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American Apocalypse(s): Nuclear Imaginaries and the Reinvention of Modern America

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Lee Herrmann

"Pay For My Candy, {Non-White Person}, or I'll Kick Your Ass": Trump, *Rocky*, and Representations of White American Identity

The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States of America and the rhetoric of his administration with regard to national identity has been met with a certain surprise, even dismay, by some scholars and pundits of American culture, as if a mirror, in which one had always seen a reflection of a morally authoritative Henry Fonda, were suddenly to reflect an angrily dyspeptic Donald Duck.[1] Others have projected a variety of comparative representations on President Trump, including, perhaps curiously, the fictional character Rocky Balboa as in the YouTube video with the President's head placed on Rocky's body ("Trump Rocky"). The comparison, or invocation, is not merely created and uploaded by individuals in the abstract world of digital media but is popular enough to be sold as a t-shirt in four varieties by the veteran-run company American As Fuck; it is a representation, therefore, with a certain cash value and a physical identity, an idea made real. People produce and consume this representation, materially promoting a specific image of the President as a brand, a representation that they also "buy" in the sense that they believe it and identify with it. Although the superficial valences of masculine power and victory may seem sufficient to validate the comparison, a deeper reading of the original cinematic texts and their metatextual roots and ramifications reveals how Trump and Rocky create white American identity through historical continuities of cultural and political representation.

This paper insists on a critical reading of United States history and culture as structurally white supremacist, following, among others, philosopher Charles W. Mills and sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*; Mills, "White Supremacy" and

Blackness Visible), and following the latter particularly in his construction of the "new racism" as "color-blind racism," where discursive racialization is no longer explicit but implicit, referential through coded narratives (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* 213). Likewise, herein one prefers to avoid the emphasis on "actors' views as individual psychological dispositions," in favor of an analysis of the more broadly shared socio-political discourse of "ideological racism" (2-3). This ideology, white supremacy, which is a fundamental historical feature of what may be called the modern world-system (see Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 7, 9; Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System (I)* 88 n68, and *The Modern World-System (III)* 144-46, 145 n86; Rodney, 85, 104), should be thought of as a structured and structuring structure that perpetuates individual dispositions, to apply the vocabulary of Pierre Bourdieu, as Bonilla-Silva himself has in referring to a "white habitus [...] that shapes whites' cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic reading..." (Bourdieu 5; Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 146, 164 n15). Kristen Myers, Amanda Lewis, and Charles Gallagher have interpreted collections of individual interview statements to identify shared discursive strategies that express the features of this new racism without racists, and this paper will examine some intertextual commonalities in this discourse of the white American habitus.

The "communicative interaction" that Bonilla-Silva identifies as producing and reproducing ideology produces and reproduces specific discursive continuities and practical activities. The "rearticulation of some practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period" (Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists* 11, 26) that are part of his analysis have come with a discourse comparable to older, more direct expressions of racism, to the point that it has been suggested that Trump's slogan really should be understood as Make American White Again (Boag n. pag.). One such rearticulated practice, the increase in racist paramilitaries' activity under the Trump administration (Chen n. pag.), has come with a public language of white resentment where race and class intertwine in representation and self-representation, reinforcing the commonplace observation that his election was a white backlash to the presidency of Barack Obama – a practice and a discourse historically consistent with the previous political and cultural reactions to black access to political, social, and economic resources that

overlapped with surges of violence in the name of white security following Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement.

At the crudest level, this discourse of white habitus revolves around poles of violence and economic power, as expressed by President Trump in his commentary on the mooted border wall between the USA and Mexico, where campaign promises that Mexicans will pay for the wall meet Thanksgiving Day threats that military personnel will summarily execute undocumented migrants (Diamond and Sullivan n. pag.; Qiu n. pag.). In a more official context, in 2018 the Trump administration altered the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services office's mission statement to stress "adjudicating [. . .] benefits" and "protecting Americans" through "securing the Homeland [*sic*]" (Cissna n. pag.), highlighting the same poles of economic resource control and violent exclusion in more anodyne language. This anti-immigrant political line is a result of the changed demographics of immigration, which threatens white political and economic supremacy through the increasing Hispanic-Latino-Chicano population, as Bonilla-Silva argues, most of whom are not identified as white and do not identify themselves as white ("'The New Racism'" 279-281). Despite the lack of explicit racist invective, the congruity between Trump's tweets and the administration's boilerplate redefines a particularly white American identity in political and cultural speech with a specific shift that racializes the new immigrant.

