving the targeting and scapegoating of designated internal enemies in order to restore political order by reconstituting and reinforcing the ontopolitical power of dominant groups whose political hegemony is threatened. Although only scattered references to the pharmakos ceremony have survived, we know that for many centuries the populations of Athens and other Ionian cities regularly engaged in such apotropaic expulsion rituals, which were related to, and probably derived from, similar rituals practiced throughout Northern Syria and the Levant during the Bronze Age, and possibly earlier.[[20]](#endnote-20)  These scapegoating ceremonies involved the selection of one or more innocent victims who were then ritually humiliated, degraded, castigated, physically abused, and then either chased across the borders of the city by collective stoning, or else killed, in some reports by being burned or hurled from a wall or precipice. As in other types of sacrifice (and indeed even later forms of criminal punishment, as Foucault stresses in Discipline and Punish), the “guilt” of the victim was “established” through an overt charade. In some cases, the pharmakos victim was chosen by public vote, or as a result of a show trial, which commonly had carnivalistic features, underscoring its character as a charade. Sometimes the pharmakoi were even housed and fed by the state, and then, once “convicted,” scourged or beaten with sticks in preparation for their ceremonial “killing” or expulsion.

The effect of the pharmakos ceremony is well attested: to purify, heal, and reconsecrate the city-state, particularly during times of hardship, suffering, or societal diremption caused by human or natural disasters, such as plagues, famines, or wars, by ritually purging the community of accumulated collective psychic pollution and malaise. During the pharmakos ritual the community’s sense of derangement and responsibility for the evil it was suffering from was displaced and projected onto these designated human scapegoats, who were then ritually eliminated from (driven across the liminal boundaries of) the polis. The ceremony had an ecstatic, Dionysiac aspect. It involved collective projection and demonization and physical laying of hands onto the pharmakos such that the pharmakoi took upon themselves and became charged with the evil threatening the city. Once expelled, the pharmakoi were described as a katharma – “that which is thrown away in cleansing, offscourings, the refuse of a sacrifice, purifications”, and the pharmakos ceremony was thus explicitly understood as katharsis.[[21]](#endnote-21)

The pharmakos victims were typically chosen from subaltern groups living at the margins of society – castoffs, slaves, beggars, members of groups believed likely to be criminals (the ontologically or ontopolitically guilty), the poor, deformed, physically ugly, or anyone whose identity or appearance marked them a categorically “guilty” but otherwise innocent of any actual identifiable specific transgressions of the law. In some cities the pharmakos was selected from among foreign populations or other ontopolitical outsiders. The term eventually became a general term of opprobrium or insult. The pharmakos was thus both a liminal, marginal subject, and an unprotected target object, whose selection as a sacrificial victim effectively defined and redefined, inscribed and reinscribed the boundaries of membership, of the normal and the exception, the inside and the outside of the community, good and evil.[[22]](#endnote-22)  Aesop, Aaron, Job, Socrates, and Jesus have all been characterized as pharmakoi.[[23]](#endnote-23)

The power of the pharmakos ceremony to temporarily reconstitute and restore the health and integrity of the polis operated through a mass psychological process that Rene Girard called “unanimous victimage.”[[24]](#endnote-24) The collective violence inflicted onto the scapegoat victim or victims served mimetically to assuage or overcome the community’s latent, diffuse, inchoate, unspecified, and unspeakable fears and to expiate its collective guilt for unidentified or unacknowledged crimes and injustices. It did so through a ritual act of displaced punishment that projected and redirected the community’s internal factional or interpersonal conflicts, disagreements, unavenged wrongs, and other possible sources of disunity, internecine conflict, and stasis outward, away from the community itself. The scapegoating ritual transferred the evil that threatened the community to the selected victim, and then deported that evil by humiliating, punishing, and killing or casting out the scapegoat victim, along with the toxic evil it bore. The pharmakoi were expelled beyond the walls or deported across the city-state’s border into the territory of another polity or city-state, carrying with them the accumulated evil and the political toxins or poisons that the community projected onto them. In this way, the sacrificial victim served as a container or vessel for that evil – a “poison vessel” (angeîon) or “poison vial” (phialídion pharmakou). The pharmakos ceremony was thus at the same time both medicinal and toxic.[[25]](#endnote-25) It functioned in the paradoxical way that the diluted snake venom that Greek warriors carried into battle as a salve for their wounds did, or the rust from Chiron’s spear that Achilles uses to heal the wound caused by that spear, analogously to a vaccine, or to a homeopathic microdose of the more general toxic societal violence that it prevents or forestalls. Indeed, the expulsion of the pharmakos was described by contemporaries as “the medicine that heals the city,” and which could obtain a political “therapeia” – a service, healing, or medical treatment -- for a chronic disaster or derangement of the city.

