**It’s Not the Economy, Stupid:**

**Trump’s Coalition, Christian Suffering, and the Politics of Resentment**

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At an October rally in Mississippi, Donald Trump publicly mocked sexual assault survivor Christine Blasey Ford.[[1]](#footnote-1) Behind him, men and women cheered in support. On the other side of the world, Indonesia declared a state of emergency and humanitarian aid workers rushed to contain the disastrous consequence of a tsunami.[[2]](#footnote-2) Reactions toward these two concurrent events reveal a quintessentially modern understanding of suffering. Trump made headlines for his vulgarity: his sensibilities offended “elites” while animating his “deplorables.” Indonesia made headlines for its disastrous circumstances. To speak of “suffering” in Indonesia is to state the obvious, whereas to speak of “suffering” at Trump’s rally seems conceptually awkward without greater conceptual foregrounding: the socio-economic circumstances of his “deplorables”; the marginal figure of the sexual assault survivor; the empathy elicited for Brett Kavanaugh’s career and American masculinity. Why is suffering an appropriate frame for humanitarian disasters but not the social circumstances of a political rally? The fact that suffering automatically generates empathy explains part of this difference; many of us do not want to empathize with hegemonic authority. But even the relationship between suffering and empathy gestures toward something more: in modernity, suffering is only meaningful if it’s exceptional.

Not all suffering is exceptional. Every day we manage forces, both long-term and short-term, that do not present any immanent possibility of death while nonetheless inflicting emotional, physical, and psychological harm. This *quotidian suffering* is an uninteresting dynamic for us (post)moderns except for when it impedes our habits, aspirations, and cognitive patterns because its unexceptional nature structures its banality. In contrast, for most of Western history, quotidian suffering was not the banal foreground of human existence. Suffering, quotidian and tragic, discursively emerges from a Christian genealogy concurrent to debates about the body, self, and humanity’s fallenness. A pre-Modern Christian could not understand themselves or their social relations without an ever-present awareness of even quotidian suffering and its theological registers. But with the modern disenchantment of the world came the de-theologizing, and thus banality, of quotidian suffering. We no longer imagined ourselves as subjects actively constructed from circumstances of everyday struggle, but as subjects that happen to passively navigate otherwise uninteresting suffering (to the point that many of us might not think of these situations as suffering at all). That exceptional suffering, encountered in moments of severity or tragedy, elicit our attention gestures to the ontological foreground which normalizes quotidian suffering: disruption requires a context in which banality is the norm in order to have its exceptional force.

Donald Trump’s mockery of Dr. Ford performs two simultaneous discursive gestures that demonstrate the banality of quotidian suffering. For us disenchanted moderns, it portrays incivility and offensiveness which elicit anxiety, stress, and fear. But modernity makes discursive sense of these emotions, which are emblematic of quotidian suffering, through the liberal logic of civil norms, public decorum, and disenchanted offensiveness. For his base, this political incorrectness signals an affective manipulation of quotidian suffering where offensiveness is not a character flaw but moral virtue. They know an “elite” audience of #MeToo liberals are watching and, in some instances, responding with anxiety, fear, and pain. These elicited emotions function to discipline the unwarranted #MeToo outcry against Brett Kavanaugh; they are intentional, desired effects. For Donald Trump’s political coalition, quotidian suffering remains theologically inflected as an economy that generates moral and political value. Within this paper, I want to interpret Donald Trump’s support from the perspective of this moral economy of suffering. I argue that Trump’s election victory was fueled by his ability to tap into this moral economy as it is shared across two elements within his conservative coalition – the religious right and the white working-class. The “politics of resentment” narrative that both groups share gestures toward an underlying ontology of suffering that inflects quotidian suffering with theological valence. While the narrative often implies that socio-economic dynamics, racism, and masculinity are the operative values animating resentment, I argue that these are mutually constituted by (rather than themselves generate) a discourse of “hard work” that cannot be separated from a theological genealogy that locates moral and political value on bodily suffering. In light of egalitarian shifts since the sixties and the inability of so-called “elites” to recognize the “rules of the game,” which are the ways that moral and political value are generated through the “hard work” of bodily suffering, Trump’s disregard for minorities, his disrespectful public gestures, and the political incorrectness of his campaign embody affective avenues for restoring the primacy of suffering as subjective discipline. The desire to see various immoral others – feminists, progressives, racial minorities, immigrants, and “desk”-working elites – in situations of visible suffering is the “proof” of this moral discipline. These immoral others are perceived to have not sufficiently suffered to be worthy of political and moral value and have therefore been unfairly leveraging public institutions for their moral and political gain (democratic equality). The suffering Trump’s public aesthetic inflicts thus operates to redistribute suffering against those who have claimed it by way of “victimization” without having been *seen* to have sufficiently suffered. The “politics of resentment,” in other words, is not just about economic shifts; it’s also a desire to witness suffering.

