Pastoral Psychology (2019) 68:549–559
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-019-00863-8

Judging the Self: A Pastoral Theological Analysis of Reality Television

Philip Browning Helsel[1]

Published online: 30 March 2019

Abstract
The author explains how Trump reinvented his business failures through reality television by inflating his successes and minimizing his failures. The author then shows how the reality television show itself reflects the rituals of neoliberal capitalism, namely, identification with the boss despite the unequal conditions. Finally, the author maintains that those struggling with layoffs use this entertainment to vicariously compare themselves with others. Echoing the needs of the soul and the theological image of God as judge, this media spectacle invites audiences to identify with individual winners rather than taking collective responsibility for systemic inequality.

Keywords Neoliberalism · Capitalism · Reality television · Celebrity culture · Schadenfreude · Stockholm syndrome · Impolitainment · Pastoral care

> Reality T.V. is central to the moral economy of our period, in which particular types of persons, families, and lifestyles are presented as worthy of emulation.
>
> —Michael L. Wayne (2015, p. 995)

> Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They do not exchange ideas, they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials.
>
> —Neil Postman (1985/2005, p. 93)

This article seeks to answer two interlocking questions: first, why did Donald Trump appeal to so many voters in the 2016 election, and, second, how might his presidency reflect the anxiety of our times? One possible explanation points to Trump's celebrity status after starring in the reality television show *The Apprentice.* Rooney (2016) unpacks Trump's television reinvention of himself through *The Apprentice* and points to how Trump's persona appealed to viewers. In

✉ Philip Browning Helsel
Phelsel@austinseminary.edu

[1] Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 100 E. 27th St., Austin, TX 78705, USA

Rooney's estimation, without the show Trump would have been perceived as a business and financial failure, but the show allowed him to market himself as an all-powerful judge of others' chances at success. At a time when viewers may have been experiencing challenges to their own narratives of success due to mass layoffs, Trump's "You're fired!" persona offered viewers the opportunity to identify with the boss, experience some Schadenfreude at the suffering of others, and channel their anxieties into a "reality" unlike their own.

At its peak when the show premiered, *The Apprentice* was number one in ratings in the 18–49 adult age bracket and later fell to fifth in this age bracket and seventh in total viewers. The second and third seasons finished in the top fifteen for this age bracket during 2004 and 2005 (Porter 2017). The show was especially popular among African Americans and Latinos, but Trump's popularity plummeted among these groups after he began embracing the racist rhetoric of the alt-right (Green 2017). The show was not as successful as Trump claims, but it may have made a difference in the election since it appears that simply being exposed to a celebrity's face and name breeds preference (Zajonc 1968).

The Apprentice, a popular show for several years, allowed Trump to reframe his bankruptcies and divorces as the rise of a self-made man and put him in the position of judge over other people's business acumen. This show took place against the backdrop of economic stresses that had racked the country for years. Through the dynamics of judging, people identified with an aggressor and tried to take responsibility for their fate, blaming one another, showing contempt and disgust, and staying close to the boss. Trump's practice of rudely insulting people for entertainment made him a celebrity.

In order to understand the cultural significance of reality television, it is helpful to locate the phenomenon within the social changes occurring in the United States in the late twentieth century. During the 1980s and 1990s, the working class experienced a steady decline in income, whereas wealth increased for the top 1%. Real wages for the working class stopped growing in 1973 and have shrunk ever since, so many of those watching Trump on television were also experiencing underemployment combined with rising health and education costs (Henwood 1992). There was a spike in unemployment between 2001 and 2004, rising to above 6%. Many of those suffering from economic stagnation were the same ones watching as Trump fired people on reality television. These viewers had less than they needed to make ends meet.

What were the feelings that people shared as they watched reality television, and how did those feelings relate to their own personal crises, their own perceived level of powerlessness? In an era of automation, globalization, and plant closures, depression is now, in the words of Cvetkovitch (2012), a "public feeling," meaning that economic anxieties are lived out in public spaces (p. 1). My thesis is that in the early twenty-first century, the media culture of *The Apprentice* was particularly appealing to those struggling to make ends meet because it gave them an indirect form of mastering the traumas of unemployment and underemployment. The goal of this essay is to encourage advocacy against policies that further blame and marginalize the poor.