In Athens, the pharmakos ritual was associated with the more familiar and overtly political ostracism ritual.i  There, as elsewhere throughout the ancient Near East, such human sacrificial or scapegoat expulsion rituals were often carried out in time of war or other existential political crisis.[[26]](#endnote-26)  Expulsion rituals not only subliminally restored and reinforced the polity’s traditional values, its ordering principles, metaphysical foundations, and the moral and social norms that were derived from these; but also indirectly relegitimated the hegemony of the city’s dominant families, tribes, ethnoi, and social classes; reclaimed and reinscribed its territorial boundaries; and re-consecrated the sacred ties between the body politic and its gods.[[27]](#endnote-27)  At some point, the ontopolitically re-sacralizing and regenerative functions of pharmacotic scapegoating were extended to encompass the fears and terrors associated with external wars. Eventually the ritual was formally institutionalized in the ceremonial structure of the annual Thargelia festival, while still being conducted sporadically during times of looming disaster or social or political derangement, such as drought, famine, plague, or imminent military defeat:

The scapegoats [pharmakoi] were expelled on the sixth of the month Thargelion, the first day of the two-day festival of the Thargelia. It is rather surprising to note that on the same day that the scapegoats were expelled the Greeks also celebrated the fall of Troy, the victories at Marathon and Plataea, and even the victory of Alexander the Great over Darius (Ael. VH. 2.25). Evidently the expulsion of evil was felt so intensely that this seemed to be the appropriate day to celebrate these victories. ii

(Socrates was born during the Thargelia, and was executed with what Plato calls a pharmakon, hemlock.)

The pharmakoi thus came to be expelled as part of a ceremonial complex, one of whose purposes was to protect the city against foreign invasion and ensure victory in war. This association between these should be unsurprising given the common theme of the sacrifice of innocents (Iphigenia, Aglauros, Polycrite, or the daughters of Erechtheus, among many others) to appease or curry favor with the gods in order to win their blessings for military operations and wars. In expressing gratitude to the gods for the temporary security provided by divinely sanctioned military victory, while collectively enacting the expulsion or deportation of the psychologically and politically deranging effects of the violence, hybris, injustice, and impiety that inevitably accompanies stasis and war, both these myths and these ceremonies of collective, public ritual scapegoating and violent apotropaic atonement suggest clues to the originary grounding of the metaphysical principles that underpin Western and Helleno-Abrahamic concepts of public morality, social order, and political authority and power. iii The politically “performance enhancing” effects of such sacrificial rituals is addictive for states. The simultaneously medicinal and toxic effects of pharmacotic violence catalyze passional political dynamics while strengthening and reinforcing those aspects of political structures and institutions that predispose societies towards further apotropaic scapegoating sacrificial violence, eventually addicting those polities to further iterations of pharmacotic violence as a remedy for stasis, especially when exacerbated by the deranging effects of war. Such ritualized scapegoating intoxicates and poisons the body politic, eventually reversing its initially politically invigorating effects as the affective repression of the arbitrary scapegoating violence comes back to haunt the community and its leaders. This haunting is the inescapable double effect of pharmacotic violence, inasmuch as the designated victims always also represent and embody repressed, marginalized and disempowered subaltern elements of the community itself, as well as “othered” groups within or outside the community, such that their scapegoating inevitably produces revenants – remnants, remainders, reminders, afterimages, ghosts – of the expurgated ontopolitical elements. These revenants must eventually either be reincorporated into or expelled from the polis through further iterations of pharmacotic violence. Through the very processes, then, by which pharmacotic violence instantiates, conjugates, integrates, unifies, and consecrates the molar political community, it also simultaneously transmits the poison of future ontopolitical instability.

