

Introduction

Early in my first year of college, I got involved in the Nuclear Freeze movement. One night, I toiled into the wee hours stenciling a horrid little handmade poster that said: “We’re not Communists and we’re not homosexuals... We just want to prevent a nuclear holocaust.”

The poster somehow succeeded in drawing a few dozen students to a meeting, after which a graduate student quietly took me aside and critiqued my poster’s expressions of homophobia and red-baiting. The two concepts were unfamiliar to me, but I quickly learned that they were harmful and hurtful. The grad student’s explanation was straightforward and casual—no shaming, no lecturing, no self-righteous indignation.

Had the grad student humiliated me, I might have withdrawn in shame or turned to a conservative campus group that would lick the wounds inflicted by the politically correct police. But thanks to her skill in teaching me something without putting me on the defensive, I was able to digest and accept the lesson.

I wish that the next chapter of the story was about how I modeled myself after her and sprinkled seeds of wisdom across America that blossomed into a progressive populist revolution. Not exactly.

One summer by the pool just after college graduation, my friend’s boyfriend, upon learning that I was about to move to San Francisco, said he could never live in a place with “so many

homos.” I replied, “That’s not a problem for men who are secure in their masculinity.” It was a slam dunk by 1980s gender-binary standards, a sick burn on the deplorable homophobe. I showed him all right. But what did I show him? How to resent snarky liberals?

I carried on in a similar vein right up through the 2016 election, tuning in to Jon Stewart on an as-needed basis to remind myself how much smarter and superior my tribe of educated, mostly white liberals and progressives was. And then, the stuff of nightmares unfolded. A nihilistic demagogue had hijacked what was left of our democracy and turned it into the worst, most crass and dangerous reality TV show ever.

November 9 had barely dawned before my contempt level began registering in the ninetieth percentile, not just toward Trump but toward his supporters. As I binged on articles, blogs, and Facebook rants, my contempt was validated a hundredfold: Who *were* These People—these crazy, racist, misogynistic, gun-toting knuckleheads who voted for a self-aggrandizing, monosyllabic, bilious, billionaire charlatan who would obviously stab them in the back as they sat in front of their TVs, being lobotomized by Sean Hannity while swilling non-craft beer?

In fact, I knew nothing about These People and, at the same time, I knew all I needed to know—they were backward, brain-washed yokels who prefer cleavage to pantsuits and Ann Coulter’s vicious racism to Stephen Colbert’s satirical genius; rednecks who eat a lot of meat but not because they’re following a Paleo diet. And they deserved to go down with their titanic mistake.

Where was Jon Stewart when I needed him most? Last I could recall he was having a mock orgasm as he thanked The Donald for descending from comedy heaven on a golden escalator to run as a vanity candidate.¹

Who could blame us for berating and mocking half of the population? How could we *not* ridicule them? After all, our adversaries had long since become certifiably insane with their birtherism and their Benghazi hearings, their guns and their rage over Obamacare and transgender bathrooms. They were so dense

and cognitively impaired, it was sad. Really, we might pity them if they weren't such a basket of deplorables.

Remember how George W. Bush didn't even know how to pronounce "nuclear"? Remember how we "mis-underestimated" him? Twice? Then we mis-underestimated those Tea Party nutters. And then we mis-underestimated The Donald. Acknowledgment of our hubris was in order, but instead we doubled down on condescension—the stupidity of those red-state rubes was once again destroying America.

Trump's election made many of us feel hurt, angry, and scared. Reeling from the daily shock and awe, we do our best to defend ourselves against his malevolence. Often, our defensiveness takes the form of contempt, a blend of anger, disgust, and superiority.

Faced with an increasingly oligarchical military-surveillance-prison-financial-industrial complex that varies little as Republican and Democratic administrations come and go, there's constant need to speak truth to—and about—power. But our truth-telling too often takes the form of what literary critic Tim Parks calls "failed" satire:

[T]he criteria for assessing it [satire] are fairly simple: if it doesn't point toward positive change, or encourage people to think in a more enlightened way, it has failed. That doesn't mean it's not amusing and well-observed, or even, for some, hilarious, in the way, say, witty mockery of a political enemy can be hilarious and gratifying and can *intensify our sense of being morally superior*. But as satire it has failed. *The worst case is when satire reinforces the state of mind it purports to undercut, polarizes prejudices, and provokes the very behavior it condemns* [emphasis added].²

Parks was critiquing the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo's* grotesque mockery of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, but he may as well have been writing about the ways in which the US liberal creative and political class has fostered a sense of moral and intellectual superiority that has thoroughly antagonized conservative Americans.

It's not just that we—liberals and progressives—vigorously disagree with their beliefs and are enraged by the brutality of militarism, corporatism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. We express our opposition in a condescending, self-righteous manner that invalidates their fears, questions their intelligence, and belittles values that are sacred to them—order, stability, religion, loyalty, individualism.

We *want* all Americans to be offended by all of the things that offend us but, when they aren't, instead of meeting them where *they're* at, we insult and shame them in an ill-fated effort to bring them around to where *we're* at. But from what I've observed and what social science tells us, hurling vitriolic truth bombs across the left-right divide only widens it.

Jodie Shokraifard, a working-class Obama voter who sat out the 2016 election, tells the story of being puzzled by a Facebook meme contrasting the migrant caravan with urban crime. When she asked her Facebook friends to explain the meme to her, they denounced her as an “idiotic Trump supporter.” None would deign to explain the meme to her. Not one. “Why is it easier to call me racist and dumb than it is to answer the question?” Jodie asks.³ Why, indeed. Here's a woman begging to learn something, but her supercilious “friends” are too cool for school. The pervasiveness of this attitude results in countless lost opportunities for learning and growth. Where will Jodie Shokraifard turn for understanding now that her liberal friends have cast her out?

A young man I'll call Todd told me that his aunt, whom he had always looked up to, began attacking him on Facebook when she learned he was a right-leaning Independent. She posted long rants decrying Republicanism, picked fights with his Facebook friends, and demanded to know if he supported Obama. When Todd said he didn't support Obama because of his positions on health care and other issues, she insisted that his reasons were invalid and that he must be a racist. Their relationship became estranged and never recovered, a turn of events that caused him great sadness.

American political culture grows ever more divisive, spiteful and abrasive, more cruel, more hateful. “Mainstream media,” says Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism Dean Edward Wasserman, “have made a fortune teaching people the wrong ways to talk to each other.”⁴ Political discourse has become a hyperpartisan, vitriolic blood sport, terribly profitable for the corporate media and terribly terrible for society.⁵

Leftists are not the primary purveyors of cruelty and hate, but we’re complicit in debasing the culture of political discourse. I draw no moral equivalency between (a) hateful rhetoric and actions against vulnerable groups of people and (b) abrasive, condescending, or spiteful words directed at those who promote or acquiesce in bigotry. But the epidemic of the former does not, in my mind, justify the epidemic of the latter, especially when the target is low-income whites whose American Dream has been smothered in its sleep.

Even participation *within* the Left can feel like a circular firing squad. During the 2016 primary, some angry Clinton supporters derided “Bernie bros,” and some angry Bernie supporters denounced Clinton as a “corporate Democratic whore.”⁶

Progressives may feel justified in being snide and impatient because we’re losing ground on peace and social justice as fast as the ice sheets are losing mass. *How can our adversaries not see that Trump and the GOP (and, some believe, neoliberal Democrats) are driving us over a cliff?*

New Yorker satirist Andy Borowitz captures smug liberal weariness at having to enlighten ignoramus:

Many Americans are tired of explaining things to idiots, particularly when the things in question are so painfully obvious, a new poll indicates... According to the poll, conducted by the University of Minnesota’s Opinion Research Institute, while millions have been vexed for some time by their failure to explain incredibly basic information to dolts, that frustration has now reached a breaking point.

Of the many obvious things that people are sick and tired of trying to get through the skulls of stupid people, the fact that climate change will cause catastrophic habitat destruction and devastating extinctions tops the list, with a majority saying that they will no longer bother trying to explain this to cretins.⁷

I'd like to think Borowitz was poking fun at liberal superiority, but I doubt we're his targets. Published online a week after Trump announced his candidacy, Borowitz was, like Stewart, cashing in on Trump's gift to satirists. But, like the failed *Charlie Hebdo* satire Parks critiques, it provokes the very behavior it condemns.

Humiliating one's adversaries is a dangerous business. It may be clever and gratifying, but it's not wise. The feeling of humiliation is a mixture of shame and anger. German social psychologist Evelin Lindner calls humiliation "the nuclear bomb of the emotions." By stripping away the other person's dignity, humiliation inflicts a mortal wound, leaving the humiliated mind to convince itself of the need to inflict even greater pain on the perpetrator. Lindner identifies horrific spirals of humiliation in the genocidal histories of Germany, Somalia, Rwanda, and Serbia, where she learned the Somali proverb, "Humiliation is worse than death; in times of war, words of humiliation hurt more than bullets."⁸

Most Trump supporters have views that liberals loathe. The trouble comes when we go beyond challenging the views to humiliating, denigrating, and "othering" the people themselves, the "deplorables" who are afflicted not only with contemptible belief systems but with bad taste, low intelligence, and gullibility. We treat them like cardboard cutouts of stereotypical redneck bigots or brainwashed evangelicals who have no valid cause for complaining.

