



ON THE VALUE OF UNCERTAINTY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES (OR, "PAY ATTENTION, YOU ASSHOLES!")

DONALD TRUMP, DAVID SIMON, AND
THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

Simon Stow

On Monday June 1, 2020, amid nationwide protests following the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Donald Trump concluded a speech at the White House by declaring himself “your President of law and order and an ally of all peaceful protesters,” before announcing that he was “going to pay [his] respects to a very, very special place.”¹ Trailed by multiple administration officials, Trump walked out of the White House gates, across Lafayette Square, to St. John’s Episcopal Church, where he posed for a photo holding a Bible. His supporters saw this as a symbolic triumph of Churchillian proportions, while his critics focused on the aggressive police action used to clear legally gathered protestors in order to facilitate the photo op. Trump’s actions led many commentators to return to a question asked frequently during his political rise: Is Trump a fascist?²

Less than three months earlier, the cultural polymath David Simon offered an intervention into the debate: a television adaptation of Philip Roth’s 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, a book depicting an interlude of alternative history in which the aviator Charles Lindbergh is elected president promising to keep the United States out of World War II. In keeping

with Lindbergh's anti-Semitism, his fictional correlate enacts policies that appear to undermine American Jews. On its publication, and despite Roth's denial, the book was widely seen as a commentary on George W. Bush's presidency.³ It divided critics along political lines: the conservative Jonathan Yardley condemned the book, while the liberal James Wolcott celebrated its perceived critique.⁴ Revived as a lens for understanding the Trump years, the novel produced a similar political division. Majid Shirvani argued that "Trump's amazing triumph . . . must be regarded through the lens of *The Plot Against America*," and Brittany Hirth said that "Roth's anticipation of contemporary political life . . . is downright uncanny," while Frank Rich wrote that it "may yet be viewed as a rather optimistic fairy tale. Charles Lindbergh's effort to impose America First fascism . . . end[s] with the restoration of democratic order. We cannot vouchsafe that Trump's unchecked plot against America will have that salutary an ending."⁵

Roth, however, appeared to reject at least some of these parallels: "There is surely one enormous difference between the political circumstances I invent there for the U.S. in 1940 and the political calamity that dismays us so today. . . . Lindbergh . . . may have been a genuine racist and an anti-Semite and a white supremacist sympathetic to Fascism, but he was also—because of the extraordinary feat of his solo trans-Atlantic flight at the age of 25—an authentic American hero. . . . Trump, by comparison, is a massive fraud."⁶ As with Roth's denial of the Bush parallels, his seeming rejection of the posited Trump parallel cannot necessarily be taken at face value: he was well aware that Simon saw his miniseries as a commentary on Trump.⁷ Disingenuity and/or evasiveness is, moreover, a hallmark of Roth's characterization of the relationship between the written world of his fiction and the unwritten world in which it is produced.⁸ At times, Roth seemed committed only to the literary and the aesthetic, asserting, "At their best, writers change the way that readers read. That seems to me the only realistic expectation."⁹ Simultaneously, however, Roth also identified moments in which the written world of fiction offered the basis for an intervention into the unwritten world beyond it.¹⁰ This tension is heightened by Roth's compulsive playfulness about his authorial identity.

Philip Roth in Fact and Fiction

Roth's *Plot* is presented as a memoir written by a fictional—or "semi-fictional"—Philip Roth about his childhood.¹¹ The Roth family in the written

world of the novel take their names from the Roth family of the unwritten world. They live in a written-world version of the unwritten world house and neighborhood in which the unwritten world author was raised. This "habit of presenting the author as a fictional character in his own books is," writes Paul Berman, "an old trick of Roth's, not to say a mania."¹² In Roth's novel *Operation Shylock*, for example, the narrator "Philip Roth" encounters another "Philip Roth," who may or may not be an imposter. Neither is, however, necessarily the "Philip Roth" who wrote the novel in which these other Roths appear. Berman's "mania" might, however, be better thought of as the author's attempt to disrupt "knowing" readings of his texts: readings that reduce his work to the expression of a specific position invariably reflecting the views of the critic in the manner of Yardley and Wolcott.¹³

