American Horror Show
Election 2016 and the Ascent of Donald J. Trump
Douglas Kellner
UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, Los Angeles, USA

American Horror Show describes the last weeks of the 2016 election, Trump’s victory, his transition and construction of a scandal-ridden cabinet and administration, to his inaugural speech and the first 30 days of his presidency.

The text uses a multidimensional analysis to explain Trump’s victory, including his mobilization of an authoritarian populist movement, the use of fake news to attack Hillary Clinton, the intervention of FBI Director James Comey 11 days before the election, claiming that another investigation of Clinton’s emails was underway, and the intervention of Russian hacking of Democratic Party email and the use of this email against Clinton.

Questions are raised concerning relationships between the Russian hacking and attacks against Clinton and members of Trump’s campaign. The remarkable positive remarks from Trump concerning Putin, followed by putting pro-Putin Republicans in key posts of his administration, raise questions about Trump administration relations and connections to Russia.

Finally, the first 30 days of Trump’s administration show that he is a rightwing billionaire and militarist who has carried out an extreme rightwing Republican agenda and is not a populist concerned about the working class.
American Horror Show
Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy’s (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.
If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education seeks to produce – literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.
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Douglas Kellner

UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies,
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INTRODUCTION TO DONALD TRUMP AND THE AMERICAN HORROR SHOW

The election of Donald J. Trump was an American Nightmare and stunning shock to the political system and body politic unparalleled in recent history. The Trump administration promised to be an American Horror Show unleashing an era of American Carnage that would be difficult to overcome. Yet Trump’s war on the media, judiciary system, and other institutions of U.S. democracy have been resisted and countered in the early weeks of his administration, as I document throughout this book. Hence, although U.S. democracy is in a severe crisis with a highly authoritarian president and administration, the forces of democracy are alive and well and a period of protracted struggle and resistance is likely.

My previous book American Nightmare: Donald Trump, Media Spectacle, and Authoritarian Populism began with Trump emerging from the gaudy chambers of Trump tower to announce his candidacy for the presidency on June 16, 2015.\(^1\) The text followed his battles during the Republican primaries in 2015–2016, in which Trump emerged as master of media spectacle and the inspiration for an authoritarian populist movement that enabled him to win the Republican presidential nomination, and to square off against Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general election.

American Horror Show: Election 2016 and the Ascent of Donald J. Trump, by contrast, deals with the astonishing last weeks of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, culminating with Trump’s stunning electoral victory on November 6, 2017, a day of infamy. The following chapters follow Trump’s antics through the transition period, when he assembled his cabinet and top administration officials, to his inauguration as president and first 30 days in office.

In the last weeks of the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump promised to “drain the swamp” of Washington, eliminating corrupt economic, political, and other figures and interests who had long been appointed to key U.S. government positions. Trump ran as an anti-
establishment candidate, attacking Wall Street and a political system that represented dominant political and economic interests and carried out policies that largely benefited establishment elites. Trump’s followers took up the slogan and enthusiastically chanted “Drain the Swamp! Drain the Swamp!” during the dramatic final days of Trump’s campaign. Yet when Trump assembled his cabinet and administration, he brought in Swamp Creatures from the slimy depths of the far right, Republican establishment, billionaire class, military-industrial complex, and extremists who had previously called for the elimination of the cabinet posts to which they were appointed, pandering to a variety of extremist and establishment wings of the Republican party.

American Horror Show will thus show the emergence to the presidency of Donald J. Trump, King of the Swamps, anointing Mike Pence, a politician of the far right and raging homophobe as Vice President, while choosing White Nationalist and extreme rightwing ideologue Steve Bannon as his “Chief Strategist” and consigliere, and picking Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus to be his Chief of Staff. Trump and his associates then assembled a cabinet and administration consisting of a combination of Republican establishment figures and Trump cronies and rightwing extremists, who have already been caught up in controversies, leading, for instance, Trump’s National Security Advisor, General Michael Flynn, to resign in February 2017 as I note below.

In this book, I trace the conflict of interests involved in the Trump family’s failure to divest themselves of their motley array of economic interests, and show how from the beginning it was clear that one of Trump’s key motivations in capturing the presidency was to promote his Trump Organization economic interests and those of his political and economic allies. Not surprisingly, the Trump administration was burdened by scandals from the beginning and provoked unparalleled resistance with the largest anti-administration demonstrations in history in Washington and throughout the world the day after Trump’s inauguration, inspiring a Resistance movement active to this day.

Trump’s ascendency as 45th president of the United States will likely be seen as the most disruptive opening of a presidential regime in modern U.S. history. Trump and his administration have already waged
battles against the media, the courts, the Congress, and the majority of the people of the U.S. who strongly opposed him and found Trump thrust upon them as president because of an outdated and thoroughly dysfunctional Electoral College system, that I will critically analyze and suggest some alternatives to in the following pages.

I attempt to explain how the Trump campaign managed to win the 2016 election and closely follow the scandal of Russian interference in the election which has generated by March 2017, growing calls for a Special Prosecutor to investigate the ties between the Trump presidential campaign and the Russians, a potential scandal which could well bring down the Trump presidency. Indeed, as Trump entered into the second month of his presidency, his Achilles Heel was clearly his connection and those of his highest officials, and a cadre of lower ones, to Russia and its murderous dictator Vladimir Putin. Trump and Putin were both authoritarians who shared a contempt for democratic institutions and freedoms, although it was bizarre and not yet explained why Trump had chosen so many rabidly pro-Russian members for his administration, and why Trump had throughout the election and into his presidency spoken so highly of Vladimir Putin. Trump had never released his tax returns, and there was still a mystery concerning the financial ties between his campaign and Russia, as well as concerning connections between the Trump organization and Russia. The Russian hack into the 2016 election, described in detail in the following pages, was perhaps one of the most scandalous foreign interferences in a U.S. presidential election in history, constituting events that could destroy Trump’s presidency as calls multiply for investigations of Trump campaign and organization connections to Russia and Putin.