We deny Trump supporters the legitimacy of their grievances because we don't look beyond the white nationalist demagoguery that has hijacked said grievances. But as Lindner cautions, "For our own sake and safety, we must give serious study and attention

to all feelings of humiliation, because *even if the injury is imaginary, the revenge is just as real* [emphasis added].”⁹ When we dehumanize others, we invite them to dehumanize us. A vicious cycle starts spinning—one with enough centrifugal force to jettison the altruistic impulses that hold society together.

Trump is the king of contempt. Lacking a positive vision for our country, he fills the void by insulting his enemies. Instead of focusing relentlessly on crafting and communicating a strong progressive agenda, the Left strikes back with caustic tweets and YouTube smackdowns wherein a liberal hero “utterly destroys” or “owns” some conservative or another. Nancy Pelosi was approvingly dubbed the Queen of Condescension when she mockingly clapped back at Trump during the 2018 State of the Union address, her smile an unmistakable smirk.¹⁰ This, after questioning Trump’s “manhood” and comparing him to a skunk during the standoff over border-wall funding.¹¹

No matter how abusive and crass Trump is, we can choose our style of expression, our path toward what writer Charles Eisenstein calls “the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.” Every time we express ourselves, we can consider: Will a stinging counterattack make me feel less hurt and afraid? For how long? Will it touch someone’s heart or stir up their bitterness, cause them to see me as more or less of a fellow human being?

Some believe that we must always fight fire with fire and see a call for respectful communication as an objectionable form of tone policing that protects the oppressors. Others, including the Dream Corps’ #LoveArmy, the Revolutionary Love Project, and Reverend William Barber’s Repairers of the Breach movement, assert that unity and respect for the humanity of all people are the preconditions for enduring social justice. #LoveArmy’s mission is to “win without deepening divides.” It asks members to commit to guiding principles like “Turn to each other, not on each other,” “Call each other up—not out,” and “Heal divides.”¹²

In a 1959 speech to the War Resisters League, Martin Luther King, Jr., said that the civil rights struggle was against evil *forces*, not evil *doers*, and that the end goal is redemption, reconciliation,

and the creation of a beloved community. “To retaliate [with hate and bitterness] would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe... someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate.”¹³

In an echo across the decades, I heard the same sentiment articulated at the 2019 Othering & Belonging Conference. There, Reverend Ben McBride, whose Operation Ceasefire initiative led to a 40 percent drop in Oakland, California’s homicide rate, called on the audience to be “hard on structures, soft on people” and to stop “othering” our adversaries: “What’s the point of getting to the Promised Land if you become the pharaoh in the process?” His organization, PICO California, is focusing on “bridging” rather than “breaking.”¹⁴

Alicia Garza, cofounder of the Black Lives Matter movement, struck a similar chord in a powerful talk she gave in Detroit in 2017. Garza reflected on the need to not only build power but to *transform* it, to “call us back to our humanity” by organizing movements across lines of difference and eschewing the desire for revenge. Though her talk concerned the role of white women *within* social justice movements, I believe the principles she articulates can be applied to conservatives as well.

A movement that rejects the potential of liberatory relationships is a movement that is destined to fail. A movement that believes that change is not possible will not succeed. Not everyone will pursue change, even when given the opportunity. But many will, and it’s our job to be the alternative that is more attractive than the status quo. Colonization, capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, heteronormativity, patriarchy—all of these systems function to break the bonds of relationship between us. Our movement must be a different one. One that seeks to forge many different kinds of relationships that reject the systems that tear us apart, reject the fear and hatred, and that reject power *over* in favor of power *with*... We are here to examine how we can bring about the world we desire while dismantling the one we don’t.¹⁵

Not everyone shares the philosophy of radical inclusivity. Some may agree with it in theory but aren't able or willing to abide it. As Reverend Jennifer Bailey, founder of the Faith Matters Network, compassionately explains, some people are in too much pain to engage openheartedly in building bridges across lines of difference, an endeavor that requires a degree of vulnerability that may not be possible for those who have been hurt by white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, or classism.¹⁶

Beyond Contempt represents my personal choice in how to communicate with people whose beliefs I view as harmful, dangerous, or irrational. As an able-bodied, white, straight, financially secure, native-born, Jewish, cisgender woman, I'm safe from many of the threats Trump has ramped up and don't want to criticize the choices oppressed people make about how best to protect themselves or express their grief, fear, and rage; hence, this book is an invitation, not a prescription.



Beyond Contempt is for liberals and progressives who want to be able to communicate with the tens of millions of Americans who approve of Donald Trump and some or all of the views he represents. Some of them may be your family members, friends, or neighbors. Some of them are the voters whose doors you'll be knocking on in the summer and fall of 2020, or who will see your tweets, blogs, and Facebook posts, your letters to the editor, your campaign ads and speeches. If you've been avoiding Trump supporters since 2016 or have an outrage hangover, this book is for you.

The first half delves into the dynamics of contempt, how and why it arises, and how people respond (poorly) to being treated with contempt. I survey the cultural landscape, showing how media and politics are rife with contempt, much of it class-based. And I show how contempt toward Trump voters often goes hand in hand with indifference toward the well-being of faltering white working-class communities.

We can be passionate and angry, we can hold wrongdoers accountable, we can even be confrontational and disruptive; but

if we lace our speech with vitriol, if we engage in caustic Twitter feuds, if we express our beliefs in a snide or self-righteous manner that deprecates those who disagree, I believe that we do our cause a disservice. When we spice up our speech with snark, only the choir savors the taste.

If, after reading the first three chapters, you believe that scorning and scolding Trump supporters is counterproductive, then the second half of the book invites you to try a different mode of expression.

Several years ago, I chanced upon the work of Sharon Strand Ellison, creator of a novel communication approach called Powerful Non-Defensive Communication (PNDC™). Ellison has trained thousands of educators, attorneys, government officials, and corporate and nonprofit leaders, and was credited with turning around the trailing campaign of Barbara Roberts, Oregon's first woman governor, by training Roberts in PNDC. She also trained activists who successfully defeated an Oregon ballot initiative that would have legalized discrimination against gay and lesbian public school teachers.

I've worked extensively with Ellison to apply PNDC to the current political divide, enabling liberals and progressives to engage with conservatives in ways that defuse hostility and create the possibility of finding common ground or, at least, do not cause them to become defensively entrenched in their position. Much of the material in the second half comes courtesy of Ellison's genius in phrasing questions and statements in ways that can open hearts and minds or, at least, not seal them shut. After decades of work as a public interest attorney and activist, I've had to unlearn several adversarial and self-righteous communication pitfalls. My skill with PNDC is a work in progress; there are times when I revert to convincing, judging, or withdrawing in disgust. Rest assured that you can rely on Ellison's expertise to guide you past my weak spots in chapters four, five, and six. (Apart from communication techniques, the views expressed in this book are my own, not hers).

For the most part, the communication guidance in this book applies to one-on-one conversations with ordinary people with whom you'd like to be able to talk without blowing your stack. It can also be helpful in interactions with people in positions of power (and their staff) when your strategy includes dialogue or negotiation. Lastly, there are some takeaways for media commentators and activists writing or speaking on divisive topics.

Beyond Contempt is not a call for genteel manners or meekness. It's an invitation to reclaim and reimagine a democratic notion of civility that facilitates public discourse through listening, understanding, and deliberating. Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell put it best: "A society guided by civility will allow a political debate that is vigorous, even fractious, while retaining a goal we should consider binding: the possibility that minds can be changed."¹⁷ So long as the United States is a democracy, we will share it with conservatives—our choice is whether to communicate with them in a manner that fosters understanding and goodwill, or that stirs up hatred.

PNDC doesn't call for being nicey-nice, feigning respect for hateful or dangerous beliefs, or subordinating justice to civility. It's not about adhering to norms of decorum that, some have argued, have been established by the powerful to insulate themselves from public accountability. It's not about being conciliatory or compromising—unless that's the chosen strategy for a reformist agenda. Rather, it's about listening to adversaries and articulating your position, passionately and compassionately, modeling the more beautiful world you want to live in. In *my* more beautiful world, there's accountability but not shame, reconciliation but not punishment, anger but not cruelty, authentic rage but not performative outrage, and passionate commitment to my beliefs, alongside compassion for the vulnerability of those who feel threatened by my beliefs.

What I value so deeply about PNDC is that it empowers people to speak their truth without blaming, denigrating, and gratuitously antagonizing others. We can stand up, sit in, speak

up, shut down; we can march, strike, and boycott. We can disrupt institutions that treat human and ecological crises with indifference. We have an array of tactics at our disposal, and if we wield them not as weapons of war but as tools for promoting understanding and prompting action, they'll be of greater value.

In my communication, I can *choose* not to be cruel to the cruel. When I speak, it's to express my pain, fear, or anger, not to blame or punish those who have done wrong by me, or demonstrate my intellectual or moral superiority. I can speak my mind without degrading someone else in the process.