The creation of Trump through reality television in a neoliberal era

In her *New Yorker* article "Guilty Pleasure: How TV created Donald Trump," Nussbaum (2017) maintains that Trump's *The Apprentice* and his subsequent *Celebrity Apprentice* provide a window into his campaign and presidency. He remade his image during a time of

personal crisis and used the medium to cast himself as a success despite his many financial failures. Set in between 9/11 and the Great Recession of 2007–2009, the show revolved around Trump's judging contestants' business acumen. Because of the show, many Americans thought of Trump as a successful businessman. "He was a hero, and he had not been before" (Nussbaum 2017, p. 23). Thus, he gained legitimacy as a billionaire and garnered a following.

Early in the season, Trump was successful at ad libbing, including the line "You're fired." His bombast yielded high ratings. He also became skillful at dividing people, using the media to pit people against one another. As the show's ratings slipped, he turned to product integration for the Trump brand and other corporations, showing a knack for advertising products later condemned as fraudulent.

These attributes are still present now that Trump has been elected president of the United States. Trump's capitalist ethos has significantly shifted the tone of political discourse in some important ways. For example, in his inauguration speech, he used capitalist language in the political sphere, replacing the traditional language of the social contract with that of competition drawn from the business world. He also underscores personal responsibility and merit, highlighting the language of meritocracy while obscuring his own privilege. Finally, his brand is synonymous with his family unit, a tight family business environment that has taken over the White House, with Trump branding displayed everywhere. Highlighting loyalty and fealty, he operates in ways that bring echoes of capitalism into the White House.

Neoliberalism is a political philosophy that underscores personal responsibility and shifts blame to the individual rather than focusing on structural causes of suffering. It has been the reigning view within economic circles for the last several years, embraced by the right and the left alike. As a theory of political and economic practices, neoliberalism proposes that human well-being "can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2007, p. 2). As a philosophy, neoliberalism expects everyone to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and it rewards narratives that reinforce this theme.

One way that neoliberalism's focus on personal responsibility (vis-à-vis economic success or failure) exerts its power is through recruiting people to manage themselves and others. Foucault's (1977) discussion of power indicates that power does not come from the sovereign. Instead, it is recruited in micro-interactions between citizens and the state, as can be illustrated with reality television. Trump has built on earlier forms of security and border discourse to underscore the threat to the United States from those who are perceived as different and thereby minoritized. This heightened surveillance of persons of color and their communities fosters an atmosphere of fear in which overreaches of power often go unquestioned. Jasbir Puar (2007) has argued that this can be seen in the "If you see something, say something" philosophy in which citizens are invited to monitor one another because of the risk of terrorism. With the porous boundaries between public and private, the established media and social media likewise become territories for surveillance of self and other.

Reality television mimics many of these characteristics of neoliberalism. People place themselves in front of others for scrutiny, all the while monitoring one another and the self and reproducing the culture's discourses of racism, homophobia, and prejudice. If the effects of Trump's presidency are increased neoliberal inequality, the means through which he achieves these ends include shoring up a nostalgic form of Whiteness against the threat of immigrants who can be perceived as other. The neoliberal logic of capitalism at the heart of Trump's approach is reinforced through a series of media strategies, and these strategies harken back to Trump's attempts to shore up his celebrity status.

Media theorists Oulette and Hay (2009) demonstrate that reality television encourages a kind of self-management by teaching people to become "ideal corporate citizens" (p. 149). A conceit of many self-improvement reality shows is that the citizen must improve and empower the self "privately" (Oulette and Hay 2009, p. 3). This fits within the political context of reality television, developed as a way to deregulate media, thus reducing costs and diminishing uncertainty, in order to boost profits (Raphael 2004). By focusing on the private individual, the larger systemic issues, such as lack of access to health care or stable employment with a living wage, fade from view.

