

**CATASTROPHIC CHANGE:  
CRACKED SOCIAL CONTAINERS AND THE  
PRECARIOUS BODY POLITIC**

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My family had recently immigrated to the United States from Cuba when the president of the United States, John F Kennedy was shot and killed. I remember watching the state funeral on a little black-and-white television set with my mother and younger sister. I was a couple of months short of five years old. This woman, the wife of the president, was American, I understood, and she was different from us. My parents were certainly no fans of JFK, having felt deeply betrayed by him in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, but they were shocked and dismayed by the assassination, and must have been swimming in complexly layered feeling about the tragedy that was unfolding in this new home of theirs. Mostly I remember my mother's empathic grief and respect for the strength and dignity of Jacqueline Kennedy. I watched my mother's face, and she watched Jackie's. Jackie held the hand of little John; my mother held our hands and wept.

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I've come to think of this memory as an emblem of my American patriation, the complexly layered beginning of my becoming a member of these United States. Without the words to formulate it to myself, my young mind was turning over the question: for whom or for what was my mother weeping?



I entered these United States, then, in a time of cataclysm: both within my immigrant family and without, when the social containers of the nation seemed to be fissuring. JFK's assassination was, disturbingly, only one of many in those years, of course.



Despite this turbulence within and without, my main preoccupations then were a child's preoccupations, immediate, close at hand; I was thankfully buffered by the noisy din and easy love of an extended family that did its best to keep the press of adult worries out of the lives of small children. But I remember, many decades later, lying on an analytic couch and trying to describe a diffuse kind of anxiety I didn't have many words for, but unquestionably felt at that time. I was telling my analyst, somewhat jokingly, how I had been afraid of tornados

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(we had immigrated to central Texas - there had been a big twister on the news that devastated a town) and, more acutely, of “Communists.”



These Communists, I feared, were going to take me away, or take others away and somehow destroy everything I knew of my world. I did not know what a Communist was, really, nor did I have a sense that — as Winnicott would have it — this fear of breakdown was a fear of something that had already happened. My family fled post-revolutionary Cuba after having first enthusiastically supported Castro, when it became clear to my father that democracy was not going to be the outcome of the struggle. Unwittingly, what I began to construct that day in analysis, the figure that started to form out of this diffuse cloud of anxiety that I had no name for, was a palpable feeling of my subjection to the State. Because of

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my family's immigration in my early childhood, I had become precociously aware of this thing that operated on the order of a machine, a great machine of power that cared little for the small lives of individual humans. I could not have put it into words as a child, but that day in analysis I slowly became conscious of an object relationship I had with the State, as real as any I had with the individuals in my life: I felt the cold touch of Regime, and as a kind of terror gripped me, I slowly broke down.

I begin with these reflections in part to position myself in your eyes somehow. To give you a way to begin to localize me. And in part to remind myself and us, that the strange, dark, anxious times of this election cycle are neither new nor all that unique — though, given just how strange, dark, and anxious they are, I also feel I have frequent need of that reminding — not that it soothes all that much. If the early 60s was a time when the social containers as we then knew them were undergoing radical transformations, then today we may feel as if they are melting.

Wilfred Bion, who came of age as a 20-year-old commanding a tank in World War I, elaborated his enigmatic concept of catastrophic change over a lifetime of work. Not to be confused with trauma, catastrophic change is a psychic perturbation at the threshold of growth: the catastrophe can be understood as a rupturing of the container by what it contains, the old skins no longer able to hold the new wine. But the catastrophe is also the refusal of accepting that change is immanent, as inherent in the process of growth as it is painful. Shiva, Christ, or Abraham: the old stories link spiritual growth to destruction. Bion means the concept as a way to describe *intra*-psychic process, and he puts this event on the