The fact that Russia, the U.S.’s Cold War adversary, had hacked into the Democrats emails and released emails embarrassing to Hillary Clinton, the Democratic National Committee, and Clinton’s campaign manager John Podesta, was an outrageous scandal that honorable members of Congress and wide sectors of the American people are demanding that the government and media investigate. As this text indicates, Trump’s National Security Advisor, General Michael Flynn, was forced to resign in February 2017, because of a phone call just before the election with the Russian ambassador, and years of
shady connections to the Russians. Shortly thereafter, Jeff Sessions, Trump’s Attorney General, lied to Congress about his contacts with the Russians, and was then forced to admit that he had connections and conversations with the Russian ambassador during a period when Sessions was serving as a key advisor to the Trump campaign as they battled to overcome Clinton’s lead in the polls while the Russians allegedly leaked information embarrassing to her and her campaign.

Trump’s well-received first address to Congress on February 28, 2017, was soon followed by more revelations concerning relations between top officials of his administrations and the Russians, which led to increased calls by March 2017 for congressional investigations and a special prosecutor. Trump, who had resisted sending out his daily controversial and to some crazed tweets for the previous week, went on a Twitter rampage, first posting a photo of Democratic Senator Chuck Schumer and Putin smiling and snacking together with the message: “We should start an immediate investigation into @SenSchumer and his ties to Russia and Putin. A total hypocrite!” Schumer quickly retorted: “Happily talk re: my contact w Mr. Putin& his associates, took place in ’03 in full view of press & public under oath. Would you &your team?”

After a similar Twitter blast against Democratic Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi and picture of her with Putin, the now crazed Trump went after former President Obama, and culminated a blast of five successive tweets with the astonishing claim:

How low has President Obama gone to tapp my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy! 4 March 2017

After launching a Twitter attack on the former president, Trump’s twitchy Twitter finger returned to more mundane matters, attacking Arnold Schwarzenegger, the former host of his reality TV show The Apprentice and protagonist in a recent Twitter war with Trump. The Arnold had just announced his decision to quit The Apprentice because “there was too much baggage” (i.e. Trump’s continued role in the show as Executive Producer and his propensity to launch Twitter attacks on the Arnold). Trump exploded in fury: “Arnold Schwarzenegger isn’t
voluntarily leaving the Apprentice. He was fired by his bad (pathetic) ratings, not by me. Sad end to great show.”

There was debate over whether Trump was unhinged and totally out of control, or whether his Twitter antics were a clever strategy to distract attention from his campaign’s connections with Russia during the election and the burning question of whether the Trump team had conspired with the Russians to defeat Hillary Clinton in the election. There were increasing calls to appoint a Special Prosecutor to investigate the Trump team/Russia links. This story was coming to dominate the news until Trump’s Twitter attack on Obama and his outrageous claim, without a shred of evidence, that Obama had bugged his campaign and Trump Tower, which created a new round of outrage as members of the Obama administration and top U.S. intelligence officials flatly denied Trump’s claim that Obama had wire-tapped Trump Tower.

Appearing on NBC News the Sunday morning that the story broke on March 5, former director of national intelligence James R. Clapper Jr., who had just resigned, flatly denied that a wiretap was authorized against Trump or his campaign during the election, asserting: “There was no such wiretap activity mounted against the president-elect at the time as a candidate or against his campaign,” Clapper said on Meet the Press.” Clapper added that he would have “absolutely” been informed if the FBI had sought or received a warrant to wiretap Trump or his campaign, and confidently claimed: “I can deny it.”

No major Republican appearing on the weekend talk shows seemed inclined to support Trump’s outrageous claims against President Obama, and pundits speculated that Trump had launched the Twitter assault on Obama to deflect attention from investigations of the Trump/Russian connections. So explosive was Trump’s unsubstantiated wiretap accusation that FBI Director James B. Comey asked the Justice Department to take the extraordinary step of issuing a statement rebutting it.

Trump’s astonishing Twitter attack had offered no evidence or any credible news report to back up his accusation that Obama had wire-tapped Trump Tower, but media analysts concluded that Trump may have been referring to “commentary on Breitbart and conservative
talk radio suggesting that Obama and his administration used ‘police state’ tactics last fall to monitor the Trump team. The Breitbart story, published Friday, has been circulating among Trump’s senior staff, according to a White House official who described it as a useful catalogue of the Obama administration’s activities. Trump’s response also has deepened doubts about his own judgment, not just in the face of the first crisis to confront his young presidency but in dealing with the challenges that lie ahead for the chief executive of the world’s most powerful nation.”