*Working-Class Suffering and the Politics of Resentment*

Conventional wisdom suggests that Donald Trump won the presidency by appealing to working-class whites. While this belief overemphasizes the political importance of working-class whites within Trump’s coalition, it nonetheless gestures toward a quantitative truth. Trump’s hypermasculine rhetorical patterns, nativist fearmongering, and emphasis on an absolute divide between “winners” and “losers” appealed to hegemonic whiteness and masculinity.[[3]](#footnote-3) His disruptive patterns of speech, refusal to work within institutional knowledge, and channeling of economic-driven anger tapped into working-class and rural American resentment.[[4]](#footnote-4) Nonetheless, Trump’s victory could not have been secured by angry white men and the white working-class alone. The majority of Trump’s voters “were not members of the working class” and 28% of Trump’s voters were former (white working-class) Obama voters and (white) 2012 nonvoters.[[5]](#footnote-5) Additionally, more than half of white women – across the socio-economic spectrum – voted for Donald Trump, partially motivated by racial resentment.[[6]](#footnote-6) Donald Trump mobilized enough of the conventional Republican base and 2012 nonvoters that the white working-class, particularly within the Rust Belt, secured the electoral college. Without each part of this coalition he would not have won. Within this paper I am concerned with the ways the values of this coalition, the language of racial resentment and economic anxiety, oversimplify the dynamic of Trump’s support. While I do not deny the research that links their support for Donald Trump with economic anxiety and racism, both of these factors exist within a moral economy of suffering that requires a broader, religious contextualization in order to understand Trump’s public appeal. Moreover, identifying this moral economy will further speak to the ways the religious right and white women join with the white working-class in supporting Donald Trump.

Media narratives suggest that the white working-class secured Donald Trump’s presidential victory in the 2016 election. As of writing, a Google search reveals that the *Washington Post* has over 43,000 hits for the term “white working class” while *The New York Times* has 163,000. Google’s own data reveals that searching for the “white working class” remained relatively stable since 2004 *until* March of 2016, when a gradual increase gave way to a near 300% upsurge in search interest that stabilized around January of 2017.[[7]](#footnote-7) These searches are located across the contiguous United States, with slight concentrations located in New England, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. Most media articles reflect this urban (elite) bias: that “resentment” and “economic anxiety” broke the Obama coalition through appeals to white working-class voters or otherwise stimulated non-voting, white working-class surges.[[8]](#footnote-8) A concurrent narrative development chastised coastal and educated elites for ignoring the white working-class.[[9]](#footnote-9) And a third category of narratives challenged the simplicity of the previous two, reminding audiences the economic precarity and rural living are not limited to whiteness, and that Trump’s victory had as much to do with wealthy and middle-class voters as with impoverished ones.[[10]](#footnote-10) In most cases focusing on poor whites, popular accounts framed the white working class through a politics of resentment: in some narratives as a cultural attitude bred from economic precarity, while in others an uneducated desire for a more authoritarian, masculine executive.

In addition to popular media accounts, recent academic literature on the white working-class – for my purposes, including surveys of the working class generally that identify the specificity of whiteness as well as surveys of rural America that emphasize race and work ethic – links economic precarity to political attitude. The white working-class perceives their marginality in relation to broader racial and economic shifts over which they have little control. Racial minorities and immigrants are visual symptoms of this political impotency and race foregrounds the way the white working-class makes sense of their social circumstances.[[11]](#footnote-11) Geography further inflects this political isolation: the rural-urban divide as well as local trust in the faces of their communities against the seemingly value-less, federal bureaucracies of D.C. breed a sense of political distance that correlates with moral difference.[[12]](#footnote-12) Surveys since the 2016 have emphasized authoritarian values, whiteness (especially working-class whiteness), and resentment as likely predictors of supporting Donald Trump.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Both academic and news media interpretations of Donald Trump’s white working-class demographic share the narrative of “resentment” and its attendant cultural shifts. This resentment is generated from the belief that the federal government is disproportionally allocating resources to the underserving. Moreover, the struggling white working-class is forced to burden taxes that support this maldistribution while having fewer economic opportunities available in light of racial integration, immigration, and broader neoliberal shifts. The politicized vocabulary of “Timeworn values,” “deservedness,” “special rights,” “laziness,” “self-sufficiency,” “dependence,” and most importantly “hard work” reflects a moral economy emerging within this context that provides the white working-class with a sense of value and a way to make sense of non-white others in light of their precarity.[[14]](#footnote-14) But these terms have more than one moral valence: it is not at all obvious that economic self-sufficiency is the beginning and end of their moral connotation. The narrative of resentment that connects these terms too readily conceals their discursive ambivalence by circumscribing their interpretations to the racially inflected, economic circumstances of their origin. In order to understand the moral economy within which these values operate and uncover a more troubling moral connotation, we must first understand the importance of working-class *suffering.*