To a certain extent, antagonism is unavoidable in the social justice struggle. When Martin Luther King, Jr., led civil rights protestors in nonviolent civil disobedience, many disapproved of their disruptive, confrontational tactics, yet their disapproval didn't dampen public support for the civil rights legislation enacted during that tumultuous era. I believe that's because King eschewed gratuitous personal attacks and demonization of the movement's racist foes. As King said in praise of the early civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois, "He did not content himself with hurling invectives for emotional release and then to retire into smug, passive satisfaction."¹⁸

For King, the social justice struggle was rooted in beloved community, and conflicts reconciled in ways that turn opponents into friends and "bring about miracles in the hearts of men."¹⁹ I might not be spiritually capable of going so far as King did to befriend or love my opponents, but I do recognize the futility—and danger—of inflaming their hatred of me.

Trump is the anti-King. In a 1990 interview, Trump said of then-President Bush, "I disagree with him when he talks of a kinder, gentler America. I think if this country gets any kinder or gentler, it's literally going to cease to exist."²⁰ Trump sees compassion as the enemy. Do we?

Among the many factors that made Trump's rise possible is the toxic state of our political culture, brimming with vitriol and bereft of empathy. Opinion leaders and political figures have increasingly adopted a combative, nasty, self-righteous style. Both

sides do it in different ways and to different degrees. There are plenty of books you can read about the mean-spirited, dishonest, and divisive antics of right-wing ne'er-do-wells. This book is about our bad, not theirs.

The majority of Americans are exhausted by tribal divisiveness and say that the outrage culture has led them to tune out politics altogether.²¹ When people disengage, they're more apt to make uninformed decisions at the voting booth or stay home, which leaves elections in the hands of voters who are disproportionately wealthy, evangelical, and/or NRA members.²² The Left has its own faithful base, but we need the increasingly apathetic blue-collar swing voters of all races to show up, too.

As the 2020 election gets underway, scorn for Heartland and Appalachian voters is not what the doctor ordered. Pulitzer-prize winning writer and progressive populist Art Cullen, who publishes a local newspaper in Storm Lake, Iowa, criticizes Democrats like the Clintons for whom Iowa is flyover country...that is, until the Iowa caucuses roll around, and then suddenly they touch down to express dismay over rural hard knocks.²³ As I recount in chapter two, somewhere along the way, the Heartland became Dumfuckistan, its troubles written off as the self-inflicted wounds of racist old white fools—never mind the fact that those fools wield 159 out of 538 electoral votes.

Many leftists believe our efforts are better spent mobilizing young and minority voters than wasting time with Cullen's Midwestern swing voters. I favor a both/and approach to voter turnout. Drove of working-class voters of all races in swing states chose not to vote in 2016, in far greater numbers than the margin of Clinton's loss.²⁴ In addition, substantial numbers of economically populist Obama voters turned to Trump, enough in key electoral states to tip the election.²⁵ Democratic success in the 2018 midterm elections was a function of *both* high base turnout *and* Trump voters who flipped blue (and who, political scientists believe, could swing either way in 2020).²⁶

According to Republican strategist Ari Fleischer, Trump's re-election strategy again hinges on flipping white working-class

swing voters.²⁷ But alas for Trump, Working America, the political organizing arm of the AFL-CIO, has surveyed thousands of swing-state voters and found that many of them are ambivalent about Trump's performance—and open to ditching him in 2020.²⁸ We won't win back blue collar whites with disdain.

Consider a young white Pennsylvanian swing voter like Kaitlyn Harrold, who quickly came to regret her vote for Trump. Harrold grew up in a conservative white suburb of Pittsburgh and has family members on both sides of the aisle. She didn't like either candidate but was influenced by several Haitian-American coworkers who were voting for Trump because they believed that the Clinton Foundation misappropriated monies it had raised for Haitian earthquake victims. She also figured that being so rich, Trump wouldn't be an "establishment puppet."²⁹

Harrold didn't approve of Trump's bigotry, but it wasn't until she moved to Pittsburgh and "met people who watched their best friends get shot on the street" that she began to understand systemic racism. "My hometown was all I knew, and I was very influenced by my community and didn't see the big picture," she explains. Once she began empathizing with victims of racism and poverty, her moral compass shifted, and she switched her party registration to Democrat. Harrold didn't jump ship because her coworkers hectored her. She shifted because they shared their stories with her. Even her vote for Trump was motivated by compassion for Haitian-Americans she believed Clinton had wronged.

How many other Kaitlyn Harrolds are out there, decent people who are not entrenched in reactionary ideologies but whose parochial upbringing steered them toward Trump? And how many are we surrendering to Trump when we treat them with contempt?



In *Rules for Resistance*, seasoned opponents of autocracies from around the globe beseech Americans not to make the same mistake they did of feeding tribal polarization by scorning their adversaries as stupid, gullible, and racist. "Don't hate people for

voting for Trump,” writes Indian journalist and Narendra Modi critic Satyen Bordoloi. “Understand them, engage with them today... Don’t force fence-sitters to jump on the side of the bigots by you calling them so.”³⁰ In my research for this book, I heard American conservatives saying much the same: that they value loyalty dearly, and liberal contempt makes them *more loyal* to Trump and unifies them in hatred of their enemy (us). “Donald Trump may be a fool,” notes conservative journalist Rod Dreher, “but he’s their fool.”³¹

No matter who occupies the halls of power after 2020, the struggle for peace, and social and environmental justice never ends. Many of us will forever be lobbying, rallying, writing, speaking, filmmaking, artmaking, litigating, teaching, and tweeting to bend the arc of the future toward justice. In every one of these endeavors, we can accelerate change, defuse backlash, and increase cohesiveness by communicating respectfully—or, at least, neutrally—with those who are animated by a different set of values, hopes, fears, and, yes, heavy sigh, “facts.”

The radical premise at the heart of this book is that asserting our own humanity does not require the degradation of other people’s humanity—that we can honor the dignity of every person, *even if the other side doesn’t*. The belief that we *should* humiliate and belittle our opponents is rooted in what Ellison calls “the war model of communication,” in which dialogue is a battle with a winner and a loser, and it’s our soldierly duty to browbeat our opponent with force. In war, that force is lethal; in communication, it creates and maintains the great divide.

Washington Post columnist Margaret Sullivan has sage advice for journalists laboring in the age of Trump: “Lose the smugness. Keep the mission.” Her advice to journalists (which many *Post* writers have ignored) applies equally to activists, elected officials, influence leaders, and the rest of us. Holding the powerful accountable is more important than ever and is best achieved with a measure of humility.³² *Beyond Contempt* is an invitation to learn how to communicate across the great divide with integrity, passion, and compassion. It will show you how to imbue your

words with the power to defuse hostility, build connection, and, just maybe, discover that somewhere in the great divide there exists an island of common ground where we can break bread together as fallible, complicated, sad, joyful humans.

Contempt and Its Discontents

*If we write off half of society as deplorable,
we forfeit claims on their attention.*

—Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*

Psychologist John Gottman can watch a married couple talk for a few minutes and predict with 94 percent accuracy whether that couple will still be together in 15 years. The number one predictor of divorce? Contempt.¹

Out of a pool of 56 couples, it was the seven who harshly criticized each other, rolled their eyes, and made snide remarks who didn't make it to their sixth anniversary. Had Gottman randomly guessed which couples were destined for divorce court, he would have had a 0.000000004 percent chance of correctly identifying all seven. Gottman isn't psychic, but he understands contempt's power to destroy relationships. If contempt can erode the love between two adults who had planned to spend their lives together, imagine what it can do to political adversaries.

If you can't imagine, watch a two-minute video called "Man Gets Schooled by Anti-Fascism Sign."² The video is from a 2018 May Day rally in Seattle, where 21-year-old Luke Mahler, dressed in a Patriot Prayer t-shirt, tried unsuccessfully to rip up a discarded sign reading, "In the Name of Humanity, We REFUSE to Accept a Fascist America" while onlookers heckled him. (Patriot Prayer is an "alt-right" group. Although not considered a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center as of this writing, Patriot Prayer rallies alongside hate groups and provokes violent clashes with antifascist protestors.)³

The hecklers mocked Mahler's strength and intelligence, suggesting that "educated engineers" at the nearby Amazon office could help him out. "You need a liberal to help you with that, dude. You're too fucking stupid to figure it out on your own," said one of them. A video of the encounter went viral, providing an online forum for a barrage of taunts. There were hundreds of hateful comments posted by people on both sides: those who saw him as a Nazi who deserved to be ridiculed and "alt-rightists" furious that he had embarrassed them.

Online hecklers reveled sadistically in Mahler's humiliation, calling him a "dumbfuck," "human garbage," and "soy boy." Several said they were trying to get him fired from his job at a local restaurant. Others mocked his "manboobs" and weak hands, speculated that he was a virgin, and wished he would be beaten to death.

As I scanned the nasty comments, I couldn't always tell the two sides apart:

"Hey you, out of the gene pool."

"He should use his teeth before someone knocks them out of his stupid head one day soon."

"Nothing better than watching pathetic Nazis get humiliated."

"You can tell how miserable and dumb he is...what a waste of a life."

Occasionally, a commenter expressed concern that the verbal abuse had gone too far, especially since Mahler is autistic. Such heresy was quickly stamped out as fascist apologism. When one person suggested that "mocking someone for being weak is against liberal values," another responded, "Mocking people is against liberal values. Lucky for us, conservatives and alt-right aren't people."

