

# Donald Trump and the Birth of a Planetary Culture

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## Introduction

The election of Donald Trump provides a window into our changing world. His genius as a cultural phenomenon is that he allows us to see where we have come from and also to clarify where we want to go. To be sure, his election was not guaranteed. Trump's campaign was marred by scandals of his own making. Yet he was helped by 6 years of committed gerrymandering of political boundaries by the republicans<sup>1</sup>. Russian hackers, with the help of Wikileaks, compromised Clinton's credibility with swing voters. FBI chief Comey further undermined Clinton at the crucial time. The mainstream media gave Trump free coverage and then fake news aided by Facebook worked in his favor. And an over-confident Clinton campaign was lackadaisical and poorly run (Robb, 2016). If any one of these factors had gone the other way, we could have seen a Clinton presidency, and Trump would have been a historical footnote. His unconventional campaign, use of Twitter, and salesman-like meme hacking would have been seen as novel but not substantial.

As it stands, the popular candidate Clinton (who won approximately 3 million more votes than Trump) is not the elected president, and Trump's election, which seemingly came out of nowhere, now needs to be understood.

This essay analyzes Trump from the point of view of cultural politics, and in particular sees Trump as a transition milestone from empire to pluralist-planetary culture. The essay draws upon the cultural theory and perspective of William Irwin Thompson (1984), and employs elements of Inayatullah's (2008) Six Pillars methodology, through a movement across four dimensions, the used future, the dominant vision, the disowned future and the integrated future.

The used future is Trump's return to the 1950s, a type of social psychosis where he and his followers retreat into nostalgia and amputate themselves off from science and the reality of a dramatically changing world, i.e. the rise of East Asia, digitalization, climate change, etc. The dominant vision that has been guiding the country is neoliberal empire and what Trump and his supporters are reacting to, for good reasons: West coast style capitalist led multi-culturalism challenging the maintenance of mainstream white culture, and global capitalism eviscerating the working base of heartland USA. The disowned future is neoliberalism's shadow, what it denies: tradition, de-militarization, economic stability, social fabric, a moral base. Finally, drawing upon Thompson's argument that the emergent planetary culture is one where all oppositional polarities in the global system need to be held as a diverse ecology, an integration between the dominant neoliberal vision and its disowned future is explored and elaborated.

## Trump's Used future

A used future, according to Inayatullah (2008, p.5), is an "image of the future unconsciously borrowed from someone else." In the case of Trump, it is a longing for a past that is gone, and a desire to recreate

that past. That image is of a United States which is culturally homogenous, with white culture and white people as dominant. In this essay I refer to this as “ethno-nationalism”. There are also strong elements of patriarchy, with a strong father authoritarianism driven by fear<sup>2</sup> and derision toward strong and confident women (though he will accept meek and compliant women). The ethno-nationalism he embodies is toward a USA that has a dominant white core with strong domestic industry and is protected from contamination from outsiders through walls, immigration bans and trade barriers.

Understanding what is at play here requires a segue into a discussion on empire. Thompson contrasts two archetypal forms of empire. In the Persian model of empire, the empire is the territory of the subjected. This is to say that as an empire expands, the power of the mobilizing ethnic group driving the empire expands (whether it be Persian, Han, or Anglo-English), while the power of the subjected diminishes. By contrast, in the Roman model of empire, subjects of lands conquered could become citizens. In one instance, large portions of the state of Gaul (today’s France) were granted Roman citizenship through a single law (the *Lex Roscia*). In its history, with various stops and starts, the US has mostly followed the Roman model. Thus Thompson writes:

*American [US] empire sought to absorb civilizations into its multicultural identity. With the Marshall Plan, and the Post War Bretton Woods dollar economy, it first absorbed Western Europe. Now it is trying to show that Islamic Civilization can also become American. The Ummah and the oil barrel can both live in peace in a new expanded “us”.... This multi-cultural America is what Trump wishes to eliminate in his nativistic movement of a return to White Protestant America... Paradoxically, Trump’s vision is isomorphic to the Han Chinese vision of empire and identity in which China seeks to shut out the incursions of the world wide web. (Thompson, 2016).*

The modern nation state in its European manifestation constructed a sense of belonging around a dominant ethnicity. This cultural core was both constructed as per an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991) and was also organic and evolutionary in its development, as per the linguistic and sociological similarities that people within the geography shared. States like England and France required the construction of national languages through standardization or consolidation. Later states (such as Italy and Germany) were formed from many small kingdoms with linguistic similarities. The constructed and organic nature of ethnicity was wedded to the development of the nation state, ethno-nationalism was born.