In deleting the phrase celebrating "America's promise as a nation of immigrants" (qtd. in Arthur n. pag.), the new USCIS mission statement turns away from one of the major discourse conventions characteristic of political and cultural orthodoxy, and thus of the racialized social system, for over a half-century. Since Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy published *A Nation of Immigrants* in 1958, that "new orthodoxy," as Francis Fitzgerald called it, very quickly supplanted the universalist "melting pot" ideology of modern socio-cultural homogenization as presented by postwar sociologists like Talcott Parsons, a new way of thinking helped along by state-functionary academic Daniel Moynihan's formulation of an ethnic "mosaic" in 1963. That definition of American identity was followed by the 1965 government-policy social-scientific study known as the Moynihan Report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National

Action," which claimed that black American families were "a tangle of pathology" (because they were "matriarchal" and "disorganized," among other things). Such ideological guidebooks kicked off what has been called the white-ethnic revival, analyzed by Matthew Frye Jacobson, whereby European-origin ethnicities celebrated their inclusion in the white mainstream of American Cold War cultural and political representation through the exclusion of African Americans. "The immigrant saga," as he points out, "supplied the normative version of the family, against which the 'pathologies' of Moynihan's black family might be highlighted"; the inverse proposition is also true: white ethnics became normed as Americans through the characteristics they projected onto the black American other (Jacobson 2-7; 12; 41; 204).

Culturally, the use of a white-imagined representation of blackness as a foil that defined an inclusive normative whiteness reaches back to antebellum minstrelsy, wherein an urban lower class, most visibly the New York's Irish working class audience, watched and participated in white actors' blackface performances. The grotesques of so-called "Ethiopian" dances and skits played a vital role in that audience's, and later audiences', identity construction as white Americans: T. D. Rice, the originator of the "Jim Crow" character and song, was the most profitable draw to the Bowery Theater in the first part of the nineteenth century. The fundamental communicative interaction of the form can be seen in a nostalgic remembrance of Rice's first blackface performance around 1830, that described the peak of the evening's entertainment, which produced "convulsive merriment" at the onstage appearance of a real black American, stripped of his possessions, begging Rice to return his clothes, which had been taken away by the performer for his costume (Lott 19; Rice 7-10). The performative fiction of Jim Crow, as structuring structure, gave its name to the later juridically codified practice of exclusion and segregation of black Americans in social, economic, and political life. The intertextual iconographic codes and metatextual communicative interactions that reify whiteness through violence and economic control appear more literally in an 1859 one-act minstrel play for bourgeois home performance in which a group of uninvited white ethnics finalize and justify their inclusion in a white Anglo-American social event by uniting and chasing out the

already-present black(face) American servant, with clearly implied violent consequences should they catch him (White) – an immigrant saga played at home, titled "The Hop of Fashion."

A psychologist has identified this minstrel dynamic in racialized discourse in sport cinema, describing it as the "dependence on the black other for the construction of white identity" (Free 27), which brings us to the Italian Stallion. Reading *Rocky* and *Rocky II* as narratives of resurgent white power, Matthew Jacobson uses the films to link the political and cultural discourse conventions that institutionalized the "nation of immigrants" narrative. He further describes how the films' depiction of white grievance encapsulates neoconservative discourse tropes. By extending Jacobson's reading of these films and examining popular responses to them, the discursive features that constitute *Rocky* as a representation of American identity reveal historical constants of white supremacy as a structured and structuring confluence of political and cultural speech. Trumpian anti-immigrant rhetoric conforms to the most fundamental elements of the *Rocky* films' racial triumphalism, with its roots in the nineteenth century, and that helps explain Trump's successful communicative interaction with the electorate in rearticulating a white nativist American identity.

In the first Rocky film, when the African American antagonist Apollo Creed enters the ring to begin the climactic fight scene, his American-flag trunks and George Washington and Uncle Sam costumes, in having a black American metaphorically represent the United States, signify that "the deck has been reshuffled since the 1960s and now the Apollo Creeds of the world hold all the social power" (Jacobson 108). This representation of Negro domination reinforces and historicizes itself in that the clownish black Uncle Sam is in fact a blackface minstrel conceit with a century of cultural representation. The figure is highlighted in Spike Lee's minstrel-show film *Bamboozled*, but first appeared in antebellum blackface minstrelsy as purveyor of the "stump speech" that ridiculed black political inclusion, and can be seen in late-nineteenth-century ephemera like "The Jolly Darkie Target Game," which requires players, like Rocky, to strike repeatedly a black face and mouth. A blackface Uncle Sam appears in an advertisement for prunes in the September 1941 issue of *Life* magazine, two pages after Henry Luce's celebrated "American Century"

article, paying for and framing political speech. Flag motifs and colors in decorative bunting were also ubiquitous in minstrel-show advertising, in the clothes of the blackface stereotypes but especially as the setting surrounding the drawings of the performers or performance (see the *Minstrel Poster Collection*). This discursive continuity codes the space of the film's climax more determinately than does the intratextual justification of the Philadelphia bicentennial gala: Rocky's wife Adrian's red-white-and-blue ensemble is one thing, but Creed's ridiculously oversized, floppy, flag-striped top-hat is quite another. This code also bleeds into early scenes of the sequel, where Adrian wears a red-white-and-blue scarf that marks her as the representation of the national pride that Rocky has "won" back for white America, and this motif repeats visually in the matching elastic on the championship belt that he wins at the end of *Rocky II*.