Trump continued to make the unsubstantiated claim that the Obama administration had wire-tapped Trump Towers, making the milder claim that it was simply under surveillance, but then made the completely outrageous claim that British intelligence had helped the Obama administration do surveillance of Trump Towers, a claim that Her Majesty’s Government and the U.S. closest traditional ally, quickly shot down, using words like “ridiculous” to rubbish the Trump allegations, which he claimed he had heard on Fox News, along with rightwing websites, his preferred source of information. In a March 20 Congressional House Intelligence Committee Hearing, FBI Director James Comey denied that the U.S. government had done surveillance of Trump Tower and confirmed that the Trump administration was under FBI investigation for alleged contacts with the Russians during the election, ensuring that the Trump/Russian story would be a major issue for months to come, perhaps the defining story of his administration.

Indeed, Trump’s call to repeal and replace Obamacare went down in ignominious defeat on March 24 when the Republican Congressional delegation and Trump could not agree on a health care plan that the majority of Republicans would support and so pulled the bill in an incredible confirmation of Trump’s incompetency and inability to master the complexities of legislation. The stunning defeat raised questions concerning Trump’s competency to make a deal, to fulfill key campaign promises, and to lead the Republican Party which although it controlled the House and Senate was deeply divided and did not trust Trump.
Upon concluding almost two years of sustained research on Trump and his successful win in Election 2016 and ascension to presidency, Donald Trump emerges as the American Id providing an American Nightmare and American Horror show to the shocked citizens of the U.S. and to many billions of people throughout the world. Trump represents the Worst of the Worst of American culture, incarnating in one orange-haired monster from the dankest and vilest swamps of American history, society, economy, polity, culture and psyche, the Worst of the Worst. Yes, Trump is a monster that not the most deranged Hollywood scriptwriter could imagine, and that would require a Dostoevsky, Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis rolled into one Master of the Deranged, the Corrupted, and the Absurdly Ridiculous, to adequately describe and evoke.

What we know of Trump’s business career is a morass of corruption, cons, and criminality of which only surface facts are known,\(^\text{11}\) enough of which qualifies him for the Hall of Capitalist Shameful Shame. Further, we do not even know all of those who bailed him out of his many bankruptcies and failed enterprises since he has refused to release his tax and business records. Although more and more information is dripping out weekly on his business and other strange connections with the Russians (watch the *Rachel Maddow Show* nightly on MCNBC for all the scandalous details), we are still waiting for the results of investigations into connections between the Russians and the Trump organization by the FBI, and the House and Senate Intelligence Committees, with growing calls for a Watergate or 9/11 Commission panels of distinguished experts and investigators.

The more we know of Trump’s personality, his family, his closest White House Associates, his cabinet members, and major and minor villains in his administration, we see a daily parade of the worst imaginable actions by the worst administration and presidency in memory and is perhaps The Worst President Ever. As for Trump himself, he embodies the worst of American narcissism, stupidity, boorishness, sexual predation, phoniness, mendacity, villainy, kleptocracy, nepotism, and words not even yet invented. Trump is uncultured with no ability to digest books or information larger than a Tweet (not surprisingly, his favored mode of communication); he is asocial and apparently devoid
of empathy, unable to grasp or articulate much beyond a sound-bite or Twitter blast, with attacks and invective his distinctive mode of social interaction. Trump is amazingly unpolitical, without an idea, policy notion, ideology, or grasp of how Washington and the presidency works. The result is that he makes pronouncements, signs Executive Orders, and is set to advance legislation that embodies the worst of Republican anti-government “ideas,” although, fortunately, his first foray into actual legislation went down to defeat, as Trump, his team, and Republican allies were not able to cobble together an alternative to Obamacare and so Trump-Ryan (un)Care went down to ignominious defeat on March 24, in a stunning demonstration of Trump/Republican incompetency, stupidity, and dysfunctionality, indicative of the whole Big and Smelly MESS of Trumpdom.

Since Trump embodies in spades and to the max HUGE dimensions of the Worst of Everything, it is hard to pin down in a concise manner the very worst features of Trump and Trumpworld. I’ve tried in this book to delineate some of the worst visible features and actions of Trump and his fellow Swamp Creatures. Yet so much is buried, secret, and as yet unknown, that I am perfectly aware that I have only scratched the surface, and that Trump Studies will continue for decades to disclose one outrageous scandal after another as Trumpdom devolves into what Jean Baudrillard described as The Spiral of the Worst.

Yes, Trump is the Worst who brings U.S. and the world defeat after defeat, as the U.S. devolves from a City on the Hill, the Best Hopes of Mankind, and a Shining Beacon of Freedom and Democracy to a ridiculous and surreal Horror Show, highly entertaining to Putin and the Russian kleptocracy, to the Chinese Leader Xi, and to tin-horn dictators and wanna be Authoritarians everywhere. To be sure, Trump’s popularity continues to spiral down with his approval at a shockingly low 34% of the public who approve of Trump’s job performance, according to the April IBD/TIPP poll while 56% disapprove of the job he’s doing marking the lowest rating during the first 100 Days into his term.12

Trump has a gloomy pessimistic view of the world encapsulated in the philosophical vision that: “Man is the most vicious of all animals, and life is a series of battles ending in victory or defeat. You
just can’t let people make a sucker out of you.” Winning is all for one-dimensional Trump, the only purpose of life, the only thing worth pursuing, and the organizing principle of the Donald’s existence. To win, Trump will do anything, raising the spectre of what would a losing Trump do with nuclear weapons under his control, and what destruction might his unrestrained Ego and uncontrollable Id unleash if Trump is threatened in any sort of way. Trump has a Hobbesian view of the world where there are enemies everywhere and where the U.S. must use force to pursue its interests and destroy its enemies. It is also worrisome to contemplate that Trump has developed a large following through his demagoguery, and that Donald Trump and authoritarian populism constitutes an American Horror Show, and a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy and global peace and stability.