While such sacrificial pharmacotic violence could provisionally resolve political problems or crises by reinstating the hegemony of dominant groups, like a narcotic or performance enhancing drug, the inescapable duality of the medicine/poison logic of the pharmakon meant that over time its cumulative effects would, however, become malignant for the body politic. Such targeted scapegoating violence might temporarily reinvest the city’s traditional hegemonic moral and political norms, meanings, and identities, and provisionally re-stabilize its metaphysical principles, but political identities, hierarchies, and values sustained through pharmacotic violence were always as a result volatile and turbulent. Resecuring these across time required further sacrificial, pharmacotic violence at home and abroad, fueling the kinds of tragic cycles of stasis and war to which many ancient polities became habituated. These cycles of pharmacotic violence subtly and gradually restructured and reinformed the states that succeeded them -- or which conquered them and folded these abstract machines into their own political assemblages -- by revising their political cultures, institutions, and values, restructuring their own internal ontopolitical relations, and propagating new rhizomic political identity formations around which the groups or factions that would become dominant could crystallize. These newly instantiated abstract machines would then become available to be folded into or captured by later state assemblages that succeeded them throughout the Helleno-Abrahamic Mediterranean, until these were eventually overcoded in Roman Christendom. In this way, the originary pharmacotic abstract machine or diagram of Athens and other Ionian polities came to be incorporated into the political bodies of European states and their settler colonies, down to our own times.

**ONTOPOLITICAL GUILT AND PHARMACOTIC CURE**

As a cathartic response to a collective social or political trauma or derangement, the effects of pharmacotic violence are thus always ambiguous and contradictory. Stasis is itself characterized by status inversions, the breakdown of binary distinctions, and the permeation of the polity by dissembling and deception,[[28]](#endnote-28) and so is its cure. Because the medicinal effects of pharmacotic violence are only brought about through the collective, morally transgressive infliction of arbitrary punishment, sacrificial scapegoating pharmacotic violence is always meticulously encoded, enveloped in phantasy, and accompanied by masquerade, carnivalesque role inversions, and other evasions, deceptions, and dissemblings. This is why it simultaneously stabilizes and unsettles, tranquilizes and agitates, the political community. A great deal of effort, for example, is typically expended to make the sacrificial scapegoat victims appear to ritually confess their own ontological guilt, and to “volunteer” for, or at least concede to, the sacrifice, even if under blatantly false pretenses. This is because to dispense with the charade of voluntary self-immolation would be to expose the fact that the pharmacotic sacrifice is a collective crime against an innocent or arbitrarily chosen designated victim -- as when a magician’s audience’s inability or refusal to suspend their disbelief in the magician’s “magical powers” threatens to disrupt the necessary shift in perceptual mode that makes the illusion work.

Because the ritual involved inflicting punitive suffering on a personally innocent victim who was arbitrarily designated as guilty, it temporarily dissolved existing moral categories and legal standards of guilt and innocence, creating a momentary “degree zero” within which a different abstract machine of community morality and justice could be configured. If this moral double articulation of the sacrificial act were publicly acknowledged or openly thematized, however, its collective psychological effects would be diminished or cancelled out, and so this momentary rupture or tear in the moral order entailed a simultaneous collective act of group denial and feigned consensual amnesia. This encounter with the Real was thus experienced as mystical and supernatural. In this sense, pharmacotic violence functions like magic or sorcery; indeed one Greek term for magician or sorcerer was pharmakeus (and sometimes pharmakos).

For the pharmakos ritual – or any form of ‘othering’ through enmity construction and scapegoating – to function, the pharmakoi or designated objects of collective hostility and demonization must necessarily be in fact morally ambiguous, if not innocent – ontopolitically “guilty” by virtue of being members of a group identified as dangerous to the hegemonic party or faction but ‘innocent’ of or at least not culpable for the wickedness and iniquity for which they are denounced and condemned. Pharmacotic enemy-formation should be understood as a kind of staged, ritualized, encoded acting out and displacement of the larger stasis threatening the state’s political integrity and survival. For the projection-purification dynamic to work assumes that the pharmakoi or designated enemies must be no more “guilty” than the persecuting group itself (indeed they must embody and represent qualities which the persecutors possess and detest or feel morally disturbed about in themselves). This Janus-faced bivalence will already be observed within the generalized societal miasma or collective trauma that precedes and calls for the performance of the pharmakos ritual.