Mahler says he tried to destroy the sign not because of what it said but because it was created by Refuse Fascism, a group he claims had glitter-bombed and assaulted members of his group

(an obscure offshoot of Patriot Prayer) months earlier.⁴ (He provided me with video footage of the glitter bomb.) When I asked him how he felt about the public shaming he was experiencing, he showed no emotion and said his autism makes it hard to recognize sarcasm.

I don't know what to make of Mahler. He could be a full-fledged white nationalist. He could be, as he insisted to me, a defender of free speech who counts Muslims, gays, and Latinos among his friends and group members. He could be a college junior dabbling in the "alt-lite," trying to find himself. He could be all or none of the above. But for the hecklers, he was a cardboard cutout of a white nationalist, devoid of humanity, worthy only of venomous contempt.

One astute commenter predicted that if Mahler weren't already "incel," he would be now. (*Incel* refers to the online community of involuntarily celibate misogynists.)⁵ The alt-right actively targets autistic, depressed, and socially anxious individuals in online discussion forums and gaming sites.⁶ Whatever loneliness, angst, or anger led this young man to Patriot Prayer could only have been magnified by the public humiliation.

The hecklers may have believed themselves to be doing the right thing in ruthlessly shaming a racist. But feeling as though we're doing the right thing doesn't necessarily mean we are.

The Contempt Reflex

Contempt is a complex sentiment produced by a blend of anger, disgust, and, frequently, superiority. It's a feeling of scorn toward someone we hold in low esteem and wish to reject or punish. We display contempt through facial expressions and vocalizations, such as sneering, eye-rolling, snorting, sighing, and tsk-tsk tongue clicking.⁷ Next time you catch yourself rolling your eyes at someone, ask yourself what you're feeling. (If that someone is your significant other, make an appointment with Dr. Gottman.)

Contempt is often leveled by a higher-status individual looking down upon a lower-status other, as suggested by the common

term “beneath contempt.” In the act of displaying contempt, we assert our superiority and social dominance over the contemptuous other.⁸

In a split second, the brain can appraise another as morally or intellectually inferior and, therefore, unworthy of one’s attention.⁹ Often, we treat the entire person’s character as contemptuous rather than homing in on a specific offensive behavior or trait. If I hold someone in contempt, there’s little reason to engage them in dialogue—a casual sneer or snide comment will generally suffice to dismiss the contemptuous other.

Trump dispatched his 2016 rivals with crude displays of contempt—“Lyin’ Ted,” “Little Marco,” and “Low-Energy Jeb;” he is gearing up for 2020 with “Sleepy Joe” and “Crazy Bernie.” A TV or radio personality looking to fill airtime and delight their partisan audience might go beyond a snarky put-down and indulge in a lengthier reverie on the idiocy, lunacy, and moral reprehensibility of the object of their contempt.

The “emotional goal” of contempt is to exclude or punish the inferior other. By showing contempt, I inflict shame on the transgressor and then remove them from consideration.¹⁰ I might not even trouble myself with explaining the basis for my views—it’s so *obvious* that I’m superior and anyone who doesn’t recognize this is hopelessly clueless. In other words, I write the person off as irredeemable or, as Hillary Clinton classified half of Trump supporters, “deplorables.”

Clinton’s supporters saw the blowback against her “deplorables” gaffe as unfair. Perhaps. It’s true that, in the next and under-reported part of her speech, she spoke empathetically about the other half of Trump’s base, people who felt that the government and economy had let them down and that no one cared about them.¹¹ But in 2018, she was still dissing the Heartland and blaming its washed-up residents for her defeat:

If you look at the map of the United States, there’s all that red in the middle where Trump won. I win the coasts. But

what the map doesn't show you is that I won the places that represent two-thirds of America's gross domestic product. So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward.¹²

If, as Clinton claims, her base of coastal elites is optimistic, diverse, dynamic, and moving forward, the implication is that red-state voters represent pessimism, white ethnocentrism, lethargy, and backwardness.

In politics, perception is reality. If a voting block perceives Hillary as disdainful toward them, then she is. And because she tossed out the unsubstantiated charge that "half" of Trump voters belong in the basket of deplorables, that left *all* Trump supporters wondering if she was referring to them. With a 50-50 chance that they were being placed in the basket of deplorables, they were incensed, just like they were when Obama made the following comment on the 2008 campaign trail: "They get bitter, they cling to guns or religion, or [have] antipathy to people who aren't like them, or [use] anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." Eight years later, Iowan Dennis Schminke cited Obama's comment as part of his rationale for voting for Trump: "His comment, the whole thing, it's been worn out to death, that clinging to God and guns, God and guns, and afraid of people who don't look like them, blah, blah, blah. Just quit talking down to me."¹³

Contempt rankles, and the alienation it engenders has a long half-life.

Contempt Toward Trump and His Base

Several times a day, Americans are subjected to Trump's latest outburst of Islamophobia, bellicosity, misogyny, white supremacy, narcissism, mendacity, ineptitude, and/or ignorance. For the first year or so, I lapped it up. I loved to hate it. Watching Trump act despicably or butcher the English language made me feel vastly superior. Alongside my revulsion and rage, what really fueled my

horrified fascination with Donald J. Trump was my contempt for him.

Princeton psychologist Susan Fiske has observed that, when someone is in a scornful frame of mind, their brain's reward center lights up in the same way as when they are praised.¹⁴ In other words, contempt feels good; when we unleash it on an adversary, it can serve as a fleeting emotional pick-me-up, like those who delighted in the man-versus-sign heckling. When I deem Trump—or one of his supporters—to be reactionary and stupid, then I'm quite the stable genius by comparison. If they're racists, then I'm morally superior. If they're gullible "fake news" consumers, then I'm a savvy freethinker. If they're ruled by fear and anger, then I'm a rational actor with a complex inner life. And if These People—these know-nothing, fearful bigots—are controlling the levers of power, then I have a strong urge to assert my dominance over them by displaying my disdain.

When, oh when, will those racist old white guys just die off?

Contempt is junk food for the soul. And for Lefties whose souls have been battered daily since 2016, it's an irresistibly gratifying treat, and one that can feel like a necessary form of emotional self-regulation and protection. Trump's hairstyle, physique, and incessant bluster provide an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord of contemptible delicacies. From the moment he announced his candidacy, we mocked him, fat-shamed him, grammar-policed him, and pathologized him, and we laughed, oh how we laughed, right up until about 10:30 p.m. EST on Election Day, and then we cried.

We were chastened, but not for long. Hardly a day has gone by without my coming across a reference to the crazed, obese, orange Cheeto. On July 4, 2019, activists floated a giant diaper-clad Trump blimp at the National Mall. When he insisted on the border wall, Nancy Pelosi questioned his manhood. In defiance of the legitimacy of his election, I took to referring to him exclusively as BLOTUS (Biggest Liar of the United States).

We liberals and progressives indulge in cheap gratification by

deriding conservatives in ways that violate our own values—we fat-shame Chris Christie, slut-shame Megyn Kelly, gay-bait the Trump–Putin “bromance,” and IQ-shame too many to mention here. We disparage the “fever dreams” of “rabid right-wing nut-jobs” and, in so doing, denigrate those who suffer mental illness as well as conservatives. We refer to rural states as “flyover” country and its inhabitants as rednecks or, as Silicon Valley CEO Melinda Byerley put it, “shithole[s] with stupid people.”¹⁵ We lament that the simple-minded “Joe Six-Pack” just doesn’t get it. None of this goes unnoticed by working- and middle-class conservatives and, just in case a snide remark slips by, there’s a squadron of right-wing commentators standing by to make sure These People feel the sting of liberal condescension.

Weeks before the 2016 election, political comedian Bill Maher expressed exasperation at the number of states that Trump looked certain to win: “What the fuck does it take in this country to have being a human being supersede being a Republican?”¹⁶ Maher’s shock and horror are understandable, but when he contemptuously suggested that Republicans are subhuman, he did Trump a favor by playing the role of the sneering liberal elite. (Maher’s classist contempt is notorious: In 1998, he mocked the death of seven workers in a Kansas grain elevator, one of whose bodies was still missing, saying that the community should check their loaves of Wonder Bread.)¹⁷

Maher’s snipe echoed actor Julia Roberts’ gibe during a 2000 Democratic National Committee (DNC) fundraiser: “Republican comes in the dictionary just after reptile and just above repugnant...I looked up Democrat. It’s of the people, by the people, for the people.”¹⁸ Roberts’ wisecrack smacks of snobbish superiority—just picture the room full of wealthy DNC donors who smugly see themselves as warm-blooded pillars of virtue. Rinse and repeat at the 2017 Golden Globes, where Meryl Streep knocked football as inferior to “arts,” and again during the 2018 Tony Awards, where Robert DeNiro waved his fists in the air and bellowed, “Fuck Trump” to a standing ovation of tuxedo-clad

glitterati.¹⁹ Feeling superior feels good. In fact, I'm feeling a tad superior in denouncing their superiority right now in case you didn't notice. (The contempt reflex is hard to restrain.)