Los Angeles, California
April 3, 2017

NOTES


4 Trump’s Twitter outbursts during the first week in March can be found at https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%7Eauthor (accessed March 6, 2017).

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.


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Guy Debord described a “society of the spectacle” in which the economy, politics, social life, and culture were increasingly dominated by forms of spectacle. Donald Trump lived the spectacle from the time in New York as a young entrepreneur and man about town he performed his business and personal life in gossip columns, tabloids, and rumor mills. He used PR advisors to promote his businesses and himself to eventually become a maestro of the spectacle when his popular TV-show *The Apprentice* made Trump into a national celebrity. Trump ran his 2016 presidential campaign as a media spectacle with daily tweets that became fodder for TV news, and rallies where he would make outrageous comments that would be replayed endlessly on cable and network news. Trump thus dominated news cycles by making shocking assertions, insulting and negatively defining opponents, and helping construct daily media events through which he was able to define the news agenda.

Yet the Donald Trump Presidential TV-Reality Show also stumbled, choked, and went into crisis mode with the onset of the annual presidential debates in which the two finalists get to duke it out to see who will convince the audience that they deserve the ultimate prize, the presidency of the United States.

U.S. presidential debates have been in the Age of Television, and now New Media, a gladiator spectacle in which the opponents try to destroy each other, while the media personalities who moderate each debate try to positively define themselves and avoid gaffes that could negatively impact their image forever. The first presidential debate on September 27, 2016, was a compelling political media spectacle in which the two candidates showed how they were able to make their case for the presidency under conditions of intense pressure and media focus. From the outset, Trump played to the hilt the authoritarian macho, shouting, insulting Clinton, and trying to dominate the procedure.
Clinton, however, ignored Trump’s bullying and blustering, made her arguments against him, and presented her positions on the issues.

As the debate progressed, Trump exhibited a loss of stamina, rambled, became incoherent, and was unable to cogently respond to Clinton’s sharp attacks on his business record, his failure to pay taxes, his atrocious attacks on women, and his lack of qualifications to be president. Trump’s unraveling during the first debate presented the media spectacle of the Outsider and Macho Man, not ready for prime time, and losing the debate to the cool professional and qualified politician, who was able to provide coherent answers to questions, and look presidential while Trump faltered and appeared increasingly flustered as the debate went on, by the end, he looked like he lacked stamina and was a choker, accusations that he had made against his Republican rivals in the primaries.

The next morning after what commentators on all sides labeled a disappointing, and even disastrous, debate, Trump went on the offensive, lashing out at the debate moderator, complaining about his microphone and threatening to make Bill Clinton’s marital infidelity a campaign issue in a spectacle of desperation. There were estimates that 85 million people had watched the debate live on television, and millions more were re-watching it and discussing it at home, work, and online, making it one of the major debate spectacles in US political history. Clinton was exuberant, campaigning with Bernie Sanders the next day, and presenting a united Democratic Party on the offensive.

Presidential debates are the ultimate shared media spectacle and it would be interesting to see if Trump could recover and gain the offensive in the coming political debates and in last weeks of the campaign. At different stages, Clinton and Trump had dominated the presidential spectacle, and anything could happen as the spectacle moved toward its conclusion.

Over the weekend of October 8–9, 2016, media coverage of the campaign was overwhelmed by a videotape of Trump’s bragging of his sexual prowess with women that revealed the full extent of his vulgarity, crudeness, and contempt for women. The front page of *The New York Times* featured a full account of Trump’s sexual bragging in an October 8, 2016 story: “Tape Reveals Trump Boast About Groping
Women,” and television networks and social networking cites played the footage over and over.

A three-minute videotape was found and endlessly replayed of a conversation of trash talk between Trump and Billy Bush, a minor TV celebrity on Access Hollywood and member of the Bush clan. Trump boasted that his “star” status allowed him to do what he wanted with women, including married women, telling how, in one case, he “moved on her like a bitch, but I couldn’t get there.” On the whole, sex philosopher Trump asserted that a “star” like him gets special treatment, and “You can do anything,” including “grab them by the pussy.” Displaying his vengeful retaliation, he noted that the married woman who managed to resist his cave man charms wasn’t really up to The Donald’s high standards, as he explained: “I did try and fuck her. She was married. She’s now got the big phony tits and everything.”

The video clips of Dirty Donald went viral and a nervous Republican establishment went hysterical with Paul Ryan disinviting Trump to a Republican Unity campaign rally, John McCain withdrew his support, and Trump’s wife Melania, to whom he was married when the Access Hollywood interview took place, said the comments were “unacceptable,” but none the less the Donald she knew was a great “leader” (although not much of a husband as he was married to Melania when he bragged about bagging all the women he wanted). There was speculation whether this spectacle of lechery would end Trump’s run, but the Shameless One was seen waving at crowds in front of Trump Tower, showing that he was still in the game, and his surrogates claimed that in the coming days the Trumpsters would provide evidence that Bill Clinton’s sexual indiscretions were worse.