The targeted, demonized enemy victim serves as an “attractor” or nucleating agent[[29]](#endnote-29) for an emergent, complex non-linear process that is always latent and potentially available within any human group or community. This is particularly so within settler states – like the US, apartheid South Africa, or Israel -- founded on cumulative serial iterations of acts of expulsion, cultural or ethnic cleansing, and other acts of pharmacotic violence that have left behind political societies rigidly stratified into racial or other ontopolitical hierarchies. To function as such an attractor, the targeted scapegoat victims (whether actual pharmakoi themselves, or their contemporary analogues -- the victims of school or synagogue shootings, or the caged children of families punitively separated for seeking political asylum at the US border, or LGBTQ+ and other gender non-conforming persons, elected Democratic officials, or even Trump’s disloyal former associates and other sporadic foes or targets of his rhetorical castigation -- must be figures of moral ambiguity. To construct suitable enemies through projection and scapegoating, the constructed foe must always be at some level morally and politically liminal and arbitrary -- they must be selected and persecuted for what can be transparently seen to be but not acknowledged as morally arbitrary and even openly hypocritical reasons, and their fate must be personally undeserved, such that the supplementary guilt that the dominant group collectively loads onto the targeted group will so vastly exceed the victims’ own actual possible guilt that the ritual cannot be misunderstood or misconstrued simply as the normal carrying out of a legitimate act of individually merited punishment or deserved revenge, but instead must be experienced and made meaningful as an ontopolitically reconciliatory act of collective expurgation and cleansing of both the hegemonic group and, by extension, the polity. This is the otherwise mysterious clue to and explanation for the jouissance – the enthusiastic glee -- exhibited by Trump’s supporters at the flagrant cruelty and bullying character of so many of Trump’s rhetorical attacks and punitive policies, and the blatant, indeed obsessive, lying, evasion, deflection, “whataboutism”, and denial that is so central to Trump’s political style. As Northrop Frye puts it in his classic commentary on the figure of the pharmakos in Western history and literature, the pharmakos is precisely a “typical” or “random” victim,

… no more deserving of what happens to him than anyone else would be…. The pharmakos is neither innocent nor guilty. He is innocent in the sense that what happens to him is far greater than anything he has done provokes, like the mountaineer whose shout brings down an avalanche. He is guilty in the sense that he is a member of a guilty society, or living in a world where such injustices are an inescapable part of existence.

The two facts do not come together; they remain ironically apart.[[30]](#endnote-30)

The pharmakos is also different from the victims in other kinds of human sacrifice.[[31]](#endnote-31)  Indeed, where the victim is actually believed to be personally guilty of a specific crime the ritual elements of the pharmacotic scapegoating may unfold in a way closer to vigilantism, or ordinary police violence.[[32]](#endnote-32)  And, at the other extreme, in those cases of human sacrifice where the victim is personally selected as an exemplary, highly valued member of the community, explicitly selected for innocence and purity (such as Iphigenia or Jephthah’s daughter) the ritual effectively crosses over from the category of expiatory, apotropaic violence into conventional do ut des sacrificial exchange, in which the victim is offered up as a gift to the gods in hopes of currying favor and receiving very high-value benefits -- such as military victory or delivery from a natural catastrophe -- commensurate with the preciousness of the sacrificed victim.[[33]](#endnote-33) Contemporary US analogues to this category would include war heroes, police officers killed on duty, victims of Al Qaeda or ISIS, etc. The ideological character of such apparently unifying political deaths can be seen in the desperate avoidance, denial, conceptual decoupling, and even open refusal on the part of Trump’s followers, White Christian Nationalists, and right wing media, and even many Republican elected officials to denounce or even seriously engage morally with the ideological and policy contexts surrounding school shootings and acts of terrorist violence in recent years against Blacks, Asians, Latinos, Jews, and liberals by right wing extremists. The point here is that the collective targeting, public denunciation, and both threats and acts of physical violence directed against the Trumpian right’s designated political enemies parallels the role of the pharmacotic victim, whether in the ancient Athenian pharmakos ceremony itself or mass shootings by White Christian Nationalist terrorists, police shootings of unarmed Black men, or the deterrent policy of separation of families and expulsion of asylum seekers along the US-Mexican border, LGBTQ+ victims of sexualized political violence, Democratic elected officials and their families who have been threatened, kidnapped, brutalized, and shot at – including during the failed January 6, 2021 coup d’etat --

is not to make the victims suffer proportionally for their own personal guilt, but to interpellate them to represent and serve as a vessel or bearer of what it is that members of historically hegemonic American groups believe threatens to derange their community and foment internal disunity and stasis.