A week after Maher's doozy, filmmaker Michael Moore said that anyone who voted for Trump was a "legal terrorist" and added:

It's like somebody went to Dr. Frankenstein last year and said, "I need a candidate who is the embodiment of every awful male trait, every awful white-man trait, and every awful rich guy trait and roll that all into one candidate"... He literally is a representative for each of these things that we've been seeing a gradual end to...The days of these dinosaurs are over. It's got to be hard on them. Nobody likes to give up power. We've been in charge for about 10,000 years, so it's a long run. We had a great streak.²⁰

However accurate Moore's diagnosis may be, the way he articulates it conveys an existential degree of contempt: Your days are numbered, deplorable white dinosaurs, and good riddance.

As his movie *Fahrenheit 11/9* attests, Michael Moore understood better than anyone how white blue-collar voters' feelings of resentment and alienation fueled Trump's rise. Yet he's been provoking These People since 2001, when he published *Stupid White Men*. The title alone speaks volumes, and the book relentlessly and gratuitously stereotypes and derogates the "stupid white men" who voted for George W. Bush, the stupidest white man of them all.

Moore satirically speculates that male birth rates are decreasing because Mother Earth is wisely rendering extinct pot-bellied boneheads whose purpose can be better served by a test tube and turkey baster.²¹ Put yourself in the shoes of the people Moore lambasts. What greater shame is there than being told you're so worthless you shouldn't even exist? The guys in your Swing Left chapter might not bridle at being called "stupid white men," but most white American males do, so what's to be gained by turning whiteness and maleness into epithets?

Contempt and condescension, rather than investigative reporting, fill the cable news airwaves. Watch CNN and MSNBC hosts and guests smirk knowingly at Trump's latest abomination. Notice when they cross the line from zealous reportage to sarcastic bloviating. Do we really need to watch Chris Cuomo and Kellyanne Conway go at it for the umpteenth time on CNN? Cuomo knows she's going to lie and spin, so what's the purpose in hosting her, other than to create a combative spectacle?

I cheered for CNN's Anderson Cooper when he demolished Trump's Orwellian assertion, days after calling Nicaragua and Haiti "shithole" countries, that he was the "least racist person you will ever interview."²² But after my contempt-high wore off and I watched the clip again, I began noticing Cooper's sarcasm and eye squinting, and his use of repetition to cast Trump in an even more unflattering light. Cooper wasn't merely furious with Trump; he was, I suspect, gratifying his desire to show how much he despised and disdained Trump. It was appropriate—indeed, necessary—for Cooper to report Trump's overt racism, but the condescending manner in which he packaged the presentation undermined its power. In the eyes of Trump supporters, I suspect Cooper's report came across as a haughty harangue, its meaning lost on them as they mentally deflected the implication that they were racist for voting for him.

Morning Joe cohosts and political moderates Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski, whose show MSNBC teases with the tagline "brutal honesty," are notorious for their excoriations of Trump, his administration, and his base. Brzezinski, for example, called Secretary of State Mike Pompeo a "butt boy" for the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, and Scarborough has castigated as "stupid" anyone who believes there's a crisis at the southern border.²³ Meanwhile, liberal talk-radio host Mike Malloy fills the airwaves with fantasies of right-wing adversaries suffering gruesome deaths.²⁴

Not all TV and radio personalities act superior, but enough of the 24/7 news cycle is replete with contempt to keep These

People convinced of “elite liberal media bias.” Rather than subject themselves to scorn, they tune in to Fox.

Just to be sure I wasn’t imagining things, I contacted David Matsumoto, a psychologist at San Francisco State University and a renowned expert in the fields of both micro-expressions and contempt. Matsumoto says contempt is “rampant” in the media. Though he usually examines frame-by-frame footage fastidiously to detect subtle, fleeting expressions of contempt, in today’s polarized political arena, Matsumoto requires no such high-tech scrutiny to recognize it.²⁵

Political scientist Jeffrey Berry and sociologist Sarah Sobieraj, two Tufts professors, mapped ten weeks of right and left cable TV, commentary shows, talk radio, political blogs, and newspaper columns to determine the prevalence of what they call “outrage discourse”—speech that intentionally provokes an emotional response through the use of tactics such as belittling, mockery, insults, misrepresentations, and ideologically extreme language.²⁶ They documented outrage discourse in *100 percent* of TV episodes, 99 percent of talk radio, and the vast majority of blogs and columns surveyed. While they found considerably more overall outrage speech on right-wing media, the Left holds its own when it comes to mockery and belittling.²⁷ Rod Dreher, a conservative who reports drifting right in reaction to liberal disdain, observes, “There is animosity and polarization on both sides, but...most of the organic *disdain* comes from educated liberals...Motives are impugned *constantly*. These people just know they have the magic answers for society, and the only reason anyone would disagree with them is because they are stupid bigots.”²⁸

On late-night comedy shows, many of which serve as *de facto* news programs, contempt is daily fare. Satirists perform a public service when they help us see contradictions and hypocrisies we might otherwise have missed. However, as Caitlin Flanagan, a moderately conservative contributing editor at *The Atlantic* notes, they don’t always punch up. Flanagan concedes that Trump’s grotesqueness invites disparagement, but chastises comedians who go after his supporters. She cites Samantha Bee’s takedown of a

young, Trump-admiring Christian boy as “Jerry Falwell in blond, larval form.”²⁹ That’s not comedy, that’s cruelty.

Flanagan describes shows like Bee’s and John Oliver’s as “imbued with the conviction that they and their fans are intellectually and morally superior to those who espouse any of the beliefs of the political right.” She goes on to make a disturbing observation:

Though aimed at blue-state sophisticates, these shows are an unintended but powerful form of propaganda for conservatives. When Republicans see these harsh jokes—which echo down through the morning news shows and the chattering day’s worth of viral clips, along with those of Jimmy Kimmel, Stephen Colbert, and Seth Meyers—they don’t just see a handful of comics mocking them...they see exactly what Donald Trump has taught them: that the entire media landscape loathes them, their values, their family, and their religion... No wonder so many of Trump’s followers are inclined to believe only the things that he or his spokespeople tell them directly—everyone else on the tube thinks they’re a bunch of trailer-park, Oxy-snorting halfwits who divide their time between retweeting Alex Jones’ fantasies and ironing their Klan hoods.

I understand the longing for satire in times like these—it’s the spoonful of sugar to make the very bad news go down. But perhaps such news *shouldn’t* go down. Perhaps comedians are inadvertently lulling us into a hubristic stupor in which we somehow think that virtuous consumption of comic irreverence (the hilarity of which only superior beings such as ourselves can appreciate) renders us invincible against proto-fascist buffoonery. John Oliver sarcastically begged Trump to run and offered to donate to his campaign.³⁰ Like nearly all liberals, Oliver radically—and contemptuously—underestimated “the Donald,” goading him on from Trump Tower to the White House.

Whatever comedians’ contribution to—or neutralization of—resistance to Trumpism, the problem is that everyone’s trying to act like John Oliver these days. Even newscasters like Anderson

Cooper and everyday people in casual conversation jeer at Trump and his supporters, and forget the bipartisan, pre-Trump origins of crises like climate disruption and poverty.

This brand of “corporatized outrage” is, as writer Charles Duhigg astutely observes, “fundamentally manipulative and tends to further the interests of the already rich and powerful.”³¹ It takes the heat off the corporate advertisers and obscures their role in creating the mess we’re in. And it’s probably one of the reasons why public confidence in the press has sunk to 44 percent.³²

CNN and MSNBC decry Trump’s refusal to disclose his tax returns every day, but how many stories have they done on how the IRS has moved from auditing billionaires to auditing low-income households that claim the paltry earned income tax credit?³³ How many exposés of corporate tax avoidance? Anti-Trump “corporatized outrage” is cheap when there’s no budget for investigative journalism; plus, there are no uncomfortable sit-downs with corporate sponsors required.

Mainstream journalists lace their prose with vitriol. *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow doubled down on Clinton’s infamous “basket of deplorables” gaffe.³⁴ After conceding that, as a candidate, Clinton shouldn’t have insulted voters, he went on to say that “deplorable” was too charitable a description of Trump and his supporters. I agree with Blow that actively supporting Trump reflects support for or indifference to Trump’s bigotry, but castigating those millions of Americans as deplorable was a gift to Trump that keeps on giving.

After the election, *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman pilloried the “chumps” and “losers” who “shot themselves in the face” and “basically destroyed their own lives” by voting for someone who would take away their health insurance.³⁵ *Daily Kos* founder Markos Moulitsas was more blatant in his schadenfreude, publishing this blog post after the election: “Be Happy for Coal Miners Losing Their Health Insurance. They’re Getting Exactly What They Voted For.”³⁶ Other political blogs like *Wonkette*, *Crooks and Liars*, and, yes, *Contemptor*, seethe with scorn.

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have full comple-

ments of columnists who gleefully bash Trump and his supporters to the exclusion of vitally important non-Trump news analyses. Their contempt is contagious. In January 2018, when the *New York Times* published letters to the editor from voters explaining their reasons for supporting Trump, other *Times* readers excoriated the paper: “Why do you keep asking questions of Trump voters? Who cares what they think?” wrote one reader. “Please don’t ever do that again,” said another reader victimized by exposure to the thoughts of 14 Trump voters.³⁷

Accusations of stupidity are the leading form of denigration of Trump and his supporters. *Gawker*’s Hamilton Nolan specialized in trashing the “fucking dolts” and “dumbass hicks” who supported Trump during the primaries.³⁸ *Salon* chimed in with articles about the “idiots” who voted for Trump when they weren’t too busy killing themselves with tobacco and fried food, and called for readers to shame “dumb Trump fans.”³⁹ At a 2017 Make America Great Again (MAGA) rally, I saw a counterprotester jeer at a man for not knowing the meaning of “hegemony.”