Yet the same coded space that informs the viewer of *Rocky* that he or she will be watching a classically racialized entertainment offers a dangerous and disturbing antagonist, who fights back. The way the nationalist imagery is subverted by Weathers's blackness and his performance as a cocky fighter reads in this context as anti-American, an insult to the flag, and the way his punches pulp Rocky's face increases the affect of white victimization communicated to the audience. This imagery is a transgressive and often forbidden imagery: in 1868 a point of white grievance had been a real-life stump speech where a Radical candidate had told a group of former slaves that they could now punch back if a white man punched them ("Louisiana Contested Elections" part 2, 92); in 1909 the defeat of white champion Tommy Burns by black challenger Jack Johnson led to the censoring of all future films of the black pugilist (Kendrick 36). Rocky does get the last blow in, however, and Creed is saved by the bell, making the final image of violence one of white domination and vindication if not entirely black defeat or humiliation. The virtuous white working-class immigrant does not technically win the match – indeed, there is a suggestion that he was robbed of victory in an unjust "handout" to his black antagonist – but he has gained back enough self-respect after going the full fifteen rounds so that he might possess his red-white-and-blue woman, conveyed by his climactic bellowing of her name and her scurrying to his side.

The sequel closes the redemptive loop with Rocky's victory and by

returning to the classic structure of narrative regeneration identified by Richard Slotkin in his seminal work, *Regeneration through Violence*. The challenger must "fight the enemy on his own terms and in his own manner, becoming in the process a reflection or double of his dark opponent" (Slotkin 563). The champ is more naturally gifted and technically superior, so the white underdog, at greater personal physical risk and through greater personal tragedy, must learn his ways and beat him through technique: by training harder, with true grit, and by training smarter, with a strategy. In *Rocky I*, *II*, and *III*, in keeping with traditionally racist imagery of the black body going back to Reconstruction, the black athlete is imagined as physically superior by nature, not by dint of practice and hard work, but as gifted, not self-made; in contrast, white athletes are characterized by "fortitude, intelligence, moral character, coachability, and good organization," as argued by a sociology of sports textbook (Coakley, qtd. in Ferber 20). When Balboa finally wins the championship, for example, it is through his strategic shift to his left hand at the end of the fight, brought about through his intelligence and coachability, but also through his fortitude and character, as he forces himself to his feet while Creed falters.

However, the display of these virtues reifies a distinctly ethnic whiteness. He is "a greasy-fast Italian monster," or "a greasy-fast, two-hundred-pound Italian titan," representing "his people" in the ring. In the first film, Rocky was a loner, running alone through the old neighborhood, characterized by trash and burning oil drums; in the second his highlighted ethnicity becomes a public identity, as he is joined by hundreds of children who run behind him, a scene helpfully coded for the viewer by receding flags running down the street behind the foregrounded Rocky and the mass of kids following him. First, he runs through a neighborhood market as in the original film, now free of signifiers of urban decay but marked by fluttering American flags; then, the children on the streets in the background drop what they are doing to run in his wake inside a virtual tunnel of flags, first Old Glory, and then an international array (part of the real landscape of Philadelphia), offering the viewer the clearest possible visual metaphor of the white ethnic as the representative of the nation of immigrants. *Rocky II* reaches its climax with Apollo Creed's bloody-faced collapse, semiotically linking the political orthodoxy of free-white-immigrant American identity

to the violent domination of African Americans; through that violence, this identity is thus confirmed in victory.

The immediate cultural consecration enjoyed by *Rocky* was matched by a Supreme Court decision that equally consecrated the neoconservative political line, ignoring the real history of white supremacist violence and economic exploitation and claiming that reparative government outreach oppressed whites. Norman Podhoretz had begun complaining about Negro domination in 1963 (Jacobson 193), even before the Voting Rights Act was passed, but the Court signaled the change in political line with the Bakke decision in 1976, the same year in which *Rocky* won an Oscar. As the Cornell University Legal Information Institute points out, the decision "began a circuitous route toward disfavoring affirmative action" ("'Affirmative Action'" n. pag.). Allan Bakke had been denied entry to the University of California at Davis Medical School despite minority applicants with similarly low scores having been admitted; the State of California ordered the University to admit Bakke and scrap their special admissions program, which set aside sixteen of one hundred openings for disadvantaged candidates, because it used race as a factor in admissions. The US Supreme Court upheld the decision, although a slim majority insisted that it was the quota system, not "race" per se, that made the admissions policy illegal. Though widely interpreted as a victory for affirmative action, the Court's actual decision only grudgingly admitted that discriminated-against minorities could have their racialized status positively evaluated by public institutions. Four justices insisted that only "color-blind" policies were appropriate, and all agreed that any policies that favored minorities could "adversely affect" whites (Regents of the University of California v. Bakke n. pag.). The Court's decision mirrored one of the major discursive continuities in the liberal and neoconservative movements by characterizing affirmative action as a response to past discrimination, not a counterweight to contemporary structural racism. As Jacobson puts it, from the Supreme Court's point of view, "Davis had unjustly created a class of victims in order to redress a prior injustice that had perhaps never even occurred" (Jacobson 99-101).