This is why the effects of pharmacotic violence are always both medicinal and poisonous for the body politic. It both territorializes political assemblages around nucleating figures of enmity constructed ideologically by dominant ontopolitical formations seeking to retain or recover fragmenting power and privilege, and at the same time contributes to the deterritorialization of those assemblages. As Deleuze and Guattari observe [[34]](#endnote-34) with reference to the Levitical scapegoat (Azazel) ceremony, the scapegoat incarnates a line of flight, which both delimits or defines and is at the same time intolerable to the city’s politically dominant signifying regime. In the pharmakos ritual, this line of flight followed an initial disruption and transgression of established social and political regimes of signification, opening up the possibility for the proliferation of complex, contradictory, and unpredictable ambiguities, inversions, reversals, polyvalences, and other potentially deterritorializing forces and relations among the participants in the ceremony, and within the polis more generally. But unlike the Levitical Azazel ceremony, the pharmakos ritual simultaneously and immediately blocks and reverses this line of flight by violently foreclosing the escape vector of the ceremony through the act of stoning and expulsion or killing of the victim, and is thus thereby able to effectively, at least temporarily, catalyze the resecuring of the polity’s prior traditional regime of signs, with its familiar structures of hierarchical binaries and distinctions, and to provisionally mend the rent fabric of the socio-political symploke, temporarily restoring the corrupted and diseased body politic to health and vitality.

**THE PRECESSION OF PHARMACOTIC VIOLENCE IN TRUMP’S REMAKING OF AMERICA**

The United States is currently exhibiting troubling signs of emergent stasis, as recounted in the opening pages of this paper. Political trends and events such as the ethno-political polarization and increasing stasis that rightist populist-nationalists are threatening to turn into a full-scale *oikeios polemos*[[35]](#endnote-35) . The challenge currently facing Trump and other right-wing populist leaders is how to continue to encourage and provoke this kind of polarizing projection and scapegoating among their followers, and to justify unauthorized violence by police, border patrol officers, and other complicit state actors, while exploiting the surplus political jouissance generated by it to reconfigure and stabilize new partisan political affiliations, strengthen the institutional structures, arrangements, and practices that favor their agenda and weaken those that do not, while at the same time resecuring the essential distinction between such lawless violence and legitimate, sovereign state violence. All state formations are, of course, originally and continually conjugated through violence, and state police power is the form of expression, the in-folding, of that originary violent conjugation. Sovereign state violence directed against foreign and domestic designated threats continually reenacts and re-establishes the originary “founding” violence of the state, in the sense that its effect is to performatively differentiate legitimate from illegitimate, legal from illegal, violence. Unauthorized or disproportionate violence, whether by police officers exercising their own discretion in the use of lethal force,

border patrol officers enforcing a cruel family separation policy, lone gunmen gaming real-world political revenge fantasies, white nationalist terrorists, or the former president himself abusing the powers of his office and threatening his political opponents and critics with violence, serves to blur the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political violence in ways favorable to the right-wing populist project of destabilizing liberal democratic legal norms and institutions.

Pharmacotic violence functions in exactly this fashion, because its core is the ritual inversion and reversal of the originary judicial relation between punishment and guilt. In pharmacotic sacrifices, punitive violence must be understood as performatively preceding and reconstituting the liminal boundary between legitimate and illegitimate violence. Lynchings are only the most familiar example here.[[36]](#endnote-36)  Such inversions of the expected relation between punishment and legal judgment is one of the characteristic features of what Deleuze and Guattari call despotic or “imperial barbarian” law:

“… the law reveals nothing and has no knowable object, the verdict having no existence prior to the penalty, and the statement of the law having no existence prior to the verdict.”

As in the medieval trial by ordeal or the judicial penal machine of Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony”,

“it is the penalty that writes both the verdict and the rule that has been broken…. Overcoding is the essence of the law, and the origin of the new sufferings of the body.” Here Deleuze and Guattari reprise Nietzsche’s account in the Genealogy of Morals of how imperial formations transform punishment into state vengeance:

“There occurs a detachment and elevation of the death instinct, which ceases to be coded in the interplay of savage actions and reactions where fatalism was still something en-acted, in order to become the somber agent of overcoding, the detached object that hovers over each subject, as though the social machine had come unstuck from its desiring-machines: death, the desire of desire, the desire of the despot’s desire, a latency inscribed in the bowels of the state apparatus.” (Anti-Oedipus [hereafter AO] p. 213)

It is through this punishment-as-vengeance exercised in advance (AO 213) that the despot invents the law, and it is out of the jouissance it generates that the abstract machines of obedience, loyalty, religious faith, patriotism, and subjectivization can assemble the molecular elements of a deterritorialized socius into the resonance machines out of which will emerge the molarized lines and segments of the despotic state. As Ronald Bogue describes the dynamics of this process,

 “[t]he despot institutes law, but initially this law is Kafkaesque, one in which edicts are pronounced through punishments, in which punishment is no longer festive, as in the primitive machine, but vengeful …” (Bogue, 99).