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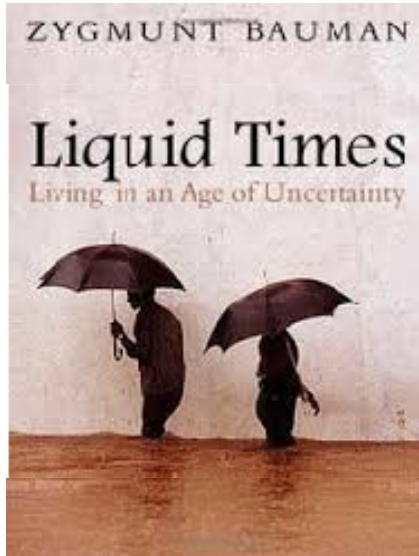
order of death, or more often, birth, as a fundamental change of existential state, and therefore on the side of potential growth. But in Bion's ambivalent use of the term, the catastrophe can also be the refusal to that change, the dogged clinging to old forms that simply will not hold, resulting in seismic disruptions to the psyche. In our analytic work we often see and live catastrophic changes, and we count on the resilience of the therapeutic frame and the creativity of a co-constructed process to be the crucible of such disruptive transformation. We have faith that this bigger container can contain and sustain the violent cycling of mental regeneration.

I understand the psychology of this election cycle in the light of this idea of catastrophic change, thought on a social level. The current structures no longer seem to hold: Congress is massively dysfunctional, unable at times even to keep the government open, much less working; the explosion of media rather than promoting a productive debate among a diversity of views has instead resulted in highly curated experience of self-confirmation; in the tsunami of money flooding an election, the funding streams can be impossible to discern. **We** — and just like that, we are already plunged into the heart of an enormous problem: in the flash of that tiny word *we*, an invisible line gets drawn, seemingly obvious, looping some into a sphere of belonging, silently lopping others out, and all the while pretending that its clear to us who is who, that we understand each other — **we**, then, as a collective in this country, are struggling with the difficulty, the refusal, or perhaps the inability to confront the limitations of our existing sociopolitical containers and to find ways to creatively elaborate new forms.

Without the elaboration of these forms, the containers crack (as we are seeing

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with the Republican party most dramatically, though the fracture lines are also visible in other quarters). The question, then, is not *will* there be change, but *in what way*, how convulsive, at what cost, and to whom?



We live in a time that the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls “liquid modernity,” which he characterizes along five lines:

FIRST, social forms, structures and institutions are no longer able or expected to keep their shapes for long — hence “they cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies.”

SECOND, power becomes divorced from politics: the power of states to act slips away to the politically uncontrolled global, extraterritorial space, unleashing cataclysmically uncertain and untamable flows. The state then increasingly “out-sources” the functions it previously

performed, leaving these to become “the playground for the notoriously capricious and inherently unpredictable market forces.”

THIRD, the social safety net erodes: there is a withdrawal of state-endorsed insurance against individual failure, which undermines collective action, increasing the risks of sacrificing individual interest for the common good, and spurs individualistic competition.

FOURTH, “long-term thinking, planning and acting [collapses]” which “leads to a splicing of both political history and individual lives into a series of short-term projects and episodes which are in principle infinite, and do not combine into the kinds of projects to which concepts like ‘development,’ ‘maturation,’ ‘career,’ or ‘progress’... could be meaningfully applied.”

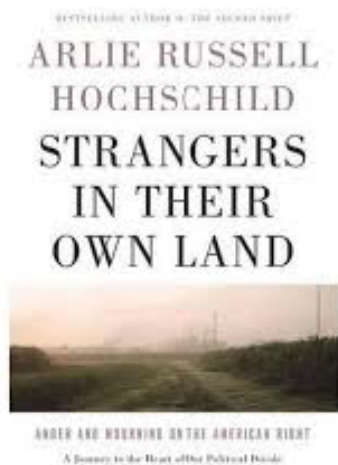
and finally, FIFTH “ the responsibility for resolving the quandaries generated by...constantly changing circumstances is shifted onto the shoulders of individuals”

One of the most unsettling problems of liquid modernity, Bauman notes, is the feeling of impotence and haplessness it can give rise to, feelings I have encountered frequently in my patients, friends, and myself in this election. By and large the most vexing problems we face have their roots in *global* flows — if Greece has an economic collapse, chances are you will feel it in Detroit;

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industrialization in India raises sea levels in New York; the refugee crisis in Turkey has effects in San Bernardino. For the small-time fisherman in West Ireland, say, — who effectively lost his way of life and livelihood when EU negotiations opened quotas for super-trawlers from Spain and France and international petroleum corporations disrupted the environment and affected the fish stock — that local fisherman has little he can effectively do to effect global change. His relationship to that Big Other, the State, is now further complicated by the State's vassal relationship to the Corporation. In the David and Goliath story of local communities as the settings where Big Capital dumps the remaindered waste of its production, a local fisherman has good reason to feel besieged by an existential demoralization.