Sociological reflections on working-class suffering begin with Lillian Rubin’s *Worlds of Pain* and Pierre Bourdieu’s edited volume, *The Weight of the World*. Rubin surveyed a number of white, American working-class families in the 1970s in which she identified a number of limits that constructed “worlds of pain.”[[15]](#footnote-15) These consisted of small horizons of aspirational possibility, repetitive and meaningless jobs, and dichotomous gender identities anchored to labor as early as childhood.[[16]](#footnote-16) Minimal leisure, mostly superficial pastimes means to make bearing “dullness” and “disappointment” more manageable, leads to “[anger] and [resentment]” at the feeling of being “overburdened.”[[17]](#footnote-17) For Rubin, liberal individualism, self-blame, and socio-political isolation are all constitutive of a perpetual dynamic of suffering.[[18]](#footnote-18) Bourdieu, writing within the French context, refers to various “double binds” that limit discursive possibilities for expressing white working-class suffering in the context of capitalism, class, and social circumstance.[[19]](#footnote-19) Bourdieu critiques “neoliberalism” as a root cause of the racial resentment animating the French white working-class’s political attempts to “monopolize access to the economic and social advantages associated with citizenship.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Rubin, writing a new introduction for her work after Reagan, likewise linked racial resentment to neoliberal changes as a resurgent factor in understanding the American white working-class.[[21]](#footnote-21) What both Rubin and Bourdieu share is an understanding of suffering as externally conditioned by socio-economic forces. Suffering among the working-class is a consequence of material circumstances and policy changes that is managed by aggressive political sympathies – in Rubin’s work, individualist resentment against outsiders; and in Bourdieu’s, support for the National Front. The emphasis here on external conditions discursively conceals the need to interrogate dynamics internal to white working-class subjects as they *construct* their sense of suffering.

Must we assume their entire sense of suffering is a response to external forces? Is there nothing internal to their reason or morals that discursively constitutes “suffering” prior to external experience? The “resentment” narrative privileges the uncontrollable dimension of external forces for understanding how the white working-class shapes subjectivity. Economic downturns breed suffering, which in turn breeds resentment. But the narrative of resentment also assumes that the white working-class either misunderstands or is ignorant of, the causes of their circumstances. They scapegoat minorities, immigrants, and bureaucracy for neoliberal shifts; or are otherwise unwilling to adapt their own lives to new material circumstances by diversifying employment skills. The “resentment” narrative then leads to further assumptions about white working-class reason: they vote against their own interests; they misdirect their anger; they lack knowledge of contemporary political economy; etc. But these assumptions do not correlate with evidence. In surveying Scott Walker’s Wisconsin, Katherine Cramer discovered that the white working-class recognized the policies shaping their situation.[[22]](#footnote-22) In his national analysis, Robert Wuthnow recognized that rural whites link ruined economies and cultural changes to shrinking populations and the ways large corporations leverage socio-economic circumstances.[[23]](#footnote-23) Most recently, Francesco Duina acknowledges that the working-class individuals he surveyed in Montana and Alabama were “reflective, intelligent, and wide-reaching minds who were aware of their situations and deeply felt a true sense of appreciation for the United States.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

If the white working-class is aware of their socio-economic situation and they still express a politics of resentment, how can we make sense of their political values without assuming inhibited reason? To answer this question, I suggest turning away from externally conditioned suffering toward an examination of suffering as a moral value. External conditions shape white working-class suffering but this fact, *which the white working-class recognizes*, does not imply that such conditions should radically change. Rather, suffering is mutually constitutive with white working-class subjectivity. The white working-class inhabits a Christian moral economy, albeit secularized through modernity and political liberalism, that constructs suffering as a moral good even while suffering constructs their sense of self. The language of “hard work,” “timeworn values,” and “deservedness” – correlating with Rural Consciousness,[[25]](#footnote-25) a Deep Story about the American Dream,[[26]](#footnote-26) Ethnocentrist-Nationalist Authoritarianism,[[27]](#footnote-27) and other conceptual signifiers for white-working class ideology – refers not only to external economic shifts but refer to a moral economy operating internal to white working-class communities that generates moral and political value prior to external conditioning. This moral economy furnishes a set of values, discursive patterns, and affective disciplines for understanding suffering prior to making sense of the political and economic dynamics which inflect suffering.