This highly politicized case, though not the real content of its adjudication of benefits, became a cultural shorthand for expressions of white

grievance, despite the victory for Bakke and the criminalization of the UC Davis special admissions program, as whites into the twenty-first century affect to believe African Americans are granted special privileges by the state or that "everything is, like, over and done with since like the sixties" (white interviewee, qtd. in Gallagher 153). The legal decision and *Rocky* merged in popular consciousness into a narrative of white victimization (Jacobson 98). The fictional boxer's working-class social position plays a key role in this narrative imaginary, just as the hardworking antebellum stage-persona of "Mose" set off the shiftless blackface stereotypes of Jim Crow and Zip Coon in defining audiences of that era as white (Lott 83-84), and just as post-World War II white-ethnic respondents set off their hard-working assimilationist family history with imagined lazy black welfare cheats (Gallagher 150). "The immigrants believed in hard work… they didn't come here for a handout," as Richard Nixon put it in his 1972 immigration museum dedication speech on Liberty Island, transparently "encoding a racial comparison," in Jacobson's words, that "redefines the legitimate national community itself to exclude the supposed welfare-mongers of the present-day ghetto" (65). Here one see the how ideas of adjudicating benefits codify a racializing discourse.

Thus, pervasive in the first two *Rocky* films is the contrast between the black champion Apollo Creed's athletic and financial success and Rocky Balboa's poverty and social marginalization. Even more granularly, it is a black foreman that lays Rocky off from his slaughterhouse job: these characters "invert the historical white-over-black power dynamics of American society" (Jacobson 101), and one must add contemporary power dynamics as well. Intratextually this world turned upside-down suggests that Creed's success is responsible for Rocky's failure simply through the protagonist/antagonist duality and through how Creed is cynically using Rocky to further his own career. Like Bakke, the virtuous hard-working white would fall victim to an upstart, or uppity, black. Creed's brash arrogance plays against Balboa's respectful self-effacement, character traits that white informants frequently condemn and extoll, respectively, when voicing grievances against black America (Gallagher 156): these onscreen roles directly refer to real-world codes of racialized conduct.

The white-victim conceit is further reinforced metatextually by the

parallel political arguments of neoconservative white-ethnic ideologues against affirmative-action and welfare programs, but it also goes back to Reconstruction, when civil rights for non-whites were characterized as coming at the cost of white progress or as bringing on the end of white civilization itself through "social equality," which meant "Negro domination" ("Louisiana Contested Elections" part 1, 542-46). This causal relationship is also communicated by the broader intertextual representations of Hollywood cinema where wealthy, powerful, and socially-acceptable black men were virtually absent, and where virtuous white ethnics in the 1970s were exploited by unscrupulous black stereotypes, as in Barry Levinson's *Avalon* (Jacobson 110-13). The conceit is replayed in 1990's *Rocky V*, where Rocky's innocent white protege Tommy Gunn is manipulated by an unscrupulous black promoter, George Washington Duke. Tommy is given an identity of marginalized white working-class poverty that contrasts with Duke's slick, corrupt wealth: the film's representative of blackness is "a vampire… living off your blood" who foments conflict between whites who should be "like brothers" (*Rocky V*).

Already by the third *Rocky* movie, only racialized relationships remain: the occasional departures from strictly racist discourse conventions in the protagonist/antagonist relationship disappear, while Carl Weathers's charisma is put to service in order to depict a "magical Negro" whose newly found affability accentuates the brutishness of the black bad-guy Clubber Lang, played by Mr. T. The contrast in the antagonists' names plainly enough demonstrates how racializing representation has been broadened and exaggerated. Lang is barely even a one-dimensional character, exhibiting only aggressive violence in threat and deed. His highly stylized "black" vocal mannerisms, one of which, "I pity the fool," became a 1980s catchphrase, are the aural equivalent to the "de," "ob," and "him am" littering white representations of black speech, which were ubiquitous in minstrel-song transcriptions and other derivative cultural forms, including a wide array of ephemera like postcards and advertisements (see Pilgrim), light fiction (Carleton 9), musicals like *Porgy and Bess* and *Carmen Jones* (Baldwin 38, 616), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Ashmead Jr. 12; Railton n. pag.).

In the first film, the sexual threat of the uppity black man was abstractly

sublimated as Rocky's need to prove his (white) adequacy before claiming his (white) woman, and in the second Adrian's pregnancy-induced post-natal coma remains more structurally than literally related to the threat of Creed's dominance; in the third film, Clubber Lang crudely and publicly suggests that Adrian requires his (black) sexual prowess to feel real masculine power, a transparent threat both in the film's realist narrative depiction and the intertextual history of American racist discourse conventions. To quote scholar Abby Ferber, white-supremacist hate-group literature displays "a similar naturalization of racial difference {to that} in sports discourse," wherein "depictions of African American athletes may also reinforce the traditional hierarchy by reifying stereotypes of their animal-like nature, emphasizing their sexuality, aggressiveness, and physical power" (19).