The founding of the US, differed in history and conditions. There were immigrants from across Europe, with different languages and cultural backgrounds. The framers of the constitution drew upon a Roman model of statehood and citizenship. The Faustian bargain of political incorporation is the need for a liberalist cultural policy<sup>3</sup>. Over time the idea of “Whiteness” and Christian White American emerged as an assimilatory category, a consolidation of 20th century American values. Thus a fundamental tension has existed at the heart of the US project. On one hand the expression of a dominant and consolidated ethno-nationalism more reminiscent of European nations, versus a Roman imperial model of political incorporation that does not require cultural conformity.

Thus, liberalism in the US is of an imperial tone, and more likely to express a rupture from cultural foundations (e.g. from European Protestant Christianity to multicultural LGBT rights). While liberalism in Europe is of an ethno-nationalist tone, everyone has rights but also needs to play by the tacitly agreed upon cultural rules (e.g. in France take off your hijab and no burkinis unless you are a Catholic nun, in which case it is fine<sup>4</sup>).

Trump’s vision is a used future because it recycles the nativist ethno-nationalism of the yellow peril, fear of Mexicans and multi-culturalism - rejecting Martin Luther King, the planetary imaginaire of Star Trek, the women’s rights movement and the Imperial (pluralist) legacy of the US republic. In place of this is a Fortress America where fearful white men can regain some pride and

privilege sheltered from a world they feel is slipping from their grasp. Or as Thompson argues:

*The coasts express a planetary cultural awareness, but the heartland – from Montana down to Texas, the Midwest and the Deep South – express nativist values. It is ironic that this nativism has found its leader with an elderly man showing the signs of the onset of senile dementia who is a billionaire and a New Yorker... Trump's new nativistic movement has emerged because it is really about multi-culturalism versus White Protestant America. (Thompson, 2016).*

## **The Dominant Vision, Neoliberalism**

Thompson's distinction between Persian versus Roman models of empire helps us to rethink the dominant vision of the last 35 years, neoliberalism. The liberalism that was the basis for the civil rights movement, women's rights movement, queer and lesbian movements from the 50s to the 70s, was eclipsed by a new liberalism - neoliberalism. This began as an economic prescription (e.g. the Washington Consensus) in the 80s and 90s, then morphed into militarized neoliberal globalization (Ramos, 2010) and shock doctrine (Klein, 2007) from the turn of the century to the present. In these three movements can be seen core processes challenging the constructed white ethno-nationalism of America. Social movements from the 50s to 70s challenged the christian white cultural norm (from Jazz to Blaxploitation, spiritual counter culture to queer rights). Regan's neoliberalism began the evisceration of the white industrial working class and the immigration of talented or rich non-whites. Militarized globalization incorporated diaspora communities from nations participating in globalization, or which were disciplined for not participating properly (Iraq). All three processes drove multi-culturalism, challenged the normative stability of a white America, and paved the way for cultural hybridity. Neoliberal empire thus drives the creation of hybridity from the foment of its cosmopolitan incorporations - pluralism is built in just as nativism is.

Its most advanced stage is West (and East) Coast cosmopolitan capitalism. In California we see tech giants vacuuming up global talent in an innovation accelerator that drives global economic disruption. People are color blind, globally minded, science driven and hyper capitalist. California and the west coast more generally represents the triumph of neoliberal empire. If you can code for Facebook, Apple or Google you may become a citizen of the republic. If no-one knew any better in the 1970s, Facebook' workspace today would have easily been mistaken for the Star Ship Enterprise. Yet, if the west coast tech economy had to rely on the white American heartland for its brains and talent, it would be a shipwreck. This is an uncomfortable truth for white America. These contradictions between ethno-nationalism and neoliberal empire are at the heart of Trump's heartland popularity.