The desire of critics—both lay and professional—to say what a text means in a definitive fashion is strong and much in evidence among those who assert that Roth's *Plot* should be understood as a commentary on George W. Bush or Donald Trump. Roth's elusiveness is playful but far from frivolous. As Catherine Morley notes, it cultivates, or seeks to cultivate, an uncertainty in the reader.¹⁴ It is in such uncertainty, in such unknowingness, that critical thinking begins. As the novelist Milan Kundera observed in an interview with Roth, "The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything. . . . The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question. There is wisdom and tolerance in that attitude. In a world built on sacrosanct certainties, the novel is dead."¹⁵

Donald Trump, not known to be a reader,¹⁶ has an answer for everything: he never admits mistakes and never apologizes, and the list of subjects on which he has claimed expertise—including hurricanes, forest management, drones, windmills, science, and steam-powered catapults—is dizzying.¹⁷ It is, perhaps, unsurprising that given totalitarianism's commitment to rank certainty, Trump might be surrounded by a miasma of fascist suspicion. This is not to suggest that there is something about reading that necessarily saves readers from fascism.¹⁸ Nor is it to mock Trump and/or his supporters for his and their strident anti-intellectualism; it is rather to draw a distinction between their commitment to certainty and the ethos embraced and potentially cultivated by the ambiguities in Roth's fiction. For it is when Simon best embodies contingency and uncertainty that his *Plot* offers its most effective engagement with Trump and the powerful and persistent forces

in American history that Trump might be thought to embody. Indeed, the frequently made claim about Trump—"this is not normal"—is misleading: Trump, as Simon shows us, is anomalous only in brazenness, degree, and style, not in substance. Cultivating a Rothian ambiguity within a highly realist televisual format that seeks a paradoxical historical authenticity within a uchronia, Simon offers viewers a critical perspective essential to identifying and fighting fascism and other forms of oppression. Simon moves beyond the polemical to cultivate a way of seeing that both alerts viewers to the fragility of democracy and offers them resources for renewing democratic practice.

As the experience of Alvin Levin, played by Anthony Boyle, suggests, however, fighting Nazis solely with art and good intentions is likely to be unsuccessful: the drawings of a heroically depicted Lindbergh by Alvin's cousin Sandy Levin (Caleb Malis) show how the promiscuous power of the aesthetic can be employed in the service of what William Connolly has called "aspirational fascism."¹⁹ It will, nevertheless, be suggested that Simon offers a valuable resource for such conflict, one that can productively inform possible political violence. It is an approach predicated on what John Keats called "negative capability," the capacity to exist without certainty.²⁰ It is then somewhat problematic that so much criticism of Simon's *Plot* saw so little contingency in its approach.

Beware Your Own Footprint

In a largely negative review of Simon's adaptation, Robert Lloyd identifies parallels between Simon's *Plot* and Trump's America. Arguing that "Simon's politics are easy to read. . . . It's difficult not to read this [*Plot*] as a memo to Trump," he seeks an unwritten world referent for almost every aspect of the show. Observing that the character of Walter Winchell asks, "How long will Americans remain asleep while their cherished Constitution is torn to shreds by the fascist fifth column of the Republican right?" he suggests, "You could tweet that any day of the week and it wouldn't feel anachronistic at all." Perhaps immune to Nabokov's critical dictum—"Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint"²¹—Lloyd complains, "Spoken aloud, and loudly, Roth's (and Simon's and Burns') political points can come across a little too explicitly, obviously, heavily."²² The comment is echoed by the more balanced Charles Bramesco: "Trump

parallels come early and often, and while the writing occasionally prints its subtext in font a couple of sizes too large, it's all in order to make the point that much more forcefully."²³ At the other end of the political spectrum, however, there were those who were keen to discredit Simon's allegorical use of Roth.

The libertarian Glenn Garvin identified several of the "show's political missteps," asserting that the overly idealized Roosevelt in fact "spent a good bit of his spare time plotting schemes to keep Jews out of a postwar America" and pointing to the show's underplaying of the efficacy of Lindbergh's spying on the Luftwaffe and its ignoring of Canada's refusal of Jewish refugees from Europe. Such errors, he argues, undermine "both its dramatic and its political credibility."²⁴ Sharing Garvin's concerns about "the troubling record towards the Jewish people of President Franklin D Roosevelt," Melanie Phillips suggests that the pro-Lindbergh rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf—played by John Turturro—should best be understood as a parallel to "Rabbi Stephen Wise, the community leader who acted as Roosevelt's cheerleader and thus sanitized his . . . acquiescence in the extermination of Europe's Jews."²⁵ Echoing the description of Herman Levin (Morgan Spector) by Evelyn Finkel (Winona Ryder) as "narrow-minded and frightened" and Sandy's assertion that his parents are "narrow-minded ghetto Jews," Phillips distinguishes between those "reason[ed]" and informed Jews who support Trump and those who express an "irrational hatred" toward someone considered by many Jews to be the most pro-Israel and pro-Jewish US president ever. Such unhinged hatred, she suggests, is "an undercurrent in the six-part TV adaptation of the Philip Roth novel," a manifestation of "Simon's highly-selective indignation."²⁶