In her new book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, Arlie Russell Hochschild describes the environmental decimation wreaked upon the Bayou country in Louisiana by a lightly regulated oil industry. Facing the loss of their beloved wetlands — once a rich habitat that supported locals through farming and fishing, and now



a poisoned swamp of dying trees and literally carcinogenic waters — some folks would have chosen to leave, but now can not. Their houses lost value — who, after all, would want to live here? — and so they remain: trapped. Hochschild calls

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them “stay-at-home migrants,” and as she writes: “They had stayed. The environment had left” (p. 49). Everyone she talked with in this region over the course of several years, Hochschild writes, “felt like victims of a frightening loss — or was it theft? — of their cultural home, their place in the world, and their honor” (p. 48). I will get back to Hochschild's important work later, but for now I simply want to illustrate this common feeling of living in liquid modernity: the sense of loss, the frustration of helplessness, the anger it generates, and what I think is the prevailing affect undergirding all of those emotions: namely, free-floating anxiety and fear.

*We* — and perhaps here I can use that little word with a troubling inclusivity — we are afraid in this country. Some amass gold under the bed and others stockpile food for the coming race war, while school campuses and universities give workshops to faculty on how to manage “lone shooters.” In late August, six terminals of Los Angeles International Airport were evacuated as panicked travelers responded to unconfirmed reports of gunfire on social media, leading to a total shut down of the airport. Two weeks earlier, it was Kennedy International in New York. In neither case was there an actual shooter. Quoted in a NYT story, John Horgan, a professor of global studies and psychology at Georgia State University who specializes in the study of terrorism, put it this way: “I would say that we are in the grip of a moral panic. ... The constant threat perception of being vulnerable to mass violence has seeped into our collective consciousness.”



“Threat perception,” as Horgan puts it, is a fitting term, for as the fear creeps in to the national soul, it does indeed become the very way that we perceive the world. We are enjoined to keep our eyes open for any suspicious activity and to report it immediately. And in a certain way, we do. Armed with personal cameras, nearly everyone is another eyeball for the collective: the eyes multiply and proliferate, never blink, go viral. If in the 1960s the rhythms of the news cycle were marked by the nightly broadcast and the morning paper, today it has become a unending flow, stories layering one upon the other, news outlets continuously recirculating slight modifications, sound-bited and retweeted, so that stories reverberate and echo endlessly.

We are wary of strangers.

Speaking at the Republican National Convention in July, Newt Gingrich stoked the fires, invoking what he called Trump's speaking the "truth about our national security":



- We are at War.
- We are at War with Radical Islamists.
- They are determined to kill us.
- They are stronger than we admit
- And are greater in number than we admit.

National security thus becomes national insecurity. And this pervasive anxiety haunts every aspect of this election.

The Chapman University Survey of American Fears listed the top three national fears in 2015 as "man-made disasters" (like terrorism), technology, and

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the government. “There isn’t a single fear that defines our era,” says sociologist Frank Furedi, author of *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*. It’s not that we live in an objectively more fear-driven age, necessarily, but that the fear we harbor has a particularly new quality. “What we have is a more promiscuous, pluralistic form of fearing,” Furedi writes: “The very important implication to this is that while my parents feared together, you and I have a more isolated, private experience. We fear on our own.”(<http://www.utne.com/Politics/Overcoming-American-Fear-Culture-On-Eve-of-New-Presidency?pageid=1#PageContent1>) The neoliberal conditions that shape liquid modernity, atomize collectivity: scattering us to our own devices. The safety nets once provided by career stability, unions, company and civil service pensions, a nationally shared media, religious and ethnic homogeneity, and the like, are eroded and it’s increasingly every man for himself.