The practices of reality television demonstrate "self-preservation based on self-entrepreneurship and contrivance" (Oulette and Hay 2009 p. 118). "The upwardly mobile individual," the authors write, "advances by 'convincing his associates that he possesses the attributes of a winner'" (p. 118). Reality television magnifies discrepancies between individuals, pitting them against one another and forcing people to take personal responsibility for the problems they encounter. The illusion is created that everyone is competing on a level playing field.

Oulette and Hay (2009) suggest *The Apprentice* as an example of the prototypical neoliberal game show. It is a game of risks that teaches people to recognize a good corporate citizen, one who is able to be "self-actualizing, self-disciplined, and energetic makers of their own fortunes and futures" (p. 188). The show fictionalizes the idea that everyone should be responsible for themselves by creating situations where people must take responsibility for their behavior. By slowing down the camera, focusing on micro-interactions, and attempting to make people take responsibility—even for things that are out of their control—reality television creates a comforting ritual that helps make meaning. It purposefully obscures the different starting places that people may have, the distances they travel to compete, and what it takes to gain a seat at the table, and instead it forces each person to confess personal responsibility.

Reality television hinges on a moment when someone loses their place in the competition, and this dynamic is eerily familiar to the many who lost their jobs in the layoffs of the 1980s and 1990s. In the "You're fired" scenario, Donald Trump consults with other experts and the contestants themselves and then pronounces his judgment, sending people down the golden elevator. The firings create division and discord among the remaining contestants, alienating the workers and sowing seeds of dissent that undermine the shared support that could exist between them. The show ostensibly teaches personal responsibility as zero-sum, but in reality it depicts the way people are rewarded for identifying with the powerful to advance their own desires at the expense of others.

To summarize, Trump reinvented himself through *The Apprentice* by embodying the values of neoliberalism, which stresses the personal responsibility of individuals while ignoring larger social factors contributing to inequality. The genre of reality television itself tends to cultivate a neoliberal ethos, and this ethos has been carried over into the discourse of Trump as president.

Theological implications of reality television

In his forward-thinking book *Reality T.V.*, Faller (2009) argues that reality television is about collective hopes and thus is implicitly theological. In an age that lacks genuine human connection, the genre struggles in a Marxist sense with "the shadow of alienation" in the modern marketplace (p. 27). Yet, this class struggle never rises to consciousness because it is submerged in the mythos of celebrity.

Neoliberal subjects are invited to become celebrities, identify with celebrities, and imitate celebrity styles in their lives, focusing on adoration as a form of authority. Faller (2009) points to the theological reasoning operative in these movements: "the reason celebrity is addictive is that it so closely mirrors the needs of the soul" (p. 55). Although the soul may crave respect and the ability to participate fully in life decisions that matter, the debased form of these needs shows up in reality television as adoration and calculation.

Faller pays special attention to the process of judging since that is precisely where the cathartic trauma of reality television shows occurs. Faller (2009) discusses *The Apprentice*, noting how "You're fired" became the show's tagline and is identified with Trump's personality, and he describes how the show is less about winning and more about "the myriad of ways people lose" (p. 60). This means that, as the judge, Trump "wound up judging the entire persona of the contestant," and contestants constantly needed to cultivate their relationship with the judge (Faller 2009, p. 30). The purpose of this scene of judgment, the reason the camera slowed and the music became dramatic, was in order to broadcast "the shame and humiliation of having all their flaws and emotional meltdowns broadcast on national T.V." (Faller 2009, p. 62).

According to McFague (1987), the model of the judge is a central metaphor that has been used to describe the divine. Metaphors do important work, carrying meaning and simultaneously hiding their limits, but the metaphor of the judge is a persistent one in the Christian tradition. For McFague, it is crucial that Christians excavate the metaphorical nature of their speech about God, understanding the limits of any language for God. Taking a feminist standpoint, she maintains that images of judge and ruler have been linked with patriarchal power, which reinforces authority. These images need to be deconstructed so that images such as mother and lover can take their place. Yet, judging still holds an important place in McFague's framework in the metaphor of mother, serving as a protective function. The abiding importance of the judging function illuminates its centrality in Christian faith and theology, whereas in the neoliberal moment these functions have shifted to the boss, the businessman who is able to judge the contestants worthy or unworthy.