When Rocky discovers that his number-one-in-the-world status might not have been due to his personal prowess alone, triggering yet another crisis of masculinity, he accepts Lang's challenge, only then to scorn those attributes of virtuous white athleticism like fortitude and coachability. He gets knocked out by the challenger, who embodies the stereotype of black male aggressive violence, including sexual threat, and whose unrestrained aggression causes the death of Rocky's inspirational Irish/Jewish trainer. The bodyguard-turned-actor Mr. T, who always appears as himself throughout his body of work, affects a mohawk-type hairstyle that he attributes, via *National Geographic*, to Mandinko warriors, and he wears it thus in a gesture of black pride toward African roots ("Don Rickles and Mr. T") congruent both with other black popular, artistic, and intellectual trends and with the political line of the white ethnic revival, in that Mr. T celebrates his African roots as Reagan or Kennedy would their Irish backgrounds; yet the African Mohican reverberates with other regenerative meanings when its role is to threaten and be vanquished.

As the Slotkinian narrative-form demands, the protagonist must go among the savages and learn their ways, so Creed becomes avuncular while he takes Rocky to train at a "black" gym in Los Angeles. In the ring, Balboa must learn to *dance*, practicing his footwork while Paulie holds the indispensable ghetto blaster, a racializing icon. Rocky repeats steps in time with Creed to the tune of the intertextually marketed "Eye of the Tiger" by the white pop/rock group Survivor, which song, through

overdubbing, undermines the formal pretension to realism more than any other element in the film. Fittingly, this formal break occurs when dealing with the material that most vitally expresses the racialized delusions of white discourse, Creed's desire to help the white boxer in the first place, the essence of the magical Negro cinematic archetype (Glenn and Cunningham 138). The function of the role was previously analyzed by James Baldwin, regarding *The Defiant Ones* (1958), and his critique of the archetype perfectly applies to the characterization of Creed in *Rocky III*: "No black man in such a situation would rise to the bait proffered by this dimwitted poor white child, whose only real complaint is that he is a bona-fide mediocrity who failed to make it in the American rat race" (525).

As friend in *Rocky III*, Creed discursively validates the assertion of white authority over the same dangerous and unruly black usurpers that he himself represented as foe in *Rocky* and *Rocky II*, but his transformation into an ally is a white fantasy. It is in this representational nexus that the appropriations of antebellum minstrelsy took place, audience and performer dancing "black" on-stage together (Lott 129) as a means of self-definition as working-class whites, or "mechanics," in the context of Jacksonian democratic inclusion in a distinctly American polity. Racial and class identities were intertwined with nativist nationalism, as can be seen in the riots of 1834 and 1849. In the first of these incidents, an anti-abolitionist mob stormed the Bowery Theater and demanded the firing of the English-born stage manager who had uttered un-American sentiments, but they also called for the deportation of African Americans. This crowd was quieted by the manager's apology, a display of American flags, and the blackface performance of the songs "Yankee Doodle" and "Zip Coon" (132). The representational display of racial power satisfied the crowd's demands for black social exclusion.

In the much larger Astor Place riot fifteen years later, a largely Irish white-ethnic mob attacked two different anti-slavery societies along with the high-society Opera House where the British rival to "Jacksonian hero" and Bowery Theater product Edwin Forrest was performing (66); Forrest has been credited as the first dramatic actor to don blackface and represent an African American onstage (Rice 23). The strongly emphasized working-class markers of this riot, like "Burn the damned den of the Aristocracy!"

(Lott 67), "stood in for deeper anxieties about displacement founded on racial and ethnic nativism," in the words of drama historian Joseph Roach; the violence was a "process of imagining a community by identifying what it must at all costs exclude" (361), hence the most powerful images by which that community defined itself were its white representations of black otherness. As Eric Lott sums up the relationship, "they ultimately assuaged an acute sense of class insecurity by indulging feelings of racial superiority" (64). This interdependence served the political and cultural construction of whiteness in similar ways for Irish working-class audiences of antebellum minstrelsy, for post-Civil Rights Movement white-ethnic political intellectuals, and for current Trumpian rearticulations of white nativism.

The nexus of class and racial grievance that Trump performs for his electoral audience can be understood through this historically consistent alchemy that creates a political identity through whiteness. Researchers Harris Beider and Kusminder Chahal have found that Trump's working-class support is not really working-class as a matter of economic demographics, in that his "typical core supporter" earns significantly more than the national average (50). The declining fortunes of the Rust Belt are about identification, then, more than social class in a Marxian sense, that is, they are about "working-class values" (63). This identification with a "hard-working" image is integral to the white habitus, an image itself frequently defined through opposition to that of a racialized other supposedly looking for a handout, as in Nixon's rhetoric quoted above. This class-values habitus also defined itself through an opposition to a dominant political class, a veritable den of aristocracy, as it were, epitomized in 2016 by Hillary Clinton, characterized as "establishment" and "elitist" (47-48). Interviewed Trump supporters were frequently critical of how elites acted out their status through "political correctness," a public stance that does not utilize a language of racial resentment but instead denigrates such language: "We feel muzzled … We feel there's a chokehold on [the] throat of white people and white working-class people. We can't even say what we feel" (56). Given the recent killing of George Floyd, one recognizes here what Jacobson has described as "a politics of white grievance that pitted itself against unfair *black* privilege […] often, ironically, couched in

a civil rights language poached from blacks themselves" (Jacobson 22) – a dynamic similar to the blackface singing of "Yankee Doodle" to satisfy the needs of white American identity.