And so the media spectacle of the 2016 campaign had devolved into gutter sniping trash talk, and Donald Trump demonstrated that yes, he was an outsider and outside the bounds of decorum, decency, and shame. In a campaign of outrageous sexism, racism, xenophobia, insults, and trash talk would this assault on women and decency finally be the viral outrage that went over the top and took Donald Trump into the sewer of filth where even his rabid followers would be loath to follow? Or is this just the way good old boys talk in the locker room, as Trump’s surrogates, like thrice-married and serial adulterers
Rudi Giuliani and Newt Gingrich insisted? Would the Authoritarian Populist Leader continue to drive his campaign and Trumpite followers forward, or was the spectacle that had created Trump about to devour him?

Trump and his male defenders revealed a backlash against the more progressive and woman-friendly concept of masculinity that had been evolving since the 1960s and the rise of the women’s movement back to the sort of caveman masculinity that had ruled the U.S. and to some extent globally for centuries. Trump and his surrogate good old boys were especially crude, and no politician or public figure in recent history was as blatantly sexist and patriarchal as Donald J. Trump. Trump blurted out that he “respected” women, but his behavior belied this claim and speculation mushroomed about whether suburban Republican women were going to vote for such a Neanderthal.

The last weeks of the campaign would resolve how much of Trump the country could take as Hillary Clinton regained the momentum and scored a double digit lead after she was able to dominate the Second Presidential Debate and make Trump’s character and attitude toward women a key issue of the campaign. A series of women then came forward with claims about how Trump had groped them inappropriately, attempted to kiss them, and, in fact, had done exactly what Trump bragged to Billy Bush he was able to do with any woman he liked.

From October 10 and for days to follow, a new woman or two would appear on television with harrowing stories of how Trump had sexually assaulted them, refuting Trump’s assertion during the second presidential debate that he had never acted on the claims he made to Billy Bush. In a mid-October summary, the list of new allegations against Trump included:

- Two Miss USA contestants who claimed Trump deliberately walked in on them when they were naked in a dressing room.
- Two women who allege Trump groped or kissed them without consent – one in the first-class seat of an aircraft.
- A claim by a woman that she was groped at a Trump event at his Mar-A-Lago estate in Florida.
- A People magazine reporter who says Trump forced himself on her shortly before she was due to interview him and his wife in 2005.
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• An incident in which Trump appears to sexualize a young girl. The encounter with the young girl surfaced in a video of a 1992 Entertainment Tonight Christmas special in which Trump appeared, according to CBS News. Trump was 46 at the time.¹

Never before had the networks or cable channels presented such graphic descriptions of sexual assault, and never had a politician been accused of such a vast array of sexual battery. The day after Trump faced the barrage of accusations of groping and sexual assault from scores of women, the Republican nominee went on the offensive attacking the accusers. At a rally in West Palm Beach, Florida, he suggested that he would never have sexually assaulted the woman who claimed that Trump was all over her like “octopus” during an airline flight, claiming: “Believe me. She would not be my first choice. That I can tell you… Just look at her!” In regard to Natasha Stoynoff, the writer from People magazine who alleged that Trump pinned her to a wall and stuck his tongue down her throat while she was at his Florida estate Mar-a-Lago to write a first anniversary story about Trump and his then pregnant wife Melania, the mogul told the West Palm Beach crowd: “Take a look. You take a look. Look at her. Look at her words. You tell me what you think. I don’t think so.”

At the same rally, Trump also crudely disparaged Hillary Clinton, referring to their bodily encounter in the presidential debate stating: “I’m standing at my podium and she walks in front of me, right. She walks in front of me, and when she walked in front of me, believe me, I wasn’t impressed.” In the following days, Trump continued to attack his accusers in vicious terms describing them as “horrible people, they’re horrible horrible liars”. Trump insisted that the press was “false and slanderous in every respect,” and said “the depths of their immorality is absolutely unlimited.”

Playing the card of anti-political correctness, Trump also insisted that: “The Clinton machine is at the center of this power structure. Anyone who challenges their control is deemed a sexist, a racist, a xenophobe and morally deformed. They will attack you, they will slander you, they will seek to destroy your career and your family. … They will lie, lie, lie.” Trump’s rant came just minutes after first lady Michelle Obama had stated in a powerful speech condemning Trump:
“I can’t believe that I’m saying that a candidate for president of the United States has bragged about sexually assaulting women.” She added: “And I can’t stop thinking about this. It has shaken me to my core in a way that I couldn’t have predicted.” While Michelle Obama took a serious tone, in the key battleground state of Ohio, Barack Obama mocked the idea of Donald Trump doing anything for working people and trying to fob himself off as a champion of the workers, when all his life he’d been trying to brand himself as a rich member of the elite, and brag about and celebrate his wealth.

As the days went by, Trump widened the alleged spectrum of the conspiracy of lies and slander directed against him to include not only the media and the Clinton campaign, but “international banks” with whom Clinton allegedly met in secrecy “to plot the destruction of US sovereignty in order to enrich these global financial powers.” This screed lead Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the Anti-Defamation League, to accuse the statement of resembling anti-Semitic tropes used by the Nazis.

Republican leaders were once again challenged as to whether they could support such a vile person, although Trump’s core supporters bought his defense that every one of the women were liars and that the barrage of revelations was part of a conspiracy against him by the media, the Clinton campaign, international bankers, global corporations, and shadowy forces who were united in denying Trump the presidency and stealing the White House for the Clintons. As the week went on, Trump added components to the conspiracy against him which emerged as a major campaign motif of the last weeks of the election, as Trump blared over and over that the election was rigged, a claim which cynics saw as a strategy to prepare Trump and his followers for a loss.