Nor is the fear distributed equally...

Molly Ball, writing in the Atlantic in a story titled “Donald Trump and the Politics of Fear” (09/02/16) cites a study by the Public Religion Research Institute & Brookings Institution, documenting that Trump supporters are more worried than the general electorate:

“65 percent of Trump supporters feared being victims of terrorism, versus 51 percent of all Americans. Three-fourths of Trump supporters feared being victims of crime, versus 63 percent overall. Trump supporters also disproportionately feared foreign influence: 83 percent said the American way of life needed to be protected from it, versus 55 percent overall. Two-thirds of Trump supporters also worried that they or a family

member would become unemployed, comparable to 63 percent of non-Trump supporters.” Ball concludes: “Economic anxiety, while widespread in America today, is not a distinguishing characteristic of Trump supporters; other anxieties are.” [Molly Ball, “Donald Trump and the Politics of Fear” Atlantic 9/2/16]

(Adapted from PRRI/ Brookings Survey June, 2016)

<b>Fear...</b>	<b>Trump supporters</b>	<b>General electorate</b>
<b>...being victims of terrorism</b>	65%	51%
<b>...being victims of crime</b>	75%	63%
<b>...foreign influence</b>	83%	55%
<b>...becoming unemployed</b>	67%	63%

In an attempt to find a modicum of refuge, the human tendency is to round the wagons. To draw the enchanted circles around a series of *we*’s in the hopes of consolidating a protective solidarity against the threat of *them*. There is safety in numbers, goes the old saying, and no one want to be alone. Donald Moss — a psychoanalyst in New York — edited *Hating in the Third Person Plural*,

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which dissects, in detail, the projective mechanisms of the most common attempts we use to get the safety of *we* through the disavowal of others, namely via misogyny, xenophobia, racism, and homophobia. Moss parses the formula in the simplest terms: “identification upwards and dis-identification downwards.” *We* works best as a protective amulet when it can claim superiority over those who are exorcised from the charmed circle. As Ta Nehisi Coates writes:

Hate gives identity. The nigger, the fag, the bitch illuminate the border, illuminate what we ostensibly are not, illuminate the Dream of being white, of being a Man. We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in the tribe. (p60)

Constituting the stranger is the way we make ourselves familiar: by pushing difference *outside* we create a false homogeneity *inside*. But in a globalized world this move comes with a doubled peril: most obviously, to those actually exiled to the outside of the charmed circle, whose bodies are made precarious; but as significantly to the tribes constituted by these exclusions, for such tribalism makes precarity the sign of the body politic itself.

Let’s consider both of these moves more carefully.

Those who are radically othered in the process of creating a fiction of collective unity pay for it — literally with their lives. In this election cycle we have had no shortage of attempts to manufacture strangers. Attempting to parlay national insecurity into votes, Donald Trump has painted Muslims as untrustworthy potential jihadists; he has depicted blacks as derelicts with nothing left to lose, and Mexicans as violent rapists. Building a wall has become

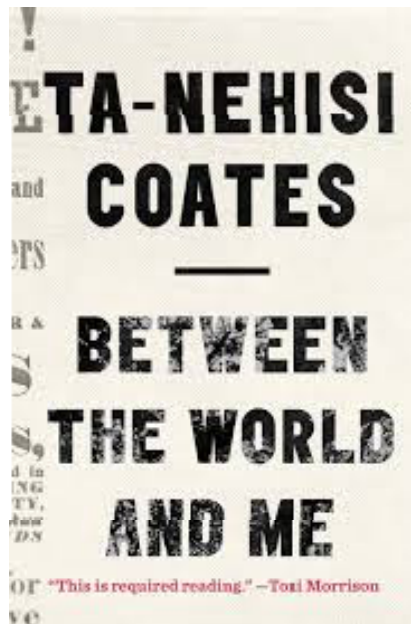
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the icon of his plan to keep the dangerous Others out. This iconography does more than make the U.S. a colossal gated community, it also concretizes the means of exclusion and gives it a specific location *on* the border, providing a kind of national fetish that stands for the inherent but less visible mechanisms of exclusion for the supposed strangers *within* our borders. Trump's campaign slogan, *Make America Great Again*, was easily transformed by satirists into *Make America White Again*, humorously underscoring the anxiety of Trump's most ardent supporters, 90% of whom are white.