Although some interviewees claimed to disapprove of Trump's posturing about Muslims, Mexicans, and Chinese, with no small number characterizing it as offensive, virtually all expressed approval of his "honesty": "They don't like it?! Too bad because this is how we all feel;" "he says what other people were thinking but they're too afraid to publicly speak;" "he's actually saying this stuff that many people across America are thinking" (qtd. in Harris and Chahal 55-56). Given their consistently stated contempt for political correctness, the racial coding of the feelings that these Trump supporters wish to see publicly expressed is clear, as with the steelworker who claims that under Democratic elites "blacks" are represented while "the working class" is not (57): black Americans are a priori excluded from this identity which, as indicated not just by the demographics of Trump's core supporters but also by the president's own wheeler-dealer background, is not about reality – certainly not about any realistically assessed opportunity for the economic recovery many supporters say they hope for (54) – but about performance. His persona successfully enacts, and allows supporters to communicatively engage in, the indulgence of feelings of racial superiority in order to assuage the insecurities of their class-values habitus.

Much as Forrest was for the theater, then, and Trump is on the political stage, Rocky has been recognized in scholarly work and the broader world of cultural consecration as a "folk-hero for white America" ("Rocky"), but not all academics interpret things so directly. Derek Catsam, of the University of Texas of the Permian Basin, for example, disputes Jacobson's interpretation of *Rocky*, proposing that the "racial aspect" may not be "divisive," that "surely choosing a black opponent was not of necessity a racial decision," and that a movie with a white antagonist could still be part of a "cinema of grievance" (n. pag.). The first assertion depends on the biological reality of race, the second begs the question and contains its own refutation, and both ignore that writer Sylvester Stallone based *Rocky* on the Muhammad Ali vs. Chuck Wepner match of 1975, billed as "Give the White Guy a Break" (Raskin n. pag.). The third proposal imagines

that a hypothetical film with a white antagonist might fit a different interpretative framework, which is irrelevant, especially since such a film was in fact made, the 1978 Stallone vehicle *Paradise Alley*, and it flopped; it was precisely the division between white and black, not white-ethnic success-through-hardship, that proved popular, profitable, and deserving of Academic recognition as Best Picture of 1976.

A more perspicacious though less academic commentary on the films has been offered, to popular acclaim, by the black American comedian Eddie Murphy. Here one cites the observation of Charles W. Mills, that the emergence of "critical race theory and critical white studies can thus be seen as a belated catching-up with the insights of black lay thought" (41). Murphy's routine about a white Italian who has just seen *Rocky* was a popular enough bit to have been chosen for inclusion in his second, extremely successful concert performance film of 1987 (which also features, in a different context, caricatures of a bestially stupid Mr. T). It breaks down the meaning of the films to the most fundamental dynamics of racialization as expressed by Trump: violent power and economic exploitation. The central joke of this routine is the exclamation of a white ethnic who has been inspired by Rocky/Stallone to demonstrate the truth of the film by establishing his economic and social power over a random black man at the cinema. Murphy's "Italian" goes to the concessions counter, cuts in line in front of a black customer, orders a few items, and then declares: "The nigger's going to pay for it… You heard what I said, Moolie, pay for my fuckin' candy, or I'll kick your ass!" (*Eddie Murphy: Raw*; see also Murphy's "Italians and Rocky.").

"Oh, you just saw *Rocky*," replies Murphy's black moviegoer: the comedian and his audience collapse the different storylines into one narrative of white entitlement based on the same terms of power presented by the Trump administration's revision of the USCIS mission statement and his border-defense posturing. The performer also presents this racist conflict of white grievance being enhanced through cyclic repetition of the regenerative-violence narrative: "Those are the worst white-people fights too… especially around *Rocky* time" (Murphy n. pag.). The essence of *Rocky* that Murphy presents as the motivating factor for the white-ethnic display

of masculine power is the film's depiction of a violent beating of a black man by a white. As his Italian character describes the film:

> "Sly [Stallone] comes right out, he breaks this big fuckin' nigger's face, he busts it fuckin' wide open, fuckin' *muligna'* lying on the floor fucked up. [Crowd cheers] It's fuckin' great [spoken through applause]! I fuckin' love him, man, *alright Rock-O*! [shouted]… You know what I like about Stallone's movies, it's the realism, you know? 'Cause, you know, that's how you have to fuckin' treat those fuckin' moolies. They think they can push you around. […] That's what I like about Sly, he comes in, and the moolies are beating him, and he fuckin', he don't fuckin' go down, he's not fuckin' going down. He cracks the fuckin' moolie's hole like this [making circle with hands], he falls on the ground, that's what I like – You know something, you can really do that, you can really fuckin' do that. You see that big fuckin' *muligna'* standing over there? You see that big black guy over there?…" (Murphy n. pag.)