Drawing on ritual theory, Couldry (2004) argues that reality television dramas reach their apogee in a form of ritualization that is the judgment scene. Ritual theorist Catherine Bell explains that a ritual "reproduces the building blocks of belief without involving any explicit content that is believed" (Couldry 2004, p. 59). The judging ritual is thus a public experience of formalized action associated with transcendent values. In *The Apprentice,* the values emphasize the unquestioned authority of the boss. In this space, the boss is able to insult people to their face, and they are grateful for his negative attention since they know they will be sorted by him (Nussbaum 2017). According to the contestant Surya Yalamanchili, it was "pretty much Stockholm syndrome" in that contestants identified with the aggressive boss and used that aggression against one another (Sellers 2015).

Neoliberal television manufactures consent by inviting contestants to reveal their thoughts and feelings, pitting them against one other and obscuring the operations of power in the background (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Something about the television, its slow pan and its minute investigation of moment-to-moment feelings, creates a tension akin to catharsis (Faller 2009). The panopticon comes inside personal relationships, scoping the contours within them and differentiating levels of performance, describing the winners and losers. Couldry (2004) marvels at how people put themselves up for public experiments, noting that not since Charcot's public demonstrations with his patients have we seen such a revelation of the private in the public sphere, what Maffesoli (1996) calls "saturated individualism."

Part of the reason that people tolerated witnessing such pain was that it provided a way to cope with feelings of betrayal and disappointment in their work life, all the while sustaining the myth of individual responsibility. Reality television provided them a form of survival through identification with the boss at the cost of developing relationships with other workers. This created an atmosphere in which people disciplined themselves through identification with the powerful. This may be one important reason why many working-class Whites identify with Trump and still support his policies. They hope to vicariously benefit from his wealth and largesse.

A second and equally important point to underscore is how White working-class communities that have experienced underemployment and reduced pay for decades may have used this identification. Instead of realizing that they had more in common with the working-class African Americans and Latinos surrounding them, they returned to a triumphant and defensive Whiteness to help them shore up their selfhood. Watching another person suffer and try to explain him or herself is a pleasurable way to avoid looking at how one is already suffering.

Impolitainment: Guilty pleasures

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the social and psychic impact of watching reality television, what it offers viewers as well as what it threatens. The discourse of reality television tends to appeal to persons who are interested in status, in part because it threatens to undo the bogeyman of political correctness. In this form of 'impolitainment,' the judge engages in "spectacular impoliteness," an illustration of the fact that all of us may be easily replaced (Lorenzo-Duz and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2013, p. 17). Impolitainment works by shocking the system of the viewer, reducing the capacity for cognitive empathy and fostering such feelings as shame, curiosity, and revulsion. This strategy in fact derails the emotional system of viewers, inviting them to return to base emotions such as gladness at another's misfortune. The strategy of impolitainment is a form of unmasking that reduces decency and makes everyone who hears the discourse less human. As Ryan LaMothe argues in his essay in this volume, the reduction in the quality of Trump's speech creates in his listeners a diminished ability to think clearly and thus to strategize and create other options.

I wish to draw a brief connection between the work of a reality television celebrity and that of a comedian, whose major job is to destabilize the audience and keep them destabilized throughout the performance. First, it is important to remember that this tool is a tool of entertainment, used by comedians and other actors to take control over their audience and thereby render them powerless to the comedian's discourse for a time. As a form of entertainment, it works by shocking and undermining what is expected as decent discourse, manipulating airtime and distracting persons from other valuable concerns, which they need space and opportunity to think clearly about, and finally derailing the ability of the community to speak.