Here’s a smattering of headlines from 2017 and 2018:

“We’re with Stupid” (with a photo of Trump), *The New York Times*.⁴⁰

“Why Republicans Love Dumb Presidents,” *New York*.⁴¹

“Donald Trump’s Biggest Flaw: He’s Not That Bright,” *Chicago Tribune*.⁴²

“Trump Wants a Big Parade (For Himself). It’s a Surpassingly Dumb Idea,” *The Washington Post*.⁴³

“Seriously, How Dumb Is Trump?” *Huffington Post*.⁴⁴

“Too Stupid to Know They’re Stupid,” *Cache Valley Daily*.⁴⁵

“Are American Voters Actually Just Stupid?” *Salon*.⁴⁶

“Trump Is Hoping You’re Too Stupid to Notice,” *The Washington Post*.⁴⁷

“How Republicans Got So Mean and Clueless,” *The Washington Post*.⁴⁸

“Linguistics Expert: Trump Sounds Like Your Beer-Swilling Uncle,” *MSNBC*.⁴⁹

So, too, is my email inbox filled with subject headers insulting the intelligence of Trump and his appointees. But as Jonathan Chait notes in the *New York Magazine* article cited above, Trump's base doesn't care about his intelligence. What they care about is feeling scorned. They hate it.

Hell Hath No Fury Like a Political Adversary Scorned

An established body of social psychology research shows that people get defensive and closed-minded when their status, self-worth, and political or religious beliefs are threatened.⁵⁰ If I tell you that Albert Einstein wasn't such a great physicist after all, your brain will probably remain calm; you may even believe me and change your mind. But, as at least one brain-imaging experiment has shown, if I tell you something that contradicts your beliefs about abortion or gun control, the areas of the brain related to fear and identity light up like a pinball machine, and there is little possibility you will change your mind.⁵¹ The difference? Your identity and self-worth are bound up in your ideological beliefs, but you probably don't have an emotional stake in preserving Einstein's reputation.

Karin Tamerius, a former psychiatrist and founder of the non-profit SMART Politics, explains, "Our political attitudes and beliefs are intertwined with our most basic human needs—needs for safety, belonging, identity, self-esteem, and purpose—and when they're threatened, we're biologically wired to respond as if we're in physical peril."⁵² Any challenge to self-worth can be threatening, and when the challenge is laced with scorn, defensiveness intensifies. When someone is scorned, the amygdala (the brain's fear center) lights up and issues a fight-or-flight command. As far as the amygdala is concerned, a threat to one's beliefs or status is equivalent to a growling tiger getting ready to pounce, and it must protect the self from attack.⁵³

When we get defensive, cognition, and the parts of the brain responsible for empathy and reason, shut down. We become so preoccupied with defending ourselves that learning something new becomes nearly impossible. As any teacher will tell you,

safety is a prerequisite for learning. Sometimes, people who are scorned become so agitated and frustrated that they wish for bad things to befall the scorner.⁵⁴

An experiment at the University of Pennsylvania intentionally subjected students to scorn and evaluated their responses. The researchers showed students high-tech alarm clocks and asked them to assess their viability as new products. Each student had a virtual partner (who was, in fact, a confederate of the research team) who provided one of four types of feedback on the students' assessments—contemptuous, angry, neutral, or failure. Failure feedback was expressed simply as a low score (e.g., "Your score is four out of 10"). Angry feedback was, "I'm getting really pissed off at your work." Contemptuous feedback included statements like "Okay, whatever, as a U. Penn. student, I'm surprised by the low quality of your performance."

Students who received contemptuous feedback responded with significantly more verbal aggression than did students who received the other three types of feedback. The contempt recipients often returned the contempt, saying things like, "I think you're off base—you have nothing to contribute," whereas the other students (who were not scorned) offered apologies like, "I'm sorry, please forgive me."⁵⁵

The Pennsylvania study corroborates an enormous body of research showing that feelings of shame damage people's self-worth, disrupt their ability to feel empathy, and prompt them to externalize the blame and lash out aggressively at convenient scapegoats.⁵⁶ In other words, shame makes people feel like a worthless pile of shit, and so they find someone to blame and attack for making them feel bad, but the shame creeps back in right away and with it the need to lash out again and again. This dynamic is particularly strong among people with an inegalitarian, dominate-or-be-dominated "social dominance orientation" when they feel that their status is being threatened.⁵⁷

As we'll see in the next chapter, many Trump supporters are experiencing a perceived loss of status and honor. If Trump supporters are anything like the University of Pennsylvania students,

being treated with contempt is likely to elicit an aggressive or vindictive reaction like donning “Proud Member of the Basket of Deplorables” t-shirts or calling you a “snowflake” or a “lib-tard.”

When *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof interviewed Oklahoma Trump supporters in 2017, they said they were dismayed by Trump’s cuts to programs they rely on but were still loyal to him. Why? Because of resentment toward Democrats who mocked them as stupid racists, among other things.⁵⁸ Kristof’s article elicited the wrath of liberal readers incensed that he was seeking to humanize Trump-supporting monsters. “I’m just going to say it: I hate these people. They are stupid and selfish. Screw them. Lose your jobs, sit home, and die,” wrote one reader.⁵⁹

Conservative author David Blankenhorn says a tribal backlash is occurring among Trump supporters—many were ambivalent in 2016 but have become more entrenched in reaction to being derided as racists.⁶⁰ Blankenhorn was so alarmed by this dynamic that he founded Better Angels, an organization that helps foster dialogue across lines of difference.

Liberal writer Thomas Frank remarked on the same dynamic when he breakfasted with the Macon, Missouri, Lions Club in December 2016. Many of the Lions had voted apprehensively for Trump out of “disgust with the perceived moral haughtiness of liberals.”⁶¹ “Disgust”—they knew they were the butt of liberal contempt and returned it with a vengeance in the form of a vindictive blowhard, a Bully-in-Chief who would bring liberals down a peg. We make it easy for Trump to satisfy his base merely by returning our contempt.

A commentary that appeared in *The American Conservative* just after Trump was elected provides another case study of returned contempt. A white, 46-year-old man named Andrew wrote a comment addressed to the publication’s liberal readers:

I don’t believe I’m actually a racist, but you’re going to label me that way anyway, so I’ll just accept it...On one issue after another, the response to my opinion is some variation of “You’re a racist!” (Or sexist, or homophobic,

or bigoted, or guilty of white privilege—the whole litany.) I get it. My opinions are not to be valued, or even considered. I’m a bad person! If only I were educated (but I am). If only I was enlightened... Dear liberals, Democrats, progressives, leftists: Your use of the word “racist” doesn’t work anymore. We get it. You’re superior. You’re enlightened and we’re not... We have given up trying to talk you out of your presumptions, or trying to earn your approval. We no longer consider it worth our while to reassure you that we’re not “that kind” of Republican.

...[I]f there’s one thing Trump has done, he’s given us some backbone to make our voices heard... I cast my vote for Trump reluctantly. Now, I couldn’t be prouder.⁶²

Andrew may be guilty of asserting white male victimhood as a defense against being held accountable for bigotry. At the same time, if liberals rely on contempt to administer accountability, then there will inevitably be blowback from the Andrews of the world. Indeed, a few months after Andrew’s post, two more white men chimed in with eerily similar and self-aware observations.

Zapollo wrote:

I’m a white guy. I’m a well-educated intellectual who enjoys small arthouse movies, coffeeshouses and classic blues...

And yet. I find [that] some of the alt-right stuff exerts a pull even on me. Even though I’m smart and informed enough to see through it. It’s seductive because I am not a person with any power or privilege, and yet I am constantly bombarded with messages telling me that I’m a cancer, I’m a problem, everything is my fault.

I am very lower-middle class. I’ve never owned a new car, and do my own home repairs as much as I can to save money. I cut my own grass, wash my own dishes, buy my clothes from Walmart. I have no clue how I will ever be able to retire. But oh, brother, to hear the media tell it, I am just drowning in unearned power and privilege, and

America will be a much brighter, more loving, more peaceful nation when I finally just keel over and die.

Trust me: After all that, some of the alt-right stuff feels like a warm, soothing bath. A “safe space,” if you will. I recoil from the uglier stuff, but some of it—the “hey, white guys are actually okay, you know! Be proud of yourself, white man!” stuff is really VERY seductive, and it is only with some intellectual effort that I can resist the pull...

It baffles me that more people on the left can't understand this, can't see how they're just feeding, feeding, feeding the growth of this stuff...