Nearly all of the recent surveys cited associate the political attitudes and social opinions of the white working-class with Christianity.[[28]](#footnote-28) But the focus on externally conditioned suffering locates religion as simply one of many ideological foregrounds that provide discursive routes for managing this suffering. To think against this minimizing of religion, I intend to center it as a fundamental part of the moral economy of working-class suffering. More specifically, suffering is a secularized, Christian subjectivity that grounds the moral vocabulary of “hard work” and “deservedness.” For most of Christian history suffering was a subjectivity cultivated to constitute one’s moral worth. Moral suffering was not only a way of making sense of dismal political and material circumstances but also a way of *desiring* those circumstances. This uniquely Christian mode of suffering continues to inform the modern, American white working-class insofar as it situates a moral economy that has secularized suffering as constitutive of political worth.

*A Brief Genealogy of Christian Suffering*

A few decades removed from the Crucifixion, Paul wrote to a community at Colossae that “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The Greek word Paul invokes here for “sufferings” is *pathemasin* (παθημασιν), from the infinitive *pathema* (πάθημα), which means “that which befalls one, suffering, misfortune.”[[30]](#footnote-30) This passage from First Colossians is just one of many in Paul’s letters that illustrate suffering “as an integral part of the process of salvation” and therefore constitutive of Christianity.[[31]](#footnote-31) But Paul is not alone in conceiving of his own identity and mission in relation to the *suffering* of Christ. Early Christians formed their communal identity in relation to the suffering of Christ and subsequent martyrs. And they inaugurated a tradition of thinking “Christian” to be synonymous with someone who suffers.

Suffering in the early Christian imagination was both an experience upon which communal identity took root and a constructed value that established a break with the classical worldview. Early Christians constructed a subjectivity of suffering in order to comprehend a world “unrelentingly filled with risk, pain, and death.”[[32]](#footnote-32) This subjectivity established new categories of suffering, like the sick and the poor, that were “essentially absent” from the Greco-Roman “classificatory” systems.[[33]](#footnote-33) Likewise, Christian eschatology, predicated on the world’s imminent end, shaped attitudes toward death, pain, and voluntary martyrdom that further distinguished Christians from the Greco-Roman neighbors.[[34]](#footnote-34) Martyr narratives extended Christian suffering toward novel forms of political resistance as enduring bodily pain, especially in public view, became a spiritual value. [[35]](#footnote-35) The memories generated from early martyrdoms, even those of dubious historicity, became a shared set of symbols within which all Christians imagined themselves in the world.

As Christianity took its institutional shape and formalized theology, suffering remained a touchstone of Christian identity. Both Greek and Latin Christianity prioritized bodily suffering in the theological imagination. Eastern fathers, like John Chrysostom and Basil, turned toward the bodily suffering of martyrs as a model for both asceticism and non-bodily disciplines. [[36]](#footnote-36) Augustine, the preeminent Latin patriarch, described Christ’s suffering as an “exemplum” for Christian humility[[37]](#footnote-37) and claimed that suffering constituted the ontological condition of fallen man.[[38]](#footnote-38) In both instances, these early Christian thinkers continued the legacy of linking Christian identity to martyr figures by centralizing discussions of suffering in their theological images of both man and the world. With the reemergence of Aristotle in the West centuries later, Medieval theologians like Aquinas and Bonaventure constructed Christian vocabularies of pain in order to answer questions pertaining to the ways a soul might suffer independent of the body. [[39]](#footnote-39) Medieval Christianity considered pain to be intrinsically valuable because “suffering on earth was granted to martyrs” and “denied to the wicked.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Like the early fathers, Medieval Christianity emphasized suffering as a means to cultivate an intrinsically Christian subjectivity. Despite widening theological differences and emergent schisms, bodily suffering as a discipline and as a category for theological reflection remained prominent into late Medieval Europe.

Modernity and Protestant Christianity normalized suffering by ontologizing suffering. Whereas Medieval suffering was tied to questions of the body’s relationship to the soul in ways that stimulated robust discussions on subjective suffering, Modernity sundered Medieval ontology by separating sacred from secular, spirit from body, and theology from history. Protestantism developed concurrent to these dichotomies. Both Protestants and Moderns, suffering became the accepted ontological norm of bodily, material, historical existence. Protestants justified this through theological emphasis on mankind’s fallenness. Modernity inaugurated secularity and naturalness as discursive ontological schemes and suffering fell between. Because both ontologized suffering, only disruptive magnitudes of suffering – tragic suffering – retain an enchanted sense of theological awe. Modernity lost interest in quotidian suffering except for disruptive moments of sickness and extreme poverty. Voltaire, for example, prefaces his response to the Lisbon Earthquake:

If the question concerning physical evil ever deserves the attention of men, it is in those melancholy events which put us in mind of the weakness of our nature; such as plagues…the earthquake[s]…All things are doubtless arranged and set in order by Providence, but it has long been too evidence, that its superintending power has not disposed them in such a manner as to promote our temporal happiness.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Not only is Voltaire linking “attention” to tragedy, but he further suggests that tragedies are in themselves evidence that the world (“All things…arranged”) is “disposed” against man’s “temporal happiness.” The exceptional is imbued with historical relevance; the quotidian is normalized as a fact of life. In contrast, Protestantism retained an enchanted interest in quotidian suffering, but in ways significantly different from its Medieval predecessors. John Wesley, Protestant intellectual and founder of the Methodist movements, asked in a sermon why so little had been written on the problem of evil[[42]](#footnote-42) while reiterating the eighteenth century Protestant consensus that sickness was a consequence of humanity’s fallen nature.[[43]](#footnote-43) Here a division exists where previously there was none: the naturalness of sickness and the eschatological nature of evil. Suffering, sick bodies are iterations of the ontological fact of fallenness that cannot be resolved by religious discipline but only managed. They are, in other words, *quotidian* suffering. Suffering retains spiritual value – Martin Luther, another modern Protestant, reiterated Augustine’s portrayal of the crucifixion as an “exemplum” for the believer– but this value is no longer “justificatory” or “meritorious.” [[44]](#footnote-44) The spiritual value derives from disciplining one’s likeness to be similar to that of Christ’s. Rephrased, quotidian suffering generated spiritual value through *resemblance* to Christ for the modern Protestant. Bodily discipline is tied to a visual category of “likeness” and separated from Medieval processes that had direct bearing on the soul. No longer does bodily discipline generate salvific capital but only a visual-moral capital.

Much later in modernity, a young Henri Dunant witnessed injured soldiers at the Battle of Solferino during a tour of Italy. Inspired by his Christian faith, he committed himself to respond to this unnecessary suffering. Despite the obvious political nature of the conflict, however, he did not believe a political response was appropriate. He founded the Red Cross on the principle of neutrality, wanting to offer impartial aid to all who suffered*.* Coincidentally, Dunant was a Calvinist and strongly believed that quotidian suffering could not be stopped and that tragic suffering was merely manageable. God had made the world so. Political humanitarianism was pointless insofar as it sought to alter pre-ordained ontology. Apolitical humanitarianism has since remained an important legacy of the Modern Protestant separation between politics and suffering.[[45]](#footnote-45)

*Christian Suffering and the United States*

Despite Protestantism retaining an enchanted sense of quotidian suffering, where bodily discipline can cultivate moral capital in the likeness of Christ despite having no impact on salvation, suffering has not been used as an historiographical heuristic for interpreting Christianity in the United States. Instead, quotidian suffering is relegated to philosophy, theology, and anthropology because it is too broad to be historically useful (like disruptive, tragic suffering) or too subjective to guide histories of society. When suffering appears in narratives of Christianity in the United States it is often in its tragic or disruptive forms. Thus Sydney Ahlstrom, a major figure in the early canon of American Christian history, mentions tragic suffering as an existential dilemma posed by the Civil War that Christians understood by reflecting on American “choseness.” They interpreted the tragic suffering as a national discipline to build their nation’s Christian identity.[[46]](#footnote-46) Curtis Evans, among the foremost contemporary historians of Christianity in America, describes suffering as a discipline wielded by Proslavery Christianity to inculcate civilizational dispositions among the enslaved.[[47]](#footnote-47) Both of these examples gesture toward a new inflection of Christian suffering: the nation. Scholars of religion and the United States have coined the terms “Civil Religion” and “Theonationalism” to describe the discursive frames that portray the United States as “chosen” by God to be the “New Israel.”[[48]](#footnote-48) In moments of political suffering, Christian Americans have turned toward the Christian heritage of the United States to make sense of history. Whereas critical historians with modern sensibilities have remained disinterested in quotidian suffering, practicing Christians have synthesized disciplines of suffering with their patriotic identities to inform their subjective sense of history.

Christians across the political spectrum have negotiated suffering and national identity in order to retrieve their religion’s political potential. The Social Gospel, African-American liberation theology, and religious resistance to the Vietnam War all exemplify robust traditions from the left that mediate American nationalism and Christianity. Left Christian responses to poverty and racism, especially in narratives that indict the nation for prolonging injustice, appeal to suffering for political effect. But these radical theologies appeal to alternative, and in many cases subaltern, discourses within Christianity that salvage quotidian suffering from ontology and discursively reposition it as an ethical consequence. They thereby generate an optimistic politics that strives for egalitarian political change. Moderated forms of this radical tendency surface in progressive campaigns and administrations that appeal to personal faith and Civil Religion to promote civility, national unity, and reiterations of the nationalist eschatological hope that America is unfolding toward greatness. In contrast, conservative Christianity inherits the modern, liberal legacy that normalizes quotidian suffering as unalterable fact. But unlike moderns that de-theologize this suffering, conservatives adopt quotidian suffering as a theological moral economy.