Impolitainment is by its very nature rude, and the transparency of its strategy to manipulate time and energy is thereby a form of power. It was this reality television strategy that helped Trump win the Republican nomination—he was able to make his opponents seem foolish. The rudeness and coarseness of the discourse distract the masses. Some argue about whether comments made by Trump are racist, while others rush to defend him. When I discussed his candidacy with White supporters, some claimed that they appreciated his candor because he spoke for what normally could not be said out loud.

Impolitainment is a debasement of discourse that occurs in the political realm when the resources of the media are used to entertain, cajole, and persuade. Rather than directly challenging moral commitments, it provides a framework for debasement that degrades those who watch it, often distracting from other important issues that deserve attention while shaming and confusing viewers and listeners. As a media discourse found in reality television, impolitainment is a method of destabilization. As a tool of political control, impolitainment creates unnecessary controversy so that a person, rather than policy or programs, stays at the center of attention. By definition polarizing, impolitainment is meant to insult and offend viewers, inviting them to delight in their own debasement or the debasement of others.

A side effect of this form of impolitainment is identification with the aggressor through the Stockholm syndrome, a phenomenon already mentioned above by a reality show contestant. Some have described this as a form of hypnosis in which people can be "mesmerized into sympathizing and even identifying with a charismatic monster" (Jameson 2010, p. 338).

This explanatory framework sheds some light into the vicariously experienced trauma of survivors of firings who watched Trump on *The Apprentice*. Since television had already given him the mantle of power, and since he had name recognition, he had a platform from which he could claim to be the voice of working-class Whites. The ongoing pleas that somehow the statements or policies of Trump are being misunderstood can be traced back to this infantile bond that occurred between Trump as a powerful billionaire capable of firing people and his viewers' own unconscious collective trauma as people facing widespread firings. This is one important reason why Whites who heard Trump promise that he would be their voice might have believed him. In this brief excursus, I have set the stage for understanding the political effects of impolitainment as well as some of its cultural consequences.

Community-wide trauma of unemployment and underemployment

In addition to watching 'happenstance' occur to others, watching Trump fire people can be a form of mastering unconscious trauma. In my own work on the impacts of foreclosure, unemployment, and debt in the Great Recession, I found that this trifecta impacted the mental health of communities, not simply of individuals (Helsel 2015). For example, widespread unemployment leads to more days missed because of mental health concerns. Conversely, by raising the minimum wage, the city of London decreased its rates of depression and anxiety.

Erikson (1978) indicated that collective trauma is different from individual trauma because it destroys the tissues that connect individuals, their social bonds, and I argue that something similar has happened in the age of neoliberalism. Social scientists such as Putnam (2000) have noted the fraying of social ties but have not always connected this with the social suffering of a neoliberal era. When this social tissue is damaged, relationships between people are harmed.

There are signs that the rupture of these relationships can lead to mental health impacts. In the neoliberal era, with its rising income inequality, the rate of depression has also been rising. Rogers-Vaughn (2014) has analyzed the data relating income inequality with depression and maintains that a causal factor is the erosion of community. I have likewise argued that an important factor is the media because a person can have precious few economic or social resources and yet be surrounded by images of success, which leads to pent-up rage.

It is a well-known maxim that trauma recovery cannot occur until safety has been established (Rothschild 2010). Little wonder, then, that those suffering from an unequal economy, those caught in the grips of poverty and watching their own careers or the careers

of their friends crumble, would be drawn to the spectacle of reality television in which people are blamed for their failings. There is something about the cult of celebrity that soothes the unanswered questions of the biblical character Job.

A crucial aspect of the shame of poverty internationally is the widespread belief that people should be able to take care of their children and families. Oxford social scientist Walker (2014) has shown, in his work *The Shame of Poverty*, that shame is a nearly universal experience related to poverty worldwide. Not measuring up to this basic standard can create a sense of shame, especially when people are blamed for accessing the social safety net. People can be shamed by their government for not being able to take care of their children. Nevertheless, when people are aware of income inequality, actively able to resist it, and resourced by their own anger, they can resist the shame of self-blame by understanding the deeper sources of their suffering.