In Deleuze and Guattari’s characterization,

“Punishment has ceased to be a festive occasion, from which the eye extracts a surplus value…. Punishment becomes a vengeance, the vengeance of the voice, the hand, and the eye now joined together on the despot…” (AO 212).

The process through which a political assemblage is deterritorialized and then reterritorialized around a pharmacotic sacrifice operates within two strata at the same time. At the molecular level, the process involves the marginalization and exclusion, through ritualized mocking, humiliation, and the physical and symbolic degradation and vilification of the pharmakos victim, concluding with the physical defilement, scourging, beating, stoning, and expulsion or killing of its body, thereby performatively banning the victim to its “proper” marginal and ontopolitically external, alien, excluded status. This process is paralleled and accompanied at the molar level in the community as a whole by a temporary inversion or overturning of conventional social norms and roles, followed by a dramatic, mystical reterritorialization and restoration of social order and unity as the victim is killed or expelled. These synchronized cycles of deterritorializing, ritualized violation and transgression, followed by the reterritorializing of the political assemblage, serve to performatively reinscribe both the boundaries between the assemblage’s inside and outside -- the intra muros and the extra muros of the community -- along with the city-state’s internal social and political boundaries, and their associated distinctions of status, class, ethnos, gender, and other ontopolitical categories. This mystical reconciliation, resecuring, reinvestment, regrounding, and restoration of the socius’ dominant signifying regime and social structure, provisionally restores the community’s members’ subjection to and faith in the viability, autonomy, integrity, and security of the reterritorialized political assemblage. The precession of pharmacotic violence thus simultaneously reconstitutes and debilitates, territorializes and deterritorializes, cures and poisons, the body politic.

The present political situation, then, can be seen as characterized by escalating expiatory sacrificial expulsions and the enactment of various kinds of ontopolitical pharmacotic violence that can be theorized using Deleuze and Guattari’s account of political “desiring machines” and “zones of power” in Anti-Oedipus. In this account, the psychological effect of the cascade of spectacular, mediatized acts of violence committed by right-wing white nationalist terrorists, along with the structural cruelty inflicted on vulnerable migrants, asylum seekers, and others, is to stimulate and provoke certain strains or vectors within the elementary unconscious and preconscious forces of desire out of which political desiring machines are assembled, so as to disinvest the entire plane of the current liberal democratic ideological field, along with its group fantasies, and then encourage the counterinvestment of this desire into new desiring machines articulated around the phantasy constructions of Trump and his GOP allies’ ethno-nationalist rhetoric. The process feeds on the individual and collective existential humiliation felt by white American Herrenvolk facing a rapidly changing social and political order, and the resulting longing for physical and economic security, cultural meaning and dignity, as well as vengeance.

To consolidate his political power and hold his governing coalition together, Trump, like other populist leaders, must reinvest desiring production, decode the resulting flows emerging from within the deterritorialized political space he has created, and overcome the derangement of prior social and political formations and systems of moral meanings brought about by his rhetoric and the violence it has animated, by overcoding a new system of imperial representation onto this political space. In the United States, with its unusually high levels of religiosity among the dominant ethnic Herrenvolk, this requires the folding in of pious desire into a new political abstract machine capable of accomplishing this overcoding. The astonishing intensity of Trump’s support among Evangelicals, to the point that many regard him as having been sent by God to deliver the nation, indicates that his movement may be capable of just such a reconjugation, producing a version of what Deleuze and Guattari call a “machine of the strange”, a “great paranoic machine”, and a “glorious celibate machine” (AO 193), whose new imperial inscription “countersects all the alliances and affiliations, prolongs them, makes them converge into the direct filiation of the despot with the deity, and the new alliance of the despot with the people.” (AO 199).