Obama was elected as president in 2008 by a coalition that cut across ethnic and identity boundaries. A rainbow coalition of white women, gays and lesbians, blacks, latinos and left-liberals elected him and made him an icon of multicultural power. Because Obama himself was a prismatic reflection of multicultural empire, he connected with people across the themes he embodied. This infuriated the Republican party and many whites around the country. It was not that his policies were Democratic policies, actually has policies abroad and at home could have easily been construed as Republican ones. It was that he was not white, he was a colored man that represented a new political construction that did not substantively require white men. Trump led the charge in the birther movement, trying to prove that Obama was born abroad. Given the reverence that is ordinarily reserved for the president and his office, the disrespect of Obama by republicans was unprecedented, who spent a good part of his presidency trying to make his life hell. Obama, by virtue of being Commander in Chief, was a direct threat and contradiction to latent sentiments

of White Supremacy and ethno-nationalism. Yet Obama, in his hybridity, was but a loyal child of Empire.

## A Personal Digression

Growing up in California, my own personal reflections factor into my analysis. My best friend in school was named Ken Nakamura, and I was practically part of their family growing up. His mom was of Irish-Spanish background. His father, a Japanese American originally from Horoshima, experienced life in a US internment camp during World War Two. Among many other things, they used to take me to Hawaiian (fire) dancing festivals. My other good friends were Hungarian (Leslie), Guatemalan (Ivan), German-American (Danny), Caucasian-Jewish (Sean) and many others from many other backgrounds.

While my parents, following in the footsteps of the civil rights movement, taught me to be proud of being “Mexican-American”, articulating this to a wider circle was complicated. First, many of my Mexican-American peers would completely deny being Mexican-American, referring to themselves as either Spanish or American. There was a cringe association with either being Mexican or indigenous or both. Secondly, when referring to yourself as Mexican-American to whites, there would be confusion or aversion to the term. “But aren’t you American?” they might ask. Identifying as American was an expression of solidarity and belonging, while Mexican-American was some strange hybrid notion that didn’t register well in the white American cultural frame I grew up in (possible betrayal). I even had a friend who got slightly upset that I referred to myself as Mexican-American, as he wanted me to identify as white, “you consider yourself white, no?” . I tried to explain to him that a) my parents came from Mexico, b) I grew up speaking Spanish and eating Menudo, and 3) Mexicans in the US were segregated till the 1940s and heavily discriminated against until the 1970s, and have a distinct history and historical memory. He understood intellectually but I could tell he was disappointed.

The reason for divulging this is to paint a picture of the tension between the US as a multicultural empire and also the latent strains of ethno-nationalism. Yes whites were on the top of the pecking order. Non-whites suffered a subtle loss of esteem. Whites were also sometimes uncomfortable with hybridity. Yet empire’s production of culture continued to generate new combinations of multicultural community and new hybridities. Both participating in some white American cultural foundations and at the same time transforming it beyond what it is. Mexican-American as an identity prefigured America’s new hybridity – I was at once indigenous, Mexican and also a citizen of empire – an “American”.

## The Disowned Future, Shadow of Neoliberal Empire

The shadow of neoliberal empire, what neoliberalism disowns and pushes away, sowed the seeds for the rise of Trump and the white American ethno-nationalist backlash. Yet it also holds the secret to transforming the crisis, and building a pluralist-planetary culture.