Researchers have discovered that those especially interested in status tend to watch reality television and enjoy the medium more than others (Reiss and Wiltz 2004). They have also noted that watching reality television makes people more aggressive (Wayne 2015). Specifically, in their discussion of women's reasons for watching reality television, Wood and Skeggs (2009) point to how often working-class women described taking delight in other people's suffering, a Schadenfreude that helped them cope with what they themselves faced.

For working-class women in the United Kingdom who watched reality television, seeing other people's suffering was a way of saying that things were not so bad for themselves. Such "leveling through humiliation" includes an implicit claim for authority (Wood and Skeggs 2009, p. 162). One subject said, "Sort of reveling a bit in other's people's you know, not misfortune, but sort of kind of makes you think, well actually, my kids aren't so bad" (Wood and Skeggs 2009, p. 161). Schadenfreude is a seldom acknowledged and underappreciated emotion in the social science literature.

In many of the communities in which people watched Trump fire others, many people were struggling with unemployment or underemployment. In towns where factories closed in the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of the population went without work. Those who stayed on felt like psychic survivors. Often, corporations had created a feeling of belonging, offering the illusion that the corporation would take care of its employees (Noer 1993). Afterwards, the corporation's betrayal created angry ex-employees and guilty survivors. Everyone in these communities was touched by the layoffs resulting from globalization and automation, and these very same individuals were drawn to shows such as *The Apprentice*.

The layoffs impacted both those who had been let go and also those who remained in the company. In his book *Healing the Wounds*, management expert Noer (1993) defined the phenomenon of the mass layoff as survivor sickness. These people went through a process of psychic numbing in which they could not acknowledge the loss that was happening within their workplaces and thus suffered from denial and silencing all the while being expected to return to work and accept the status quo. In the context of layoff survivor sickness, the unemployed, the underemployed, and the employed survivors were each invited to silence their own selves, their experiences of depression and fatigue. Everyone had to rationalize their own place. They lived with the fear that another shoe was about to drop, whether or not they held on to employment.

Some turned to dark imagery, including gallows humor, to cope. Many sought information that would help them explain their firing or the firing of others. Others described the "organizational seduction and rape" that they went through in the process of being hired and then fired (Noer 1993, p. 41). The George Clooney film *Up in the Air* (Bell and Reitman

2009) popularized a character who fired others, heartlessly memorizing his lines and keeping an emotional distance from the survivors.

Noer (1993) points to the psychic conflict in all employees during an era of globalization: "the decision to participate in a layoff economy creates depression," and it leads to a reduction in feeling, a deepening in apathy, and a refusal to take risks (p. 44). Of course, no one can decide whether or not to participate in a layoff economy since this is the only economy that we have lived with for the last 40 years.

Some employees speak back and suggest that the layoffs are simply about CEOs "padding their pockets" (p. 56). For those watching the decades-long decline of the middle class in America, it is little wonder that there is a diminishment of trust in institutions. Within this context, the promise of transcendence and power, the idea that meaning could be made out of their misery, is another important satisfaction that could come from watching *The Apprentice*.

It is not surprising that those experiencing shame because of not being able to take care of their children turned to someone with narcissistic tendencies to identify and placate their shame. Those who lost their own jobs or witnessed mass layoffs of their colleagues were seeking meaning. With the reduction of wages among the working class since 1973 and with the diminishment of the social safety net, people who watched *The Apprentice* were likely to be suffering socially from economic stress. In this circumstance, they may have turned to the show not simply to experience Schadenfreude but also as a way of mastering the trauma of chronic unemployment and underemployment.

If they were unable to redress the grievances such as automation or factory closures that had led to their own suffering, they may have vicariously triumphed over them by watching the suffering of others play out on television. The form that reality television takes, slowing down the scenes of expulsion and pitting people against one another, may have fostered the illusion that their own happenstance could have been mastered, that there might be some deeper reason behind the economic suffering that they and others were experiencing.