The contemporary Christian right descends from a political legacy in which its self-perception was shaped by a cultural defensiveness and its religious values inflected with nationalism. Prior to the twentieth century, conservative Christian forces where shaped by racial shifts, the emergence of Evangelical Christianity, and Manifest Destiny. These forces began to emerge as a coalition shortly before the mid-twentieth century, during which time conservatives and populists embraced a more explicitly Christian (after World War II, Judeo-Christian) vision of America. Black integration, Catholic integration (and battles over public education), the Scopes trial, and immigration patterns situated their political and religious view that an intrinsically Christian America was fading away. This brief history forms the backdrop against which contemporary scholars narrate the Moral Majority, Religious Right, and subsequent movements. Mark Noll, preeminent historian of Evangelical Christianity in America, describes a legacy of “historical resentment” against federal social policies informing the Christian right’s belief that the “past has been stolen from them.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Kevin Kruse, historian at Princeton, argues that the “Christian America” idea motivating the religious right formed in response to “Christian libertarianism,” an ideological coalition between populists and capitalists resisting Roosevelt’s New Deal.[[50]](#footnote-50) And Jason Bivins, historian of Christian and American politics, frames conservative Evangelicals as practicing a “Christian anti-liberalism,” an

aversion to the centralization of power; a sense that politics has become hostage to elites; politics and the state are out of line with, or even an affront to, Christian morality.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Bivins further frames the relationship between federal social policy and Evangelical “antiliberals” as, from the Evangelical’s ideology, a “politicization” of Christian identity occurring “against their will.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Despite the nuanced differences of their projects, historians agree that some form of resentment motivates the Christian right’s desire for a restored Christian America, one built on liberal-Christian individualism. Sociologists of Christianity and American politics similarly contextualize the political mobilization of Christianity on the resentment of federal power and a corollary moral individualism. Robert Wuthnow, discussing the Republican’s monopoly on Kansas’s politics, links geographic distance from Washington with the cultural rise of the Religious Right by the practice of “associational democracy.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Community trust, moreso than “moral activism,” anchors conservative Christian activity in politics.[[54]](#footnote-54) The visual, face-to-face interaction between people with a shared set of individualist values exacerbates the moral distance between Kansas Christians and federal power. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, co-authors of a major survey on Christianity and race, linked “Enlightenment liberalism” and “Protestant Christianity” to a “Freewill-individualist” tradition that rejects federal attempts at mitigating racism while placing the burden for overcoming racial injustice on black individuals.[[55]](#footnote-55) More recently, scholars have emphasized anxiety among the religious right in addition to their aforementioned individualist values. Robert Jones considers “White Christian America” to be aware of its “slow death” and subsequently left “with a haunting sense of dislocation.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Matthew Bowman interprets Trump’s presidential victory as the consequence of a threatened Christian coalition seeking to preserve “American democracy” and its necessary attendant “Christian republican sentiment[s].”[[57]](#footnote-57) For the Christian right, political resentment, liberal individualism, and nationalism inflect their moral economy, mutually constituting their morals and their politics.

Despite the proliferation of literatures on the religious right, Christian traditions of suffering remain disconnected from the religious right’s political-moral economy. On the one hand, this reflects that critical inquiries accept at face value the language they use in political engagement: “special rights,” “Christian America,” “family values,” and other terms that do not imply any condition of suffering. On the other hand, robust literatures of suffering exist within the humanities and social sciences on the white working-class that tether racial resentment and economic anxiety to rural conditions of suffering. Given some overlap between these two demographics, why should these literatures be disconnected? Conservative activism, the Religious Right, the Tea Party Movement, and the white working-class are distinct movements that bleed into one another around a shared value structure conditioned by, but not necessarily correlating with, Christianity. Evangelical Christianity in the United States and other conservatives promote “traditional moral standards” that are not dependent on religious “identity.”[[58]](#footnote-58) The Tea Party Movement shares significant overlap with the Religious Right, but also contains a significant number of nonreligious persons who share a belief in the Judeo-Christian character of the United States; in other words, “Religious Nationalism” does not correlate with professing a Judeo-Christian identity.[[59]](#footnote-59) A shared moral commitment explains why these movements overlap in practice and form political coalitions independent of belonging to the same communities. But moral standards are not simply deontological values handed down by elites; they emerge from social circumstances and are sustained by practice. In other words, an intrinsically Christian moral economy is operating independently of Christian communities among the conservative coalition, as evidenced by the fact that non-Christians as well as the nonreligious share a commitment to a Theonationalism and “traditional moral values.” The political language of “resentment” from the Christian right is therefore corollary to the narrative of “resentment” among the white working-class.