An anonymous white man echoed Zapollo:

What the left doesn't get is it's turning people like me—reasonably moderate, go-along-to-get-along types—into full-blown reactionary radicals. Ideas that I once would've rolled my eyes at I'm now willing to give a hearing. I don't think I'm some paragon of rational thought and self-control by any means, but it concerns me that if I'm willing at least to entertain some of these ideas (critically and deliberately), what about the people who embrace them more impetuously or because their circumstances seemingly leave them no other option?...What follows from all of this cannot bode well.⁶³

Liberal disdain was a recurring complaint of many Trump supporters interviewed by blogger Sam Altman: “Stop calling us racists. Stop calling us idiots. We aren't. Listen to us when we try to tell you why we aren't. Oh, and stop making fun of us.”⁶⁴

Tufts professors Berry and Sobieraj note that the fear of being perceived as racist looms large in the minds of conservatives, and this fear has two consequences: They avoid talking politics with liberals and they seek refuge in right-wing outrage media.⁶⁵ The problem extends even beyond conservatives: A whopping 80 percent of Americans view “political correctness” as a problem. I believe much of that has to do not with *what* liberals say but *how* we

say it—the self-righteous “call-out culture” that even some leftists find irksome.⁶⁶

Four white men at a red–blue dialogue I attended said they used to be liberal but got tired of being lectured to and scolded. None of them liked Trump, but they did find his hostility to liberal finger-wagging highly appealing. One of them said he hated Trump but less so every time the Left attacks his supporters: *He may be a fool but he’s our fool.*

The backlash isn’t confined to men. Cindy Kiser, an unemployed mom in Arkansas who voted for Obama and then, with reservations, Trump, says that she’s become desensitized to and alienated by “the labels [misogynist, Islamophobic] thrown around.” The feeling Cindy gets from Democrats is, “We don’t even want to be in a democracy with you because you’ve made such a bad choice.”⁶⁷ Ditto Madonna Massey, a Louisiana Republican who says she likes Rush Limbaugh because he defends people like her against liberals who insult them as fat, racist, ignorant losers.⁶⁸ Double-ditto University of North Carolina student Maggie Horzempa who said being called a bitch by liberal students and a “disgrace to womanhood” deepened her commitment to conservatism.⁶⁹

These are the voices of ordinary conservatives, not right-wing operatives, and they are beaming us a very urgent message. Whether it’s labeling them bigots or denigrating their lifestyle, religion or intelligence, liberal contempt is helping to bring the long-simmering culture war to a rolling boil and pushing conservatives deeper into Trump’s corner. It’s a curious irony, this defensive reflex to more deeply embrace whatever it is one is condemned for embracing. It’s harmful and ignoble, but it’s real.

Christina H., a latent liberal *Cracked* magazine columnist raised in a climate of parochial bigotry, wrote a hilarious essay about her ideological transformation—and how it could have been expedited if liberals had acknowledged that she came by her beliefs honestly. “It would probably be a more appealing journey if it was known to be a super common and chill one, and not a daredevil Evel Knievel jump across a chasm that only one man

is known to have survived, and that man eats his meals through a straw now.”⁷⁰ Christina wants liberals to know that potentially open-minded conservatives are quietly lurking on social media—and that they are capable of inching in a progressive direction if they aren’t attacked as “moralistic morons” when they express discomfort with values that contradict their religious beliefs.

She urges liberals to acknowledge that conservatives hold their beliefs sincerely: “I know it’s hard to believe a member of the dominant race and/or religion of the country could honestly consider themselves a besieged underdog but people really believe this. It’s not a pretend tactic to fool outside observers...It’s actually very easy to believe your own small town or local religious community is an isolated pocket of ‘sanity’ in a hedonistic, liberal world.”

No one wants to think of themselves as a bad or stupid person; therefore, no conservative is going to say, “You know, you’re right, my beliefs are stupid and selfish and racist, and I hereby disavow them. Thank you for showing me the error of my ways. I can see now how superior liberals are, and I want to become one.”

Backlash Contempt

Right-wing media are well aware of what makes conservatives bristle. Michelle Malkin, Laura Ingraham, and Todd Starnes of Fox News have devoted entire books to the subject of “liberal elite” derision of middle-class Americans’ intellect and lifestyles.⁷¹ (Ingraham gives as good as she gets with chapter titles such as “Flower Power Take a Shower.”) They have observed a degree of alienation and have done their utmost to intensify and weaponize it.

At the 2018 Conservative Political Action Conference, Wayne LaPierre, CEO of the National Rifle Association, took aim at liberal Democrats who, he bellowed, were putting the United States on a fast-track to socialist totalitarianism. Absent evidence of the socialist menace, he instead relied on the tried-and-true trope of the “intellectual elites” who, he said, “think that they are smarter than the rest of us, and think they are better than us. They truly

believe it, and you know it.” LaPierre warned the audience that they should be very frightened of these elites, who “ridicule” and “disrespect” core American values and, given a chance, will erase constitutional rights and freedoms, and install a socialist dystopia. “That’s why the Second Amendment is of supreme importance.”⁷²

Note LaPierre’s rhetorical progression: Elitists think they’re superior; therefore, they won’t hesitate to trample your rights and impose their will; therefore, you need guns to protect yourself from their tyranny. Right-wing propagandists like LaPierre weaponize intimations of liberal contempt to great effect, and every time we say something condescending or snide, we unwittingly effectuate their playbook. The last thing Wayne LaPierre needs is more ammo.

Trump has a unique brand of demonizing the liberal elite menace. He uses the media as a proxy because, as he well knows, his supporters have for decades been conditioned to view the media as bastions of liberal elitism. Trump skipped White House correspondents’ dinners not merely because he’s thin-skinned, but because snubbing the media reinforces its enemy-of-the-people status. Instead of attending the glitzy affair, he held rallies in swing states during which he trashed the fourth estate; told the crowd that media “hate your guts”; and later tweeted a split image showing (a) the black-tie-clad dinner guests and (b) himself touring a tool factory.

At a 2017 rally in Phoenix, Arizona, Trump told the crowd, “I always hear about the elite. You know, the elite. They’re elite? I went to better schools than they did. I was a better student than they were. I live in a bigger, more beautiful apartment, and I live in the White House, too, which is really great. I think, you know what? I think we’re the elite. They’re not the elites.” He reassured the crowd that they were “smart” before resuming his attack on the enemy of the American people, saying, “The media can attack me. But where I draw the line is when they attack you, which is what they do. When they attack the decency of our supporters.”⁷³

Trump stands up against those mean lib-tards who aren't as smart as they think they are or else why is Trump in the White House and they're not. The failing *New York Times* and anyone who believes a word it prints is a Loser. Trump is a Winner and, by extension, so are his loyal followers. They're willing to overlook the gold-plated spoon in the so-called populist billionaire's mouth because the words coming out of that mouth do not judge, insult, and shame them.

The merging of the strongman and his followers is a staple of demagogic propaganda. When liberals engage in behavior that resembles the role Trump has scripted for them, they strengthen his hand. I suspect Trump would have been delighted to see a counterprotester at a MAGA rally ridiculing a white man for not knowing what hegemony means and having "no culture." As one West Virginian Trump voter explained, "As the hit pieces [against Trump] kept coming, it seemed to many that Trump was being unfairly victimized by the media. Perhaps we sympathized with him because, as people from the hills who have also been rejected by the establishment, we know what it feels like."⁷⁴ What this voter expressed is a profound truth about human behavior—we bond with those who are attacked by the same group of people attacking us.

If you were a conservative-leaning American with the choice between someone who made you feel ashamed of your politically incorrect views and unsophisticated lifestyle, or someone who defended your right to think and feel whatever you want, who would you pick?

Why Liberals Scorn "Trumpkins"

Psychologist Susan Fiske views scorn as a form of self-defense. When we as a group feel we are losing ground—and, oh, how we're losing ground—our contempt helps reassure us that, despite our loss of control, we're still better than the "other" group.⁷⁵

Contempt also helps us create psychological distance between ourselves and the object of our contempt. If someone makes a

sexist comment, for example, the contemptor can hide her vulnerability and shield herself from further damage by psychologically distancing herself from the “sexist pig.”⁷⁶

The 2016 election disturbed my homeostatic balance and sent me reeling into a contemptuous tailspin. Every day another gut-punch landed, and my contempt reared up to reestablish some illusory sense of balance and control.

Today’s hyperpartisan environment is a breeding ground for contempt. Partisans often make negative assumptions about the other side’s beliefs and values, withholding the benefit of the doubt in favor of instant condemnation and guilt by association. A Trump voter is presumed to be a bigot, a moron, and/or a dupe entitled to the same treatment as a certified neo-Nazi. A Trump resister, by contrast, is a morally superior hero entitled to lampoon the enemy and justified in their *schadenfreude*. Expressing contempt against Trump supporters feels like a public service announcement: “These people will be the end of us.”

When abortion foes were incensed by the passage of a late-term abortion law in Virginia in 2019, *Salon* writer Amanda Marcotte immediately pronounced their outrage “phony.” In an article entitled, “Festival of Phony Outrage: No, Conservatives Don’t Actually Care about Late-Term Abortion,” Marcotte was adamant that anti-abortion activists’ professed love of fetal life is inauthentic.⁷⁷ Her proof? According to Marcotte, a Republican legislator slandered abortion-seeking women by, in her words, “painting the tiny number of women who get late-term abortions as lazy sluts” and feeding a sexist stereotype that views such women as “stupid” and “careless” “bimbos.” Well yes, that does sound pretty bad, except that he never uttered or implied anything of the kind and was never anything less than polite and straightforward in his questioning of the bill’s pro-choice author.⁷⁸ Even if he were a jerk, to jump from there to the conclusion that all anti-abortion activists are disingenuous misogynists is unfounded, unfair, and enormously contemptuous. If I told a conservative that I support a law making it illegal to spank a child because it breaks my heart

to see the harm spanking does to little children and they said, “You don’t give a damn about kids, you just want to undercut parental authority,” I would be mighty peeved. What Marcotte did in her article was just that—a maddeningly unfounded accusation of disingenuousness, or worse, a condescending implication that she knows better than they do why they’re against abortion.