Conclusion: Toward a model of resistance

In this article, I have pointed out the ways that reality television helped Trump reinvent himself as a success through firing others and making them take responsibility for their being fired in the process. Through this medium, the discourse of winning and losing enters into the public sphere. Simply by watching *The Apprentice*, people may have identified with the neoliberal story of self-transformation presented in reality television programming.

In the reality television show *The Apprentice*, working people were divided from one another and invited to be entrepreneurs of themselves. This created a psychic identification with Trump (via the Stockholm syndrome), a state of being mesmerized by a powerful person who seemed to be able to solve all their problems, that arguably continued into the election season. When he turned to the alt-right and began using explicitly racist rhetoric, Trump affirmed the defensive White identity of working-class voters; many were already using a racial animus to bolster their identity. As noted, *The Apprentice* was popular for several years and allowed Trump to reframe his bankruptcies and divorces as part of the rise of a self-made man and also gave him the position of judge of other people's business acumen. A new light is shed on this celebrity narrative in neoliberalism. Through the dynamics of judging, people identified with an aggressor and tried to take responsibility for their fate, blaming one another,

showing contempt and disgust, and staying close to the boss, thereby distancing themselves from one another's suffering.

Reality television creates an image of celebrity for adoration that also meets the need for authority. Metaphorical theology helps us see that this is a damaging image rooted in patriarchy but also illuminates the ways this image shifts as it turns economic. In this celebrity culture, the higher aims of the human spirit are sacrificed to its baser ones. This is powerful because the need for celebrity mirrors the theological need of the soul for respect, a theological desire that is cheapened into adoration in the celebrity image. Celebrity and image replace content, and decontextualized persons become market personalities free to change their commitments at a whim.

Those who are concerned about status are more likely to watch reality television and gain more pleasure from it than others, but watching reality television also makes a person more aggressive. Watching reality television gives people the pleasure of comparing themselves to someone less fortunate than they have been, or it offers a way to master their trauma that makes them feel there is a reason for the pain: *at least in this television show there is a reason why this person is being fired.*

If people have been harmed by deferring to Trump on reality television, what needs to be done to reclaim a more rational perspective on the president and his policies? First, people need to understand how reality television helped Trump construct his persona. Because it lent him an air of authority as his personal finances were crumbling and made him into a celebrity, people need to deconstruct his stardom in order to get a clearer view on his policies. Reflecting on how impolitainment works to keep people in their places can help in analyzing how Trump's celebrity career was a form of happenstance; it appealed to the national imagination at a particular moment.

Second, people need to explore the shame of poverty, particularly in the context of mass factory closures in the Midwest, a region that was crucial to Trump's victory in the election. By allowing the public grief from these wounds to emerge rather than silencing them, people will have a chance to lament rather than turn to the racist rhetoric that fuels their rage (Noer 1993). Lament is a first and important step to discovering alternatives to the current capitalist system that go beyond nostalgia (Hahnel and Wright 2014). Since the shame stemming from poverty is universal, it can help to name it, but then it is necessary to analyze the mistaken tropes such as the "culture of poverty" that tend to blame the poor for their circumstances.

Finally, it is important to resist the racist rhetoric of the Trump presidency, uncovering the dog-whistle politics at work in the campaign and noting how such racist appeals are meant to reinforce economic hierarchies. Underscoring how politics works in this way will make it less likely that people will be baited by birther claims or anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic rhetoric since we can show how these claims are used to engage in policies that deepen economic inequities, making everyone in the society suffer to a greater extent.

So, Trump is a president who was first a marketing personality created by reality television. He worked in a medium that reinforces and divides tribes in order to make individuals feel more responsible for their failures and successes. In an age of widespread economic and racialized suffering, it is important to reflect on the celebrity-created persona of Trump so that his presidency can be put into context. By putting his rise into context, we will have more resources to advocate for policies that will lead past entertainment and into greater care, especially for the most marginalized in our society.