The New York Times had published the first story of women who claimed Trump had sexually assaulted them, and in a speech where he was detailing those who were conspiring to steal the presidency from him and his supporters, he included the Times and a major Mexican investor Carlos Slim who he claimed was a supporter of the Clintons, bringing a Mexican into the web of conspiracy that Trump was trying to weave, returning to a motif of his opening election rant that Mexicans were pouring across the border and threatening our country.
Going off the rails, Trump intensified his rant against the Clintons, insisting every rally that they were criminals, while his storm troopers chanted “lock her up, lock her up!” Upping his journey into Crazyland, the weekend of October 15–16, Trump insisted Hillary Clinton was on drugs during the previous debate and demanded they he and her take a drug test before the next debate, coming up on Wednesday.

The weekend talk shows continued to dissect the spectacle of the multiple accusations of sexual assault against Trump and whether this would destroy his campaign, while his hapless surrogates tried to defend the indefensible, and explain Trump’s claim that the accusations against him by nine women of sexual assault were all lies. Equally difficult, was the task of Trump’s surrogates to provide evidence that the election was rigged, as election officials and media pundits kept insisting that it was impossible to rig an election that had so many variables and voting sites.

Both Clinton and Trump disappeared for debate preparation, so drama mounted as the third and final presidential debate took place in Las Vegas on October 19, 2016, which might be remembered as one of the more bizarre and perhaps consequential presidential debates in recent history. The debate opened innocently enough with a question by moderator Chris Wallace of Fox News concerning what kind of justices the candidates would appoint to the U.S. Supreme Court, an issue which obsessed conservatives and gave Trump a chance to secure this base. Trump assured his conservative followers that he’d appoint an anti-abortion majority on the court to overturn Roe v. Wade, while Clinton argued that she would appoint justices who would uphold reproductive and abortion rights, as well as LGBT rights, and would support campaign finance reform as well, making a strong appeal to millennials and liberals.

The debate spectacle continued with Trump emphasizing immigration, one of the favorite themes of his campaign, repeating the idea that launched his election bid, as he promised again that he would build a wall on the Mexican border. Yet Trump now backed away from his pledge to deport 11 million undocumented migrants and their 4 million citizen children. Clinton stated that she favored comprehensive immigration reform, like former Republican presidents Ronald Reagan
and George H.W. Bush, and argued that Trump’s “deportation force” would require a police state that raided homes, schools and businesses.

When the questions inevitably engaged Russia and the WikiLeaks release of stolen e-mail from Clinton’s campaign, Clinton argued that the theft showed that Russia’s intelligence agencies and its dictator, Vladimir Putin, were siding with Trump “because he’d rather have a puppet as president of the United States.” That prompted Trump to lose his composure and start yelling that she was “the puppet,” without explaining whose puppet she was and who was pulling the strings. Clinton countered that: “It’s pretty clear you won’t admit that... Russians have engaged in cyberattacks against the United States of America, that you encouraged espionage against our people, that you are willing to spout the Putin line, sign up for his wish list, break up NATO, do whatever he wants to do, and that you continue to get help from him, because he has a very clear favorite in this race.”

Trump interrupted her, sputtering, “You have no idea” who hacked her campaign, and Clinton retorted that 17 military and civilian intelligence agencies have reached the same conclusion that the hacks were attributable to Russian agents, to which Trump repeated again, “Our country has no idea.” She replied, “you doubt 17 military and civilian... [agencies]” Trump replied, “Yeah, I doubt it, I doubt it.” Clinton pressed on, “Well, he’d rather believe Vladimir Putin than the military and civilian intelligence professionals who are sworn to protect us. I find that just absolutely...” Trump cut Clinton off, speaking over her about how Putin had bested Clinton every time, repeating his strange allegation that Putin was a political strongman who was superior to Obama and Clinton.

The rest of the night continued in the same vein, with Trump accusing Clinton and Obama of causing virtually everything wrong in the country and world, while Clinton tried to argue that all her proposals would be paid for by increasing taxes on the wealthiest Americans, whereas Trump’s proposed policies would create trillions in debt. The highlight of the debate, and point that dominated discussion the next day and into the final days of the election, was Trump’s truculent message that the country would have to wait and see if he would recognize the results of the presidential election. When pressed by the debate
moderator, Chris Wallace of *Fox News*, if he would accept a peaceful transition of power if Hillary Clinton were declared the winner, Trump responded: “I will look at it at the time,” and then repeated one of the Republican Party’s Big Lies on voter fraud: “If you look at your voter rolls, you will find millions of people there that are registered that shouldn’t be registered to vote.”

Going off the rails again, Trump suddenly blurted out that Hillary Clinton “shouldn’t be allowed to run—she is guilty of a serious crime… in that respect, it is rigged.” When Wallace again asked Trump if there would be a peaceful transition of power, he answered: “I will tell you at the time,” he replied. “I will keep you in suspense.” As if he was playing a role in a reality TV-show, Trump broke a fundamental rule of the political game which mandated that the candidate who gets the least votes in the Electoral College conceded to the candidate that got the most votes. Immediately, the Democrats took Trump’s arrogance as evidence he was a demagogue not fit to be president, while some establishment Republicans denounced Trump and insisted that the loser must accept the mandate of the voters.