*The Moral Economy of Suffering*

Having thus provided overviews of both Christian history and the white working-class, I now turn toward a synthesis of these literatures in order to provide a reinterpretation of the moral vocabulary of resentment. In what follows, I portray suffering as a Christian subjectivity operating politically in both theological and secular registers. Suffering’s external conditions are therefore less relevant than the fact that suffering constitutes one’s moral, and therefore political, value. The discourse of “hard work” and “deservedness” is intimately bound with a Christian sense of individualism where, in addition to the socio-economic and racial dimensions identified by previous literature, there exists a concurrent moral valence implying that others *have not suffered enough.* This moral economy binds the religious right, the white working-class, and white women together in Trump’s coalition insofar as his public performance and the symbolic moral capital of his victory redistributes suffering upon others who are imagined as having not suffered enough in order to make claims for their political participation.

First, what is Trump’s coalition morally *resenting*? Most broadly, egalitarian shifts since the 1960s wherein different minority movements have pressed claim to public, political belonging without having visually demonstrated that they have sufficiently suffered. The juridical language of “special rights” discursively positions “egalitarian” social change as “unfair” in legal contexts by suggesting that “fortunate Americans” have *earned* privilege “with hard work and merit.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The language of “hard work” cannot be separated from the bodily context in which it emerges as a discipline that constructs morally valuable subjects – subjects that contrast with the effeminate labor of “desk” jobs.[[61]](#footnote-61) But leisure, too, correlates with urban living, disintegrating values, and politically impotent subjects. This moral economy rejects abortion as a Feminist right to leisure that denies the political discipline of bodily hard work: “the idea that a woman might choose to have an abortion suggests that she is not living according to the purported standards of hard work and moral obligation that are the hallmarks of small communities.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Extreme bodily suffering constructs one’s moral and political subjectivity which grants access to the right of political voice.

This moral economy of suffering requires both bodily suffering and visual obviousness. Katherine Cramer correlates the moral capital of “deservedness” with “someone who has labored extremely hard his entire life.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Likewise, Robert Wuthnow ties the economy of “moral capital” to the face-to-face interaction and shared visual circumstances of communal suffering in small-town America.[[64]](#footnote-64) On homosexuality, his rural subjects expressed moral opposition not toward sexual deviance itself, but toward the public “flaunt[ing]” and visually “disrupt[ive]” nature of gay equality movements.[[65]](#footnote-65) Abortion is a bodily process that signifies a woman conditioned by leisure and not suffering; homosexuality is a visible aesthetic that, while signifying private moral shifts, needs to be contained because of its visually signifying capacity. The contrast exposes how bodily suffering and visual registers coordinate within the moral economy of “values voters.” The visual dynamic legitimates the moral economy of suffering while the moral economy justifies the efficacy of visual evidence in Christian ways. *Ecce Homo*, “Behold the Man!” was the first declaration in Christian consciousness as Pontius Pilate served an abused, suffering Christ over to the public. In visualizing Christ’s pain, they constituted their own sense of suffering.[[66]](#footnote-66) The theology of visual suffering took on a masculine dynamic in the American context, where Christ bearing his suffering became an ethical model directing men to suffer in order to become men.[[67]](#footnote-67) Connecting these extreme histories is a Puritan emphasis on labor and liberal individualism, which to extend Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s thesis, results in a “rigorous, sometimes exclusionary supervision” and visual policing of bodily suffering.[[68]](#footnote-68) For most of us Western Moderns, visual suffering and theology are only co-constitutive in moments of excess. “To feel the pulse of Christian iconography in certain wartime or disaster-time photographs is not a sentimental projection,” but religious sentiment elicited by the sympathies of our “gaze.”[[69]](#footnote-69) But the moral economy of the white working-class operates visually by circulating sentiments framed by still-enchanted quotidian suffering.

Religiously enchanted, quotidian suffering is the ontological keystone upon which most of the conservative moral economy rests, binding together the white working-class and the religious right. Here I am only reframing in an alternate vocabulary what Lauren Berlant refers to as the “crisis ordinariness” in light of the feudalism that Anne Norton identifies as the “rich interior” of political liberalism.[[70]](#footnote-70) Both quotidian suffering and tragic suffering structure the ontological bedrock of the world. Suffering is the unchanging fact of social existence, a norm that limits discursive horizons concurrent to its discursive construction by Christianity. “Hard work” is to discipline oneself in light of this suffering: to constitute one’s sense-of-self in light of quotidian suffering and subsequently derive a sense of moral and political value from this discipline. Unlike tragic suffering, which elicits theological awe in the face of its exceptionalness, quotidian suffering is a daily reality still saturated with theological meaning for the religious right and the white working-class. This enchanted ontology of suffering suggests two political facts for understanding Donald Trump’s coalition. First, insofar as suffering is the determined and unchangeable state of reality, political movements that intend to neutralize, mitigate, or manage suffering are engaging in a fool’s task. Second, because the discipline of hard work generates moral and political value from quotidian suffering, proposing alternative possibilities through which to generate moral and political worth is to directly challenge both the self-worth of the “hard workers” as well as to threaten to upend the conceptual schema.