**The Disowned Future of Neoliberal Empire**  
 The US working class  
 De-militarization  
 Traditional morality  
 “Essence” or “how things are”  
 Ecological integrity

First and foremost neoliberal empire disowned the interests of the US working class. First through economic globalization driven de-industrialization in the 80s and 90s, but also through a series of financialization led crises (the Global Economic Crisis of 2008 just being the most severe) that devastated livelihoods and generated new levels of precarity. Obama chose to appoint economic advisors from Wall Street that rescued the banks, but that made few improvements for main street USA, and with few structural changes to the financial regulation system. This disowned future continues through the rise of automation and artificial intelligence, which is expected to wipe out yet more jobs (Halal et al., 2016). Meanwhile most large US corporations offshore their profits to avoid paying US taxes, further limiting the government's ability to reinvest in social transition (Chew, 2016).

The second disowned future is de-militarization (hence global peace). After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the US had a historic opportunity to scale back its military budget and operations globally. Instead it continued down the path of military over extension, increasing its budget and the intensity of its operations (Johnson, 2004). The US - Reagan with General Zia - helped create the mujahideen, but then experienced blowback through 9/11. This was followed by ill conceived and failed interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead of a policy off de-escalation, the US military industrial complex has fed off the perception of enemies, increasing its size and number of interventions, further fueling hostility.

The third aspect of the disowned future is a traditional morality. According to Thompson liberalism creates its counter force, reactionaries, which attempt to roll back change and re-establish traditional or conservative cultural arrangements (Thompson, 1985, p.51). Because liberalism is an affirmation of human liberty, its trajectory is to rupture from any cultural arrangement which does not accept its positive freedom. Gays and lesbians will be free from discrimination. Discrimination based on color of skin will end. For sure, liberalism has its own moral philosophy, but as it systematically demolishes laws and practices that are antithetical to it, it drives a counter movement of people seeking the continuity of traditional morality (whether or not this morality can withstand a philosophical examination of ethics).

The fourth disownment, more abstract, is “essence” or “how things are”. Neoliberal empire entails a radical re-patterning, through the steady entrenchment of multi-culturalism as the norm. This gradually de-centers the culture from constructed ethno-nationalist origins (whiteness) and drives the creation of hybrid culture. First whites eat Chinese food, later they have Chinese friends, and finally they marry Chinese people and finally create hybrid offspring.

For the cultural purists there is nowhere to hide, there is no way out. In neoliberal empire everyone miscegenates identities, e.g. the hipster mishmash, losing a core essence from the culture they came from, becoming algorithmically re-patterned by silicon valley dating apps. Thus cults of purity, the enemy of hybrid empire, (ISIS, North Korea), become the USA's antithesis, its enemy. But the cosmopolitan hybridity of empire will also create the purists within, hence the birther movement and the emotional need to have a white man in the white house. Whether of not one can point to and find an essence, Trump and his supporters will try and create it.

The shadow of neoliberalism is a large one, a dark globalism. Tax havens, disruptive economic globalization, cultural disintegration, an overstretched military, endless disruption – indeed “future shock”. And there are many new truths that are far too inconvenient for many in white heartland America. Climate change tells them they need to collaborate internationally and stop driving their fossil fuel cars so much. Migration shifts and demographic changes in the US tell them they will no longer be a majority. Corporate influence in Washington tells them their system has been captured. Science tells them there is no such thing as race, they are not “white people”. Global economic change tells them the US is slipping in stature. Failed military interventions tell them they cannot get the enemy. The success formula for a large group of once powerful people is being actively negated.



This has led to social psychosis – a condition where a whole population of people have checked out of consensual reality (as constructed through mainstream news and science). They have begun to create a world of their own, through fake news and alternative facts. The swan song of White Supremacy is its senility. And they have found their demagogue to help them shape this new world of fantasy.