In addition, Clinton provoked Trump to interrupt her and assert, “nasty woman, nasty woman,” a meme which shot through the Internet, convincing many that Trump was too rude for the prime time political game. While clenching his jaw tightly, Trump had started the evening standing erect behind the lectern and not stalking Clinton as he had done the previous debate. He had attempted with difficulty to present serious answers to the questions, but as the night unfolded he could not keep his malignant aggressive instincts under control and began interrupting Clinton, insulting her, repeatedly called her a liar, and rambled and blistered, throwing out wild accusations, and jumping from topic to topic, mixing confused recitations of his main ideas with insults and rambling attacks on Clinton.

The next day the headlines of almost every newspaper in the country highlighted that Trump was refusing to accept election results and that he continued to insinuate that the system was rigged against him. A beleaguered Republican establishment finally got Trump to modify his stand on accepting election results. In a speech in Ohio the day after the debate, Trump dramatically stated that he would
accept the results of the election, [pause]—“if I win!” Commentators noted that throughout the campaign season, if Trump did not get his way, he accused the process of being rigged against him and had even claimed past elections were rigged, documenting him as a thorough-going conspiracy theorist who many thought provided a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy with pundits worrying about what Trump and his supporters would do after the election. Gary Legum noted:

Once again, Trump was not so much a presidential candidate as he was the angry Republican id that has been howling in rage about Hillary Clinton for two and a half decades. He was the avatar of years of conservative frustration, the vessel through which the right could channel every sputtering protest against Hillarycare, every lurid conspiracy about Benghazi and emails, every cruel and cutting scream ever heard in a Usenet chat room or a Breitbart comments thread. He was the final shout into the abyss for the conservative movement, its last impotent sputter before Clinton beats them all by taking the presidential oath of office.

At which point they will start demanding her impeachment, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves.¹

The evening after the debate during the 71st annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner at the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York, the two candidates once again faced off in a televised spectacle in which politicians generally used depreciatory humor to roast themselves while attempting to make humorous but pointed political arguments about their opponents. The event is sponsored by the Catholic archdiocese and assembles New York’s elite to raise money for poor children. During presidential election years, the candidates are expected to show up and make witty, self-deprecatory speeches in which each can also take gentle gibes at the other. Breaking with this gentle tradition, Trump began with a self-pitying comment about how the New York political world, who used to love him, had turned against him since he became a Republican. Then in a tasteless attempt at failed Catholic humor, Trump compared himself to Jesus,
presenting himself as “a guy who started out as a carpenter working for his father.”

After some other weak jokes, Trump turned to nasty, telling the crowd that “Hillary is so corrupt, she got kicked off the Watergate commission,” a claim that fact checkers quickly found to be false and that caused the crowd to groan and jeer. As Trump continued his attack on Hillary with email jokes, WikiLeaks jokes, and assorted insults, the crowd began loudly booing the Donald, and network camera shots of the live, televised event showed the crowd erupting in disbelief and horror when Trump remarked that Hillary was there, “pretending not to hate Catholics.” Commentators remarked that this was the first time that there were political insults and attacks at the usually good-humored bi-partisan event, and the first time that a crowd loudly booed a candidate for president at the dinner.

In his lackluster campaign during the third week in October, with the election three weeks away, reporters were beginning to speculate that for the first time, Trump was realizing he might lose the election. Speculation became to emerge that Trump was planning to build a new rightwing media empire to mobilize his followers and capitalize on his campaign.

Yet in a campaign event at the hallowed civil war site of Gettysburg, a stone’s throw from the place of the bloodiest battle in American history, Trump delivered what his campaign announced as a major policy speech in which he would outline the first 100 days after his election. Deplorable Donald could not resist beginning his talk with attacks on the women who had recently accused him of groping and sexual assault. Trump insisted that: “Every woman lied when they came forward to hurt my campaign, total fabrication.” Threatening the women, Trump then blurted out that: “The events never happened,” adding: “All of these liars will be sued after the election is over.” Continuing his unsubstantiated conspiracy motif, Trump claimed: “It was probably the DNC [Democratic National Committee] and the Clinton campaign that put forward these liars with these fabricated stories.”

Later that day, on a rare impromptu discussion with reporters on her campaign plane, with running mate Tim Kaine at her side,
Clinton noted: “I saw where our opponent Donald Trump went to Gettysburg, one of the most extraordinary places in American history, and basically said if he’s president he’ll spend his time suing women who have made charges against him based on his behavior.” By contrast: “Tim and I are going to keep talking about what we want to do if we’re given the great honor of serving as president and vice-president.”

Trump’s “Gettysburg Address” began with a lengthy attack on the women who had leveled sexual assault charges against him and he threatened to sue them after the election. This UnLincolneque grievance tirade was followed by a rather listless list of previous campaign promises to build a wall along the Mexican border, round up illegal immigrants, cancel NAFTA and other trade treaties, cancel Obamacare, and the like. Reading from a teleprompter, Trump seemed low energy and just going through the motions of reading his text. Minutes after he concluded, cable news reported that there was an 11th accusation of sexual assault by a porn star, Jessica Drake, who at a press conference in Los Angeles gave graphic details of how Trump had aggressively come on to her, lured her to his Los Angeles hotel suite for a business dinner, and then assaulted her with unwanted sexual advances. Drake claimed that Trump had also come on to her and kissed her and other women on the lips at a hotel reception and that the other women would confirm Trump’s inappropriate behavior.