References

Bell, A. (Producer), & Reitman, J. (Director). (2009). *Up in the air*. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures.

Couldry, N. (2004). Teaching us to fake it: The ritualized norms of television's 'reality' games. In S. Murray & L. Oulette (Eds.), *Reality TV: Remaking television culture* (pp. 57–74). New York: New York University Press.

Cvetkovitch, A. (2012). *Depression: A public feeling*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Erikson, K. (1978). *Everything in its path: Destruction of community in the Buffalo Creek flood*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Faller, S. (2009). *Reality T.V.: Theology in the video era*. St. Louis: Chalice Press.

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Random House.

Green, J. (2017). *Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the storming of the presidency*. New York: Penguin.

Hahnel, R., & Wright, E. O. (2014). *Alternatives to capitalism: Proposals for a democratic economy*. New York: New Left Press.

Harvey, D. (2007). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Helsel, P. B. (2015). *Pastoral power beyond psychology's marginalization: Resisting the discourses of the psy-complex*. New York: Palgrave.

Henwood, D. (1992). The American dream: It's not working. *Christianity and Crisis, 52*(9), 195–197.

Herman, E. S., & Chomsky, N. (2002). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon.

Jameson, C. (2010). The 'short step' from love to hypnosis: A reconsideration of the Stockholm syndrome. *Journal for Cultural Research, 14*(4), 337–355.

Lorenzo-Duz, N., & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, P. (2013). Reality television: A discourse analytical perspective. In N. Lorenzo-Duz & P. Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (Eds.), *Real talk: Reality television and discourse analysis in action* (pp. 24–39). New York: Palgrave.

Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The time of the tribes: The decline of individualism in mass society*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Press.

McFague, S. (1987). *Models of God: Theology for an ecological, nuclear age*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Noer, D. (1993). *Healing the wounds: Overcoming the trauma of layoffs and revitalizing downsized organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nussbaum, E. (2017). Guilty pleasure: How TV created Donald Trump. *New Yorker*. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/31/the-tv-that-created-donald-trump. Accessed 1 December 2017.

Oulette, L., & Hay, J. (2009). *Better living through reality television: Post-welfare citizenship*. Malden: Blackwell.

Porter, R. (2017). Breaking: Donald Trump actually says something true about 'Apprentice' ratings. TV By the Numbers. http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/more-tv-news/breaking-donald-trump-actually-says-something-true-about-apprentice-ratings/. Accessed 1 December 2017.

Postman, N. (1985/2005). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Penguin.

Puar, J. (2007). *Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times*. Raleigh: Duke University Press

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Raphael, C. (2004). The political-economic origins of reali-TV. In S. Murray & L. Oulette (Eds.), *Reality TV: Remaking television culture* (pp. 119–136). New York: New York University Press.

Reiss, S., & Wiltz, J. (2004). Why people watch reality TV. *Media Psychology, 6*, 363–378.

Rogers-Vaughn, B. (2014). Blessed are those who mourn: Depression as political resistance. *Pastoral Psychology, 63*(4), 503–524.

Rooney, M. (2016). Understanding Trump by watching The Apprentice. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/understanding-trump-by-watching-the-apprentice-68901. Accessed 1 December 2017.

Rothschild, B. (2010). *8 Keys to safe trauma recovery: Take-charge strategies to empower your healing*. New York: Norton.

Sellers, F. S. (2015). What Trump learned on *The Apprentice*. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/what-trump-learned-on-the-apprentice/2015/11/06/8dd79928-67a8-11e5-9ef3-fde182507eac_story.html?utm_term=.f39bca3ae866v. Accessed 6 Nov.

Walker, R. (2014). *The shame of poverty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wayne, M. L. (2015). Guilty pleasures and cultural legitimation. *Journal of Popular Culture, 48*(5), 990–1009.

Wood, H., & Skeggs, B. (2009). *Talking with television: Women, talk shows & modern self-reflexivity*. Urbana: University of Illinois.

Zajonc, R. B. (1968). The attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9*(2), 1–27.