But for Trump to fully effect such a transformation would require overcoming the familiar Thermidorian problem of taming the violent unconscious libidinal desiring-production generated and unleashed by the revolutionary dismantling of the prevailing liberal democratic socius. In Trump’s case, this challenge is greatly magnified by the sociopathic tendencies encouraged by the ressentiment-fueled desiring-production that he has cultivated in order to win control of the Republican Party and be restored to the presidency. He must now figure out how to turn the insurgent subject-group he has assembled in the course of his ascent to power into a subjugated group (AO 348-9), but his project remains entangled in the two poles of the social libidinal investments he has cultivated (the “paranoic, reactionary, and fascicizing pole” he has brought to life, and the “schizoid revolutionary pole” that he seeks to capture and molarize (AO 366ff). ) Like any insurgent leader caught in the tidal ebb of the cycle of pharmacotic violence, Trump must now figure out how to conjugate new fields of forces and flows, reterritorialize undisciplined lines of flight, striate these into homogeneous political space, establish new, rigid, hierarchical lines of binary and biunivocal segmentation, and set all of these into his own political resonance machines -- resonating, concentric circles of opposed segmentarities that can attach to the nucleating attractors of Trump’s new socius, giving rise to a “full body” (AO 346) capable of generating state power by attracting unconscious libidinal counterinvestment and amplifying it through those resonance machines.

For Trump, regaining the state power needed to achieve his fascist aspirations will require simultaneously stimulating the politically destructive libidinal violence of his followers and those inspired by his scapegoating rhetoric, while at the same time striving to stabilize the very political institutions he will need to control in order to wield the power he seeks to recover. His dilemma is that the remedy for his immediate dilemma is toxic to his long-term project – it is, in other words, pharmacotic.

**ABSTRACT**

This paper describes the aspirational fascism of Donald Trump and his followers as trapped within a *pharmacotic* dilemma. To regain power, the Trump movement must recover lost political support and enthusiasm by persuading a critical mass of Americans that his political adversaries, the individuals and groups he demonizes, and the victims of his scapegoating attacks on those he blames for the country’s problems are genuinely existential threats to the nation, that he and his followers alone stand in their way, and that the 2024 election is so vital that should he lose, an extraconstitutional insurgency to restore him to power may be necessary and legitimate. In the recent rallies launching his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump’s speeches and performances channel language and images resonant with the rhetoric of interwar European fascists to frame this appeal and energize his movement. To account for Trump’s increasing embrace of unabashedly fascistic tropes and symbols, the paper draws on the concept of the *pharmakon* developed both in Achille Mbembe’s book *Necropolitics* and in my own earlier theoretical writings to sketch out a Deleuzian ‘diagram’ of sacrificial scapegoating rhetoric and actions that function for Trump’s movement as an addictive and ultimately toxic performance-enhancing drug.

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iiBremmer (2007), 21.

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Judgement (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2003, pp. 155-75; “The Pharmacotic War on Terrorism”, Theory, Culture, and Society Vol. 19, No. 4, August, 2002; “9-11: Pharmacotic War”, Theory and Event (Johns Hopkins University Press) Vol. 6, No. 1 (2002); “Seguid Vuestro Jefe: The Polemic Supplement and the Pharmacotic Presidency”. Theory and Event (Johns Hopkins University Press) Vol. 2, No. 3 (1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
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3. Chauncey DeVega, “The wages of cruelty: Tormented by impeachment, Trump torments the weakest”, Salon, October 4, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Democracy Now, “Cruelty Is the Point: Communities Fight Back as Threat of ICE Raids Terrorize Immigrant Families”, July 15, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Glenn M. Schwartz, “The Archaeological Study of Sacrifice” Annual Review of Anthropology. Vol. 46: 223-240 (Volume publication date October 2017); Joseph Watts, Oliver Sheehan, Quentin D. Atkinson, Joseph Bulbulia & Russell D. Gray. Ritual human sacrifice promoted and sustained the evolution of stratified societies. Nature. Volume 532, page 228–231 (14 April 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Discussed by both Hobbes and Locke. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Foucault, Discipline and Punish, [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Intended to ward off or expel evil [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Nicole Hemmer, “Why it's so scary when Trump tweets about civil war” CNN Online