Murphy's fixation on the film's violent enactment of white supremacy and the mostly white audience's enthusiastic reception of his parody, if that is the word, are all the more significant because the most recent installment in the franchise had been *Rocky IV*, a broadly jingoistic Cold War melodrama, wherein "Sly" and "the moolies" team up against the Soviet antagonist Ivan Drago, who beats Creed to death in the ring before Rocky goes on to defeat Drago in Russia. The most recent Rocky film, then, had not even featured a black antagonist, although it did feature the imagery of a white man beating a black man to death, yet the pop-culturally-recognized communicative significance of the films, going beyond the details of their plots to a simpler theme of redemptive white-supremacist violence, is identified as racist economic exploitation and physical violence. Through what he calls an "Italian white man," Murphy and his audience find the root of the films' racist effect in contemporary social features of black exclusion that are also specific historical realities of white inclusion, supporting Jacobson's interpretation. The performance artist and the academic analyst both understand racism not as a personal disposition but rather as a structural function. The various subtleties of white resentment at black civic equality collectively expressed as "they think they can push you around" lead directly to the violent assertion of a

specifically economic dominance empowered by the "realistic" depiction of black men being cracked, busted, and broken. The supposedly comic sketch ends with the white-ethnic in an ambulance – Murphy represents his black character as more naturally powerful – but the final punchline is muted and restrained compared to the pay-for-my-candy-or-I'll-kick-your-ass climax of the set-up, which is repeated three times.

These deeply rooted meanings are why the film franchise serves as an evolving distillation of the political line from the cold warriors Kennedy and Moynihan, the affirmation that white ethnics have the American identity of "just plain old American[s]" (white interviewee, qtd. in Gallagher 152), buttressed by the rhetorical exclusion of black Americans from the civic polity through the ideological pseudo-sociology that became the bedrock of neoconservative Reaganism. When Ronald Reagan went "back" to his "ancestral home" in Ireland in 1984, to honor his white-ethnic roots like J.F.K. before him, the Irish band at the central ceremony chose to play, among other selections, the theme from *Rocky*: the martial fanfares of an Italian-American boxer's training montages were the music considered appropriate to a message of Irish-American trans-Atlantic ethno-political unity. That theme also functions in the post-colonial context of a re-assertion of American power over non-whites: years later, one American soldier in Iraq contacted the composer of the *Rocky* films, Bill Conti, who reported pride in reading the soldier's account of how he would watch the series' training montages to hype himself up for combat.

Film scholar Peter Biskind has noted the correspondence between the ideology of the *Rocky* films and neoconservatism. He allows that it may be an exaggeration to claim that Rocky paved the way for Reagan but points out that the films' politics fit snugly with that movement's ideology, and further opines that their popularity addressed post-colonial malaise in the wake of the defeat in Vietnam (Biskind n. pag.). This general and vague conjunction is thoroughly supported by Stallone's metatextual representative quality as Rambo, unleashed in a cinematic Vietnam the year before the release of *Rocky IV*, by Stallone's frequent visits to the Reagan White House, and by the latter film's effect on Reagan himself; before reading a message from Camp David in 1986, President Reagan conversationally praised the film to the media technicians present,

particularly the realism: it was "so real." The German liberal magazine *Der Spiegel* characterized it in contrast as "Polit-Porno," a reading justified by the objectification of the actors' muscular physiques, which musculature Reagan also noted in his off-the-cuff remarks at his military residence, and by the film's promotional tagline of "Get ready for the next world war!" ("Ronald Reagan Talks About Rocky IV"; see also *Rocky: L'atomica di Reagan*). If under Carter the white-ethnic boxer reclaims American identity from Negro domination, under Reagan Rocky vanquishes the animalistic black Americans, then he wins the Cold War. Internationally identified in popular culture as the personification of the "American Dream,"[2] the character speaks as a synecdoche not only to the historical insecurities of threatened white supremacy from Reconstruction to the post-World War II white-ethnic resurgence, but also for the First World in both the Cold War and post-colonial senses of the phrase.

Reagan also used the fictional boxer as a symbol for American economic recovery in a press statement: "Like the fighter Rocky Balboa, America is getting stronger now" ("Rocky 4 Reagan"). One notes how this allusion, as a color-blind invocation of a highly racialized narrative, references a performance of the violent imposition of power over non-whites in the context of a would-be real economic growth: a politics governing the adjudication of economic benefits sells itself through the cultural affect of racialized regeneration through violence without explicitly mentioning race. The films also address the increasing financial marginalization of working-class Americans under de-industrialization and Reaganomics, for example when, confessing his fear of Clubber Lang in *Rocky III*, Rocky tells Adrian, "I'm afraid to lose what I got." The conflation of Trump and Rocky as an image that would make America great again visually restates Reagan's economic simile in the current context of would-be socio-economic recovery through xenophobic exclusion. In Trumpian terms, the bad hombre is coming to take away from whites the success they have achieved, the American Dream they think they deserve.