The primary subject of Coates' bestselling meditation, *Between the World and Me* is the precarity of the black body *within* these supposedly United States.



The American dream is a white dream, he says, and more specifically a dream of being white. Before whites were whites they were something else, Irish or Italian or Eastern European Jews. Blackness is what made these peoples white. In Coates's view, race is the child of racism (and not the other way around). The foundational myth of America as a land of opportunity and upward mobility was constructed on the backs of black slaves, literally by their sweat and blood. The black body, according to Coates, was and continues to be the disposable commodity that fuels American prosperity. And, because extinguishable, the black body lives in a state of perpetual precarity. Ostensibly writing to his son, implicitly writing to us all as children of an American history we prefer to ignore, Coates's book is a fierce lament about how black lives matter and the cost of losing them. These have been the kinds of lives that, all too often, would have fallen into the category of the un-grieveable, as Judith Butler would call it. Those lives that are not collectively mourned because they are seen as mattering less to that collective.

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If blacks in the United States can be construed as a kind of implicit outsider, then immigrants are marked as the self-evident stranger. From 2000 to 2012, the foreign-born population of the United States increased by over 30% to almost 41 million people, according to the American Progress Foundation, more than doubling since the 1960s.

(<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/report/2014/10/23/59040/the-facts-on-immigration-today-3/#population>) And immigrants are growing in number. As you can see here, the growth of the Latino and Asian American population dwarfs the growth of whites.

(Adapted from the American Progress Foundation, 2014)

<b>ethnicity</b>	<b>growth 2000-2010</b>
latino	43%
asian	46%
non-hispanic white	5.7%

As the population of Asian and Latino immigrants and their descendants grows, so does the fear of what this portends for American identity. As I have written elsewhere, the immigrant troubles the self-same integrity of the native culture, seeming to say by her very presence, *if I am a foreigner then foreign to what or to whom? Who are you now that I am here? Who are you actually?* The recognition of difference in the other necessarily opens a troubling difference within one's self, however unconsciously.

That difference is opening now, and with a vengeance, in the psyche of the American collective. The mythos of America as white nation is dying — whiteness is increasingly recognized as its own identifiable ethnic stereotype, not the generic norm. This constitutes a catastrophic change; and for those living it, the threat to white American identity is visceral, an existential peril.



It has become somewhat commonplace in the circles I travel in this liberal bastion of the Bay Area to speak of these Trump voters as stupid, racist, and uninformed — or to use Hillary Clinton’s ill-chosen term, as “deplorables.” Such moves are largely the symptom of an attempt to construct yet another safety zone, this time to guard against the anxiety many that we on the Left feel. I have had a number of patients lament: how can it possibly be the case that more than

40% of the national electorate would stand with a narcissistic demagogue like Trump, an ostentatious billionaire who could seem to care less for the little man.

Rather than attempting to round the wagons on what she already thinks she knows, Arlie Russell Hochschild, whom I mentioned earlier, took the radical step of trying to cross over what she calls the “empathy wall” to get into the mindset of Tea Party voters in Louisiana.



Using environmental degradation as her “keyhole” subject, Hochschild spent years getting to know home-owners and oil workers, politicians and church ministers, in short the folks who live in Louisiana's highly unregulated petroleum economy, one which has taken a devastating toll on the environment. Through this laborious attempt to find within herself, a self-described Berkeley liberal, the kind of understanding that these hard Right partisans hold about the pernicious effects of big government, Hochschild is able to construct what she calls the “deep



story” of political affiliation. This deep story is one of betrayal and disregard.