 October 1, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Peter Baker, “Trump Fans the Flames of a Racial Fire”, NYT July 14, 2019 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Deleuze, Logic of Sense; Réda Bensmaia, Experimental Nations, or, the Invention of the Maghreb, trans. Alyson Waters (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.8; William Connolly, ‘The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine’, Political Theory, 33.6 (2005), pp.874. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Deleuze, Foucault 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Deleuze, Foucault 37; Foucault (French original) 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Deleuze, Foucault, 36 (*densité* here is mistranslated as “destiny”: see French original 44); embedded quote is from Foucault, History of Sexuality, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Nicole Loraux: *The Divided City.* New York: MIT Press, 2002; Dimitris Vardoulakis, Stasis Before the State: Nine Theses on Agonistic Democracy (NY: Fordham, 2017); Steven C. Skultety, Conflict in Aristotle's Political Philosophy (NY: SUNY, 2019); Kostas Kalimtzis, Aristotle on Political Enmity and Disease: An Inquiry into Stasis (NY: SUNY, 2000); Hans van Wees, *"Stasis, Destroyer of Men": Mass, Elite, Political Violence and Security in Archaic Greece.* In C. Brélaz et al. (eds.): *Sécurité Collective et Ordre Public dans les Sociétés Anciennes*. Geneva 2008, pp. 1–39; Ronald L. Weed, *Aristotle on Stasis. A Moral Psychology of Political Conflict.* (Berlin: Logos, 2007); Jonathan J. Price: *Thucydides and internal war (*Cambridge 2001); G.E.M. de Ste. Croix: The Class Struggle in the Ancient World [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Skultety, Ch. 1 [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Thucydides [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The most familiar of these will be the Yom Kippur Azazel or “Scapegoat” ritual prescribed in Leviticus. See on this Bremmer 2005; Sara Forsdyke, Exile, Ostracism, and Democracy (Princeton, 2005); Daniel Ogden, The Crooked Kings of Ancient Greece (London: Duckworth, 1997) [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Such rituals are believed to be ancestral to later carnivalesque apotropaic rituals and festivals of inversion, such as Saturnalia, Wicker Man burnings, Mardi Gras and Carnival holidays, the Zozobra festival (and Burning Man?). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Girard, To Double Business Bound; DeVries and Weber, Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination; Wendy Brown, Walled States (NY: Zone, 2017) [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ogden; Bremmer, 2007; Forsdyke; Vernant and Naquet; [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Girard, Violence and the Sacred [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The duality of drugs/pharmaka: Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy”; Giulia Sissa, Le Plaisir et le Mal (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997); Bernard Stiegler, What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Avital Ronell, Crack Wars (U of Nebraska, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. It is worth recalling here that the pharmakos ceremony was taken up and adopted throughout the Attica-Ionia region during a time when prevailing moral codes were being deterritorialized and reassembled, as they evolved away from the Homeric warrior value systems based on *arête*, *agathos,* *chrestos*, etc., towards a countersignification of these values influenced by the emerging Axial Age normative framework of internalized moral responsibility and guilt. (cf. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*; Arthur W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*). The adoption of the pharmakos ritual was very likely an absorption of a Hittite or Northern Syrian rite (cf. Bremmer, “Scapegoat Rituals”) that helped usher in and catalyze the crystallization of these new moral and political norms and values. Taken up by Paul of Tarsus (possibly during his stay in Ephesus, the Ionian city where he may well have witnessed the *pharmakos* ritual being performed) and folded in with the Abrahamic Akedah and Levitical Azazel scapegoat traditions and the messiah prophecies, it may have become an immediate source for Paul’s pharmacotic myth of the Passion and sacrificial killing of Jesus, which would in turn, following the conversion of Constantine, come to govern the west’s hegemonic signifying regime until at least the 18th Century, and indeed in many areas down to our own time. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. This is a subtext of a pharmacotic reading of the Euthyphro, Crito, Apology, and Phaedo; cf. Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy”. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Thucydides, Corcyrean *stasis* [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Bremmer, 2005; Kristeva; [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Frye, The Great Code [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Although a pharmacotic sacrificial crisis deranging a community is typically characterized by several forms of sacrificial violence occurring simultaneously, as we are seeing today. See Claudia Card, The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil (NY: Oxford, 2002); [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ranciere, Disagreement [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Vernant; Hughes, Human Sacrifice in Ancient Greece [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, 116 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Loraux, Divided City; Agamben, Stasis [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Ida B. Wells, The Light of Truth (NY: Penguin, 2014); Mattias Smångs, *Doing Violence, Making Race* (Routledge Research in Race and Ethnicity), 2017; Jeremy Arnold, *State Violence and Moral Horror* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)