With the moral economy of suffering in mind, I can now articulate why Donald Trump’s vulgar antics operate as a moral discipline that elicit support from the religious right and white working-class. On November 24th, 2016 he publicly mocked a disabled reporter at a campaign event. White, able-bodied supporters behind him smiled.[[71]](#footnote-71) One month prior his “Grab’m by the pussy” conversation generated public outcry but did not rebuff white women’s vote. And by the end of the election, most American Protestants as well as a few heirs of the religious right – most notably Jerry Falwell, Jr. – supported Trump.[[72]](#footnote-72) While these political demographics share racial sympathies, liberal values, and respect for hierarchy, the moral economy of suffering inflects and synthesizes these values. Progressive activism and broad demographic changes instill a sense of existential dread for those who derive their moral worth from suffering. Radical and progressive politics suggests that suffering need not be normalized and that a world without suffering is possible. This claim counters not only the metaphysics of conservative ontology but further denies the moral economy of suffering. “Hard work” is no longer generates moral and political capital and reveals itself as mere toil.

Public aesthetics are the medium by which progressive and radical politics have challenged the moral economy of suffering. The religious right feels threatened and politically mobilized against their will,[[73]](#footnote-73) white and rural Americans believe that “tyrannizing minorities” are “shouting” against their way of life,[[74]](#footnote-74) and conservatives believe that “liberals” are denying the “deep story” and accusing conservatives of “not feeling the right feelings.”[[75]](#footnote-75) These modes of resentment are not merely economic but inflected by affective and moral registers. In response, the religious right and white working-class what to defend the “masculinized and White idea of precarious America”[[76]](#footnote-76) and have elected someone to save “Christian civilization as they imagined it.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Those chose to support a man whose rhetorical gestures will *discipline* by redistributing suffering. They want a man whose aesthetics will return the public to the confines of the moral economy of suffering and, by visually eliciting suffering through his gestures, silence voices that have clamored for political value without having been seen to bodily suffer. Such activity not only strengthens and validates their own political and moral worth as persons who suffer, but distributes suffering back upon those leisurely, effeminate, urban progressives whom are perceived to have publicly victimized themselves without having sufficiently suffered.

*Conclusion*

Throughout this paper, I have suggested that an ontological view of suffering animates elements of conservatism. Protestant Christianity and Modernity normalized suffering as an everyday, or quotidian, dimension of human social and material life. Both view suffering as constitutive of reality rather than as a consequence of political and social dynamics. Unlike Modernity, which disenchants quotidian suffering insofar as it is “natural,” both the white working-class and religious right continue to engage quotidian suffering as an enchanted, theological discipline through which to cultivate both moral and political worth. Various egalitarian political movements have rejected hierarchies of power that stabilize suffering as a norm and subsequently reconceived both tragic and quotidian suffering as ethical problems that can be resolved. Contemporary social conservatives, however, reject this reconceptualization of suffering as an ethical rather than ontological dilemma. But this rejection is not discursive. The ethical view of suffering, optimistic for change, and the ontological view of suffering, intrinsically pessimistic, have no common vocabulary through which to deliberate. Rather, these differences are fought secondhand through those mediums which are shared in common: public aesthetics, “culture” wars, and political institutions. Donald Trump’s victory was fueled, in part, by the pessimistic moral economy of suffering. The white working-class and religious right both perceive that the very foundations of what generates moral and political value are being disrupted by political movements that further deny their view of reality. To push back, they support a man who uses his public presence to discipline these opposing voices and restore moral order.

The narrative of “resentment,” and its racial and economic implications, is not incorrect. Rather, it works simultaneous to a moral narrative and ontology which animates this resentment as well as furnishes an alternative, more hierarchical, vision of politics. Despite my suggestion that Trump embodies the redistribution of suffering, I do not think that the moral economy of suffering fuels uninhibited rage. The members of the white working-class and religious right are still human and express empathy, regret, and fear like anyone else. But their need to return to the “normal,” impossible to separate from hierarchical dynamics, is animated by an ontological worldview that makes their racism, sexism, and xenophobia concurrent to – rather than in contradiction with – forms of sympathy. Being born into another part of the world, being raced other-than-white, and being “inflicted” with homosexuality are all human inflections of an otherwise unalterable suffering distributed by chance rather than constituted by politics. Rather than impose contradictions onto groups who are “voting against their own interest” or incapable of recognizing a separation of church and state, I propose we take them at their word. To promote a more egalitarian America, to propose that suffering can be resolved and need not be normalized, is to reject “Christian civilization as they imagine it.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

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