## Toward a Pluralist Planetary Culture

The approach in this essay follows Inayatullah's (2008) futures concept that the dominant self and its vision must work with its shadow, and through this dialogic engagement transformation can happen. The dominant vision has been neoliberalism. It has spawned a high tech revolution, a multi-cultural and hybrid America and myriad intricate connections around the world. Yet its shadows are like a great banquet of specters, feasting on the souls of a thousand repressed spirits. For Greens its shadow is runaway growth and environmental crisis. For the left its shadow is the ruthless disruption of working people's economic and social security. For the Christian right its shadow is the loss of a moral code. And for still others there are other shadows, other disownments. In this way, visions for pluralist planetization cannot be constructed by denying the shadow. Writes Thompson:

*The EU bullied Greece and the neoliberals – who define culture only in terms of a theory of markets of rational self-interested individuals – enforced economic austerity rather than Keynesian public investments. Yes, there is an element of anti-immigration among the working classes, but that is because the corporate managers dump cheap labor into their communities to break up labor unions, and then retreat behind their gated communities to avoid the social consequences. Planetization and Nativism are entwined forces. (Thompson, 2016)*

To conclude this essay, the integration of the dominant vision and the disowned future is considered next through some experimental ideas.

### The inside view

The view from within the US may require a new relationship to culture that can transcend the culture wars. Purists may need to begin to see the God in the hybrids, coastal elites and urban liberals. Likewise, hybrids, coastal elites and urban liberals perhaps need to be less condescending, and less convinced that they are the evolutionary edge of history. Perhaps they are at the cutting edge but the metaphor of the knife is perfect - it cuts both ways. Before Kurtzweil's singularity was the original singularity that rendered all of us living star dust of an equal age.

Yet this may be too optimistic. Fundamentalists are not inclined to accept compromises or to see their enemies as projections of the self. Urban cosmopolitans may not want to share power with those they consider under-educated. Another path may be to construct a new federalism. The existing federalism requires a constant culture war waged through political arenas that determines how people can live as a whole nation. What if a neo-federalism allowed states with their voting constituencies to determine unique paths? California could have its Star Trek-like low to hi-tech cosmopolitanism and teach evolutionary quantum spirituality in its schools, while Oklahoma could focus on traditional modes of production and teach the Old Testament. As in an open space conference, people would vote with their feet. The US would shift from its culture wars where each group tried to set the template for the whole nation to an ecology of cultures. But the cosmopolitans and cultural purists would have their own heartlands and homelands.

Economically, the shadow of neo-liberalism's hyper innovation and financialized profit maximization needs to square with people's needs for economic security. This requires that the

relentless pace of innovation that constantly disrupts people's stability, livelihoods and culture be counterbalanced by real social support, life long educational opportunities, community, to allow transitional processes. Economic creative destruction needs a counter weight in enduring protection. This could be through the model of a Partner State (Orsi, 2009; Bauwens, 2012) where the state facilitates development through a universal basic income, cosmo-localized production (Ramos 2016) and the design global manufacture local model (Kostakis et al., 2015), peer to peer support and sharing economy systems. This would entail a shift from capital concentrated disruptive innovation to distributed and socialized transformative innovation.

### **The outside view**

From the outside view, the export of American economic developmentalism has created as many if not more problems than it solved, from the negative impact of structural adjustment programs to a myriad of dependency relationships. What were disowned were the diverse needs for the world's myriad cultures that required support without heavy handed imposition of a one size fits all and often structurally violent integration into a US led global economy. Better is less arrogant and self assured American economic evangelism and a more humble approach that uses US expertise depending on diverse needs.

An outside view also favors a reduction in the geopolitical power of the US. If shadows include US exceptionalism, military adventurism / over-extension, and a century of clandestine CIA interventions, US geo-political power would need to be reconceived in a planetary cultural context. It might include using US muscle to collaboratively enforce intelligent global agreements on addressing climate change, shutting down tax haven, and curtailing the power of organized crime. It would also entail a dramatic scaling back of US overseas military operations and a more globally transparent approach to pursuing US interests. If Johan Galtung is right, and the US is on the cusp of an economic collapse (Galtung, 2009), such a realignment will have its window of opportunity. The US needs to be enfolded into a collaborative and binding system of planetary stewardship. As Thompson argues: "some form of compensatory cantonization will need to be part of the process of planetization" (Thompson, 2016).