Hochschild describes it like this:

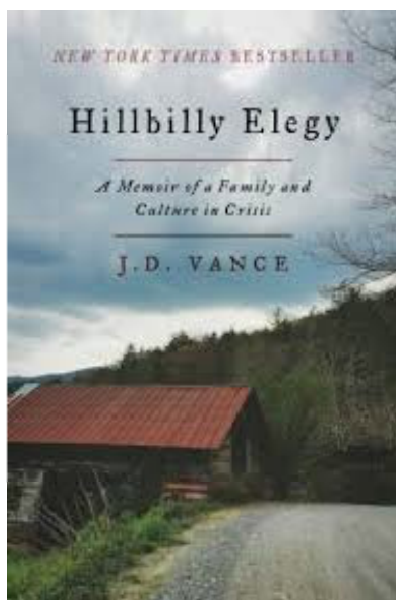


You are patiently standing in a long line leading up a hill, as in a pilgrimage. You are situated in the middle of this line, along with others who are also white, older, Christian, and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not. ...you’ve waited a long time, worked hard, and the line is barely moving.... In fact, is it moving backward? You haven't gotten a raise in years, and there is no talk of one. Actually if you are short ...a BA, your income has dropped over the last twenty years....Look! You see people *cutting in line ahead of you!* You are following the rules. They aren't. ... How can they just do that? Who are they? Some are black....Women, immigrants, refugees, public sector workers — where will it end? ... It's not fair.

And President Obama: how did *he* rise so high? The biracial son of a low-income single mother becomes president of the most powerful country in the world; you didn't see this coming. And if he's there, what kind of a slouch does his rise make you feel like, you who are supposed to be so much more privileged. ...You may not have the biggest house, but you can certainly be proud of being American. And anyone who criticizes America — well, they're criticizing you. If you can no longer feel pride in

the United States through its president, you'll have to feel American in a new way — by banding with others who feel as strangers in their own land (pp. 136-140)

The very people whose identity was indubitably American before, who never had to question that this was *their* country are now “also being squeezed,” as Hochschild writes, “by greater competition from other groups for an ever-scarcer supply of cultural honor” (p. 143).



J. D. Vance’s memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy* has been a NYT Bestseller and is making the rounds on the talk-show radio circuit. Vance grew up in Middleton, Ohio — a Rust Belt town — and Jackson, Kentucky — in the heart of Appalachia — but ended up graduating from Yale Law School. He describes a chaotic childhood, blurred by his mother’s addictions and grandfather's alcoholism, and punctuated by frequent violence. In one scene his grandparents savagely trash a store — breaking and throwing merchandise, and threatening the shop owner

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with his life — because he had the temerity to chastise their son for playing with an expensive toy he pulled off the shelf. Vance credits the love and steadfastness of these same hillbilly grandparents and a pick-yourself-up-by-the-boot-straps work ethic with his eventual success. He largely steers clear of overt politics in the book, but emphasizes self-reliance, discipline, and hard work, and seems to imply that others — regardless of their histories or race — could spin the same kind of gold he has from this hillbilly hay. I'm sure I have much to disagree with in his Republican leanings, but I also felt he provided me with a way of recognizing this political Other of mine on human grounds, and thereby giving me a way to actually disagree rather than to denigrate and disregard.

This is in keeping with Hochschild's way of thinking politics, and it is not dissimilar to the way therapists think about their patients: namely, with a strong consideration that affect/ emotion matters, and oftentimes much more than content. She finds in her Tea Party subjects not unreasoning stupidity but a profound sense of betrayal, one that becomes ever more amplified in the echo-chambers of contemporary media, helping us to see just how deeply estranged we are from each other in this country.

This election seems, finally, to be deciding itself, if in excruciating painful twists of the national character. While there have been no shortage of bizarre and unpredictable turns in this campaign, it seems extremely unlikely at this point that Trump will win. But a resolution to this unprecedented election cycle will hardly solve the problems of the political psyche we now face.

There is an intimate link between what is expelled to the outside and who we feel ourselves to be on the inside. None of us is immune from this tendency in

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the collective to build a safety camp in the interior. Some might expel Black Lives Matter activists or Muslims or immigrant Mexicans and others of us might expel the Kentucky hillbilly or the Louisiana oil-worker or the evangelist white Christian who can't bear to sell gay men a cake for their wedding. What we know as analysts is that there are histories behind these expulsions from our subjective constellations of what we consider *we*.