Liberal contempt is frequently triggered by Trump himself, the king of contempt, with his pithy putdowns (“crooked Hillary,” the “failing *New York Times*”); demagogic tirades at rallies; and giving the proverbial finger to democratic norms. When he derides us, we retaliate. But Trump is also a master conjurer of *backlash* contempt: You’re calling us stupid and crooked? No, you’re stupider and crookeder. He’s an incubator for viral contempt between partisan tribes whose ability to engage in productive discourse has all but collapsed.

According to Fiske, acting superior to another group bolsters our sense of belonging in our own “in-group.”⁷⁹ Registering our collective outrage is certainly appropriate, even vital, especially for groups who are directly threatened by Trump. If I didn’t have people with whom I could commiserate, the rankness and bedlam would threaten my sanity. It’s when group cohesion becomes tribal arrogance that problems arise. Anger and disgust blend to form contempt; from there, it’s less than a half-step to dehumanizing the objects of our scorn. Whoever sent an email to the wife of Supreme Court Justice and accused sex offender Brett Kavanaugh that said, “May you, your husband, and your kids burn in hell” took that half-step.⁸⁰

New York University social psychologist Jonathan Haidt is an expert in what he calls “the psychology of self-righteousness.” Haidt believes that what’s destructive about contempt is its alienating quality of cool indifference toward people we view as morally inferior. “Contempt,” writes Haidt, “paints its victims as buffoons worthy of mockery, or as non-persons worthy of complete disregard. It therefore weakens other emotions, such as compassion.”⁸¹ Think about Haidt’s admonition in the context

of the dehumanizing mockery of the autistic man who couldn't destroy the antifascist sign—the hecklers (and their admirers) were so walled in by their moral superiority that their capacity for empathy was impaired.

Though I didn't send Kavanaugh's wife a death threat, I was unable to muster an ounce of empathy for him during his nomination hearings. I was aware that Kavanaugh could *conceivably* have been innocent. I was aware that sex offenders were often victims before they became perpetrators, and I assume that most people who abuse alcohol have experienced trauma or emotional neglect. I was also aware that Kavanaugh came of age in a culture of toxic masculinity that wounds men, too. As the mother of a teenaged boy (and someone who did plenty at that age I'm not proud of), I could have empathized with Kavanaugh at the same time that I unequivocally rejected his fitness for the Supreme Court. But Kavanaugh's belligerence, entitlement, and remorselessness—and the GOP's determination to “plow right through,” as Senator Mitch McConnell put it—so utterly enraged me that my ability to see Kavanaugh as a human being lay submerged under a thick blanket of contempt. I found myself wishing that he'd drink himself to an early death.

Contempt is a first step on the path to dehumanizing the other tribe. If the “contemptible other” is worthless, then I can safely disregard their hopes and fears. As the distance between us grows, I might become so indifferent as to ignore their suffering or even go to war against them, as Matsumoto and others have documented.⁸²

Contempt toward moral transgressions like bigotry and deceitfulness does arguably serve a social purpose, much in the way that Puritanical shaming attempted to suppress then-unacceptable behaviors like blasphemy and fornication. But there's evidence that disparaging and stigmatizing wrongdoers interferes with their ability to change—so many psychological resources are marshaled to defend against stigma, there's little left to respond constructively.⁸³

I see contempt operating in discourse the way I see punishment functioning in the criminal justice system—as revenge against people we see as moral transgressors. It’s a quick fix, but not necessarily a humane, just, or efficacious one.

In Matsumoto’s view, the only situation in which treating evildoers with contempt could be constructive is when there’s an overwhelming consensus that the behavior in question is utterly taboo, for example, terrorism. Otherwise, Matsumoto says, directing scorn toward the offender precludes productive discussion.

As the 2016 election made painfully clear, many forms of bigotry aren’t quite the taboo many of us assumed them to be. That’s not to say that there should be no consequences for expressions of bigotry—accountability and boundary-setting are crucial. But there are effective accountability mechanisms that do not involve contempt, which I’ll detail in chapters four and five.

Rutgers University psychologist Ira Roseman suggests that it’s possible that contempt toward Trump could be fueling the resistance and/or could help mobilize disgusted voters in 2020.⁸⁴ Researchers have barely begun to study the impact of contempt-laden messaging on electoral outcomes, and the preliminary findings are fuzzy.⁸⁵ There’s scant evidence that contempt is a winning message for left-leaning candidates and there’s a significant risk of alienating swing voters made to feel deplorable. We will never out-contempt Trump and, should we try, I fear we will lose our way in a wilderness of hurt. Trump is his own negative campaign ad. There’s little to be gained by obsessing over his awfulness but much to be gained by emphasizing the virtues of his challenger.

Hillary Clinton tried to parlay contempt into victory. Days after Trump clinched the GOP nomination, she gave a speech in San Diego excoriating Trump’s ideas as “dangerously incoherent” and suggesting that his self-proclaimed “very good brain” warranted psychiatric evaluation. Cue audience laughter.⁸⁶ Toward the end of the speech, she expressed confidence that she would win because Americans with common sense, Americans who

know that America is already great, would “make the right decision.” I doubt the specter of a smug blue-state audience laughing gleefully at Clinton’s jibes played well with fence sitters whose common sense had been called into question.

Though the upsides to contempt are, in my opinion, heavily outweighed by the toxic downsides, I recognize that contempt may be a particularly important form of protection for members of oppressed groups who feel acutely threatened and demoralized by Trump’s reign and, hence, have a greater need for contempt’s in-group cohesion and mood- and esteem-boosting properties. Given what people of color, Muslims, and LGBTQ communities have had to endure, I’m not about to contempt-shame them but, instead, invite them—and everyone—to consider the alternative means of communicating their feelings and beliefs, discussed in chapter five.

Contempt Spirals

Contempt antagonizes, shames, and infuriates people. They often respond with aggression and hostility, sometimes in the form of boomerang contempt. At its worst, contempt derogates and dehumanizes the “other” and can be the first step on the path to the kind of vilification that results in interpersonal or intergroup violence or genocide.

Dishing out contempt has an addictive quality. There’s a fleeting feeling of gratification at having put the deplorable in their place. But when the contempt high wears off, there’s an emptiness or sometimes an icky, shameful feeling that comes with not representing one’s best self. Our self-esteem takes a hit and, all too often, we compensate by finding another opportunity to derogate someone.

When feeling good about oneself is achieved at the expense of another person’s self-esteem, a vicious cycle begins spinning. It’s gratifying to watch a *Crossfire* clip like “Jon Stewart Wrecks CNN to Pieces” until I notice that the very same clip exists in a parallel universe of right-wing click bait entitled, “Tucker Brutally Exposes Hypocritical Stewart.”⁸⁷ A cliché about things going ’round

and coming 'round comes to mind, with each side lashing out with more intensity the more they feel that their tribe's dignity has been assaulted.⁸⁸

The Trumpist worldview divides the population into us-versus-them tribes. When we, too, indulge in “othering” of our adversaries, we help erase nuance, harden tribal divisions, and inspire backlash political movements.

We blame Trump supporters for the mess our country is in and train our wrath on them accordingly. This keeps us from seeing our part in the slide toward oligarchy, kleptocracy, and authoritarianism. Trump exploited political vulnerabilities made possible by the decades-long erosion of public infrastructure; data mining and psychographic targeting; atrophying of civic and democratic institutions; transfer of wealth to war profiteers and the 1 percent; corporate consolidation of media; and disenfranchisement of voters of color.

Contempt plays into the right-wing strategy of deflecting attention away from these substantive issues. When Samantha Bee apologized for calling Ivanka Trump a “feckless cunt,” she lamented that the brouhaha her remark had generated was drawing attention away from the very issue Bee was upset about: the hundreds of immigrant children being separated from their parents.⁸⁹ When contempt enters the scene, it becomes the story, and the real problems fueling Trump's rise to power get buried under the avalanche of snark.

When liberals heap scorn on These People, right-wing propagandists are able to create a linkage between liberal values and liberal elitism in their audience's minds. They say, in effect, “Look at how those liberal snobs look down on you and don't care about you and maybe even hate you. It's safe to assume that anything they propose will be bad for you. *They* are your enemies and, therefore, *we* are your friends.” This elitist taint takes the shine off everything liberals promote, from solar panels to healthy food to gun safety—it all somehow becomes a sinister plot to inflict elitist values on red-blooded Americans who know better than to believe that clean air and fresh vegetables and gun-free public

spaces are healthy and wholesome. We must stop enacting the right-wing populist playbook or surrender These People to right-wing populism for the long term.

People have a long memory for how unpleasant it is to be on the receiving end of contempt.⁹⁰ Even if we dial down our scorn now, it could be many years before the hurt and distrust wear off. While that's unfortunate, it only underscores the urgency of doing so. Contempt is like greenhouse gases that linger in the atmosphere for years—the sooner eliminated, the better.