### **The Road Ahead**

A new planetary culture and worldview needs to be created, typified by our understanding that we are co-journeymers on a single planet and hence are co-responsible for protecting and nurturing a shared commons. There is no longer a "somewhere" else to put our trash, or even the pollution of our bad behavior, such as the economic exploitation of people, because we all have to live with their effects in the end. In the words of William Irwin Thompson:

*If we make such things as Agent Orange or plutonium, they are simply not going to go away, for there is no way in which to put them. If we force animals into concentration camps in feed lots, we will become sick from the antibiotics with which we inject them; if we force nature into mono-crop agribusiness, we will become sprayed by our own pesticides; if we move into genetic engineering, we'll have genetic pollution; if we develop genetic engineering into evolutionary engineering, we will have evolutionary pollution. Industrial civilization never seems to learn, from DDT or thalidomide, plutonium or dioxin; catastrophe is not an accidental by-product of an otherwise good system of progress and control; catastrophe is an ecology's response to being treated in an industrial manner.... Precisely because pollution cannot go away, we must generate only those kinds of pollution we can live with. Precisely because enemies won't go away, for the fundamentalists' process of inciting hate only creates enemies without end, we have no choice but to love*

*our enemies. The enantiomorphic polity of the future must have capitalists and socialists, Israelis and Palestinians, Bahais and Shiites, evengelicals and Episcopalians. (Thompson, 1985, pp.140-141)*

If we are able to create and nurture planetary culture, then we will be able to solve our global challenges collaboratively, establish respect for diversity as the norm, supercharge scientific, artistic and humanist collaboration across borders, and care for the poor and marginalized of the planet. If we continue to practice empire with its shadow, or worse, fall into ethno-nationalist fortresses, we will struggle to address our global challenges, and cut ourselves off from the higher possibilities of our humanness.

When a new being is brought into the Earth, this can also entails violent convulsions and agony. The challenge being faced is the backlash of ethno-nationalism, which seeks to retreat into a fantasy kingdom where the privileges and security of a select group can be guarded, and which wants to enforce a narrow spectrum of acceptable norms. Donald Trump is part of this convulsion. The opportunity we have is to transform the pathologies of neoliberal globalization that are driving reactionary ethno-nationalism, so that we can create a planetary culture in which everyone feels secure, privileged (in a transformed sense), and which allows an ecology of diverse cultures and ethnic groups and emergent identities to not only co-exist but to use their differences as a transformational resource.

While we need difference and diversity, people practicing their cultures, a return to ethno-nationalism is neither a viable path for the US nor for humanity. We have experienced enough war, dis-integration and exploitation through the delusions of “race” (or related exclusivities) to know this. Even for nations with strong ethnic constructions which insist on cultural assimilation, the contradictions and the costs are high. Yet empire, with its incorporative and pluralistic logic itself has its shadow, loyalty to the state and the creation of hierarchies – hence exploitation of peripheries by the core. The current turn toward ethno-nationalism is a direct result of empire’s shadow, the core of the empire (the neoliberal elite) preying on the fortunes of the periphery within empire (heartland USA). There is, however, a third path, the construction of diverse trans-national / global forms of power that are capable of enacting mutualized systems for the planetary common good. As global citizens, our challenge is to participate fully in addressing the global issues we all have a stake in, to practice governance of our shared commons. To address Trumpian ethno-nationalism, we need to create an ethos for the planetary commons – and develop the systems, cultures and narratives that allow all people to thrive within our Earth community.

## Notes

1. [http://www.salon.com/2016/06/05/the\\_gop\\_screwed\\_themselves\\_the\\_brilliant\\_gerrymander\\_that\\_gave\\_republicans\\_the\\_congress\\_and\\_created\\_donald\\_trump/](http://www.salon.com/2016/06/05/the_gop_screwed_themselves_the_brilliant_gerrymander_that_gave_republicans_the_congress_and_created_donald_trump/)
2. See: <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>
3. For example the prevalence of Germans and German speakers, see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_language\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_language_in_the_United_States)
4. For an example of this see: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-25/burkiniban-twitter-shares-photos-of-nuns-on-beaches-in-protest/7783464>



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