The inclusive immigrant narrative of white-ethnic bootstrappery has ignored the reality that such groups, whatever racist affect or economic hardships they may have suffered, were always juridically and politically white: as Jacobson points out, they were classified by US naturalization law

as "free white persons" and benefited from the anti-black "discriminatory practices in housing, hiring, and unionization" that were not applied to them (22, 64). They were never barred from voting. In housing, just to make two specific examples, only African Americans were explicitly banned in the deed covenant restrictions of the first half of the twentieth century that kept Baltimore's new neighborhoods white (Power 6), while Thomas Guglielmo reports finding no instance of Italians being banned in the similar white-only restrictive covenants controlling home ownership in Chicago, nor were their homes firebombed like those of black Americans (59). Racialized violence and economic exploitation could impact white-ethnics, as with Italians in Louisiana who suffered both lynching and peonage arrangements in the second half of the eighteenth century, but these events remained individually exceptional as opposed to institutionally codified (see Smith; Deaglio; Bauerlein).

During the 1868 election violence in that state, the Spanish and Sicilian populations of New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish were enthusiastic participants, literally identified as "white," in the Democratic Party clubs who murdered hundreds of black Americans in the name of so-called Home Rule (one might say Homeland security) – significantly, it was the white ethnics' strong work ethic and honesty that was singled out for praise – although this identification was qualified, as "white, that is, Spanish," ("Louisiana Contested Elections" part 1, 103, 247; part 2, 75, 84, 93, 260, 264). Italians and other white-ethnic immigrants may have been represented as insufficiently Anglo-Saxon for everyone's comfort – "greasy," as Rocky's coach would have it – but in 1936, Joe DiMaggio could play in the all-white professional baseball leagues, unlike African Americans, and he could later marry a white woman, Marilyn Monroe no less, without being lynched in effigy, provoking anti-miscegenation legislation, or representing non-white domination, unlike black championship boxer Jack Johnson. As Guglielmo sums it up, "European immigrant groups… faced differing degrees of racial discrimination and prejudice," but they "were still white on arrival" (56, 59).

The rhetoric of Trump and his supporters reflects the very different condition of the majority of present-day immigrants to the United States. The strident denials of racism are frequently undermined by the

content of the language itself (Boag n. pag.; Harris and Chahal 58), but even more strongly contradicted by the historical continuities with the discursive conventions in the communicative interactions of cultural representation through which white Americans have defined themselves as such. Yet interpreting the election of President Trump merely as a backlash to the election of President Obama does not satisfyingly explain why immigration should become the bête noire of dominant political discourse, nor why Rocky as symbol can serve the "'white' David who slew the 'politically correct' Goliath" (Harris and Chahal 57). Might not the historical continuities discussed above equally suggest that present-day immigrants could also be politically constituted and culturally represented as, more or less, white on arrival? The answer may be that the socio-political reaction generated by Barack Obama's transgression of a racialized barrier led to a specific shift away from the nation-of-immigrants narrative in political orthodoxy precisely because his blackness could be represented in the terms of the white-ethnic revival. Obama conforms to that immigrant narrative: had his father been, say, an Irish, Greek, or Italian diplomat, he would be just another Kennedy, Dukakis, or LaGuardia. Following the restructuring of race along the tripartite lines theorized by Bonilla-Silva ("From Bi-racial to Tri-racial", 224-30), in 2008 and 2012 whites voted for a "multiracial" immigrant of the middle category, not a "black" of the lowest one. Thus Barack Obama's presence at the summit of American political power represents the danger of the immigrant-inclusive white-ethnic narrative to American white supremacy. That structured and structuring structure reacts by producing a new discourse of exclusion to define American identity as white, resembling its forefathers but addressing the present. That is why the clownish politician's stated policies of adjudicating benefits and protecting America are identical to the comedic hyperbole of the professional clown: pay for our border wall, Mexicans, or we'll kick your ass. Once again in American history, it's Rocky Time.

Notes

[1] "Life for him is full of delusions, caused by his ethical error, his incapacity for moral judgment, and his deviation from paternal standards [...] Donald is a dual figure here because he retains the obligations of adulthood on the one hand, while behaving like a child on the other" (Dorfman and Mattelart 37).

[2] "They come [to the Rocky steps and statue at the Philadelphia Museum of Art] to pay homage to one of the proudest ambassadors of the American Dream" ["vengono per rendere omaggio a uno dei più fieri ambasciatori del Sogno americano"] (*Rocky: L'atomica di Reagan*). Director Dimitri Kourtchine also claims that the character personifies the American Dream.

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