Although over the weekend, Donald Trump’s campaign manager Kellyanne Conway admitted “we are behind” on Sunday talk shows, the candidate himself continued to claim over the weekend and into the next week that he is winning and denounced “phony polls.” Speaking in a rally in St Augustine, Florida, Trump falsely claimed that pollsters were “oversampling Democrats,” using a “voter suppression technique” to discourage Trump supporters from voting. He tweeted: “Major story that the Dems are making up phony polls in order to suppress the the Trump [sic]. We are going to WIN!” Yet almost every poll has shown a steady lead for Clinton since late July and pundits were starting to call the election for Clinton – polls and predictions that we now know were far off the mark.
Trump also continued his fierce attacks on “rigged media,” while previewing his own Trump TV on Facebook, featuring Trump campaign operatives minutely dissecting the latest Hillary Clinton conspiracy scandal. Trump denounced the press as being composed of “thieves and crooks”, and claimed that it may be even more corrupt than his rival “Crooked Hillary”. It was overlooked, however, that Facebook and other social media sites were constantly publishing fake news stories, circulating outright falsehoods like the Pope, or Denzel Washington, had endorsed Trump for President, or that the Clinton Foundation was accused of gun-running.\(^5\)

Trump’s rants were seen by pundits as defensive gestures preparing him for a big loss as polls were predicting a 93% chance of a Clinton victory. Trump’s activities on October 25 and 26 seemed to indicate that he was thinking more about business and the future of his organization than his campaign. There were announcements that Trump would engage in no more fundraisers for the Republican Party during the reminder of the campaign on a day when Tim Kaine allegedly attended five Democratic Party fundraisers, according to an interview with him on *The Rachel Maddow Show*.

On Tuesday, Trump held an event with employees of Trump National Doral resort in Miami, and his opening gambit was to assemble his apparently mostly Latino employees and get them to cheer him on. He opened with an attack on Obamacare and claimed that his employees were having “lots of problems with it” (there were media reports that monthly premiums were going up more than 20 per cent next year). Unfortunately for Trump, the manager of the resort had to confess that Trump’s employees were covered by private insurance from the organization and did not use Obamacare.

The next day, instead of spending the morning in one of the battleground states where polls show him trailing Clinton, Trump attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony at his newly renovated and opened hotel at the Old Post Office on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington where he had held a press conference declaring that Obama was born in the U.S. and blaming Hillary Clinton for the entire birther movement. Privileging business promotion over campaigning in the last two weeks of a hard fought campaign inevitably raised questions
about whether Trump was really more interested in business than politics, or recognized he was losing and was planning for his return to business after the presidential race.

Trump’s talking point in his ceremony opening the hotel was that it had come in “under budget and ahead of schedule.” Yet he couldn’t resist saying: “Congratulations, Newt, on last night. That was an amazing interview. We don’t play games, Newt, right? We don’t play games.” That interview was a clash between former Speaker of the House and thrice married adulterer Newt Gingrich and Trump nemesis Megan Kelly on *Fox News*. When Ms. Kelly brought up whether the sexual assault accusations against Mr. Trump were taking a toll on his poll numbers, Gingrich asked why Bill Clinton’s accusers weren’t getting covered, and when Kelly answered by saying that on her show they had been covered, Gingrich lost it, accusing Kelly of being “fascinated with sex.” She retorted that she was “fascinated by the protection of women.” Gingrich continued to bluster and Kelly signed off by telling him: “You can take your anger issues and spend some time working on them.”

The story became the highlight of the day, dominated the news cycle, and once again sent the message that Trump and his surrogates were clueless in dealing with women and unaware how angry women were becoming with the Trump campaign as their poll numbers with women continued to plummet. There was also widespread recognition that Trump’s brand had taken a beating during the course of a vicious campaign in which the businessman repeatedly made incendiary remarks about Mexicans, women, Muslims, immigrants, African-Americans, and whatever other group offended him. There were reports of efforts afoot to remove Trump’s name from some of the New York residential towers he had built when people began selling their apartments, saying that they were ashamed to be living in a building with TRUMP on it. And in Hollywood, activist James Otis attacked the Trump star on the Walk of Fame and badly defaced it.

Meanwhile, the Clinton campaign deployed the star power of Michelle Obama in North Carolina on Thursday, with the first joint appearance of the two first ladies. Both warned sharply against voter apathy, and Obama called Hillary “sister” and noted that “Hillary
doesn’t play,” after ticking off Clinton’s professional accomplishments and highlighting her qualifications to be president to the jubilant cheers from the 11,000 who came to see the joint appearance at Lawrence Joel Veterans Memorial Coliseum. Closing her argument, Ms. Obama stated: “She (i.e. Hillary) has more experience and exposure to the presidency than any candidate in our lifetime – yes, more than Barack, more than Bill – so she is absolutely ready to be commander in chief on Day 1. And yes,” Obama paused for dramatic effect, “she happens to be a woman.”

The Clinton campaign was given a final gift by Donald the Deplorable before the biggest shock and setback for Clintonland which appeared to be headed for an easy win, maybe a landslide. On Friday, October 18, 2016, there were announcements that a former Miss Finland had become the 12th woman to openly accuse Trump of sexual assault. Ninni Laaksonen alleged in an interview with the Finnish newspaper *Ilta-Sanomat* that Trump had groped her before an appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman* in 2006. Ms. Laaksonen claimed: “Before the show we were photographed outside the building. Trump stood right next to me and suddenly he squeezed my butt. He really grabbed my butt.” Donald’s butt-grabbing would be completely overshadowed by an October Surprise that would have momentous consequences for the election and the U.S. political future.