In an atmosphere of atomization, where the floor seems to liquefy, anxiety rules the day, and we manufacture safety by expelling the other into precarity. The problem is that this construction of safety on the backs of the precarious other creates in itself a precarious body politic, a brittle entity subject to rupture under pressure. And this is indeed what we have been witnessing in this election cycle, most dramatically in the convulsions shaking the Republican Party. The chickens, as they say, are coming home to roost.



The seeds were being planted, perhaps, as early as the time when my family immigrated to the US. The Republican Party's infamous southern strategy may have successfully capitalized on white racial anxieties in the aftermath of civil rights gains and the dismantling of Jim Crow laws, but it did so at a great cost to itself. Some four decades later, Ken Mehlman, elected to the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee in 2005, addressed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to apologize: "Some Republicans gave up on winning the African-American vote, looking the other way or trying to benefit politically from racial polarization... I am here as Republican chairman to tell you we were wrong."

[http://archive.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2005/07/15/gop\\_ignored\\_bla](http://archive.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2005/07/15/gop_ignored_bla)

ck vote chairman says/) Robert Kagan, co-founder of the neoconservative Project for the New American Century and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, in a scathing op-ed piece for the Washington Post written in February, cites the Republican party's "wild obstructionism," its "accommodation to and exploitation of bigotry," and its Obama hatred, which he calls "a racially tinged derangement syndrome":

Let's be clear: Trump is no fluke. Nor is he hijacking the Republican Party or the conservative movement, if there is such a thing. He is, rather, the party's creation, its Frankenstein's monster, brought to life by the party, fed by the party and now made strong enough to destroy its maker.

([https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-the-gops-frankenstein-monster-now-hes-strong-enough-to-destroy-the-party/2016/02/25/3e443f28-dbc1-11e5-925f-1d10062cc82d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3ee6aac500d5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trump-is-the-gops-frankenstein-monster-now-hes-strong-enough-to-destroy-the-party/2016/02/25/3e443f28-dbc1-11e5-925f-1d10062cc82d_story.html?utm_term=.3ee6aac500d5))



What we have been witnessing in the past couple of weeks is nothing short of this destruction. In a kind of feeding frenzy, the Republican party cannibalized its most promising candidates in the primaries, and has been fretting obsessively with what it has wrought since. For a liberal Democrat like myself, *schadenfreude* has its own intoxicating rewards, and it takes more than a little psychological work on my part to recognize it as the pernicious symptom of my own desire to exile difference. Psychotherapists are left leaning; that hardly makes us immune to the kind of rounding of the wagons and exclusion of otherness I am describing as a defense against the challenges of liquid modernity. It's all too easy to construct a knowing *we* that establishes itself as supposedly obvious, thereby

preempting dialogue with the opposing side. A gay patient born and raised in the south tells me that it has become impossible to talk politics with mother, who still lives there; it is too painful, there is no way to bridge the gap. He and I glide between the personal pain of this separation and our social malaise as a nation, that we cannot talk with one another. Isolated in our media-amplified echo chambers, we can hear little but ourselves.

It is disturbing, the cold comfort one can find in the eloquence of James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, whose words, written in 1963, could serve just as well for ours:

Freedom is hard to bear. It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms, but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation. We are controlled here by our confusion, far more than we know, and the American dream has therefore become something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the private, domestic, and international levels. Privately, we cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; domestically, we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what goes on in our country; and, internationally, for many millions of people, we are an unmitigated disaster.

Perhaps, with a sad smile, we can say it's only human nature: in the unprecedented flux of liquid modernity, when what we thought we could count on seems to melt away, we instinctively turn inwards, afraid of the catastrophic change that will save us from the catastrophe. A great deal is being laid bare in this election, and we are rightly troubled - I only hope we do not seal over this

trouble too quickly, that we have the stamina to keep the questions open. Because doing the hard work of mending the spiritual state of our nation — as Baldwin might put it — might begin with not too readily assuming that *we* actually know who *we* are.



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