For many critics, then, the relationship of Simon's *Plot* to Trump—as Roth's *Plot* to Bush—is a matter of great clarity: with almost every event in the written (or filmed) world having its referent in the unwritten world, or something of a Rorschach test in which they find and dismiss all the supposed Trump parallels. Some, however, offered a more subtle appreciation of political allegory. Gabe Friedman calls *Plot* "the scariest show I've seen," pointing to the very ordinariness of its characters as making their experiences all the more terrifying and to the sense of uncertainty cultivated in the viewer. Indeed, he suggests, the "tension of being on that dividing line, between safety and a lack of it, filled me with dread as I watched [and] made the show more powerful than a gut-wrenching Holocaust film that shows

Jews being violently abused and murdered.”²⁷ It is in this space between certainties—between “is” and “is not” Trump, between “is” and “is not” fascist—that Simon’s *Plot* finds its aesthetic efficacy and critical-political leverage.

Simon certainly sees both his and Roth’s *Plot* as “startling[ly] . . . allegorical to our current political moment,” but his understanding of allegory is more nuanced than that of many of his critics or would-be champions.²⁸ Simon has compared Alvin’s subplot to Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* and the overthrow of a tyrant. The parallel suggests how the show’s allegorical aspects might best be understood: as a lens through which to view the politics of the unwritten world, rather than as key to mapping correspondences, real or imagined, between fictional and nonfictional events.²⁹ A 2017 Shakespeare in the Park production of *Julius Caesar* featured a suit-wearing Caesar whose overly long tie evoked Trump. While the parallel was sufficiently upsetting to prompt two Trump supporters to interrupt a performance, the power of the allegory lay in the suggestion of similarity, rather than in nailing down whether Brutus was, say, Jeff Sessions.³⁰ Simon can, to be sure, be something of a polemicist.³¹ Nevertheless, it is by letting Roth’s story play out and by not overemphasizing the allegorical aspects of the show that Simon best captures what is at stake for democracy in the Trumpian moment. It is in these more questioning moments that he offers his viewers a possible political pedagogy in an anti-intellectual time.

Plot as Democratic Pedagogy

Simon’s *Plot* begins with a focus on the family, religion, and civil society. The Levins’ Shabbat meal identifies them as Jews, but the appearance of Hasidic Jews collecting for Palestine marks them out as non-Orthodox. Over the dinner table, Alvin briefly raises Hitler’s persecution of Jews, but the conversation is dominated by a baseball. Juxtaposing Jewishness and Americanness, Simon establishes the Levins as assimilated American Jews. The subsequent scene in which they visit a house—in a non-Jewish neighborhood—that Herman wants to buy, situates them within the American Dream. Thereafter, however, Herman and his wife, Bess (Zoe Kazan), establish a dynamic that runs throughout the show: his optimistic belief in America and her more cautious engagement with the world beyond her household. This tension offers an always ongoing dialectic that drives the

dramatic pedagogy of Simon's piece, one evident in the next scene, in which the Levins engage with the state.

It is, perhaps, a little too on the nose that the first overt evidence of the show's political pedagogy occurs in the classrooms of Philip (Azhy Robertson) and Sandy Levin, but the subtlety of the presentation rescues the complexity of the position. Simon juxtaposes two scenes in which Sandy and then Philip recite the Pledge of Allegiance—underlining their American identity—cutting from Sandy to Philip following the line “for which it stands,” a phrase then repeated by Philip's class. It is an embodiment of Herman's beliefs: Jewish at home and American beyond it. There is, nevertheless, much to trigger Bess's suspicion. First, the bizarreness of the pledge as a form of programming: the overlapping recitations suggesting repetition as indoctrination. Likewise, there is the wording of the pledge. The recitation, absent “under God,” may jar on modern ears. The addition of this phrase in 1954 was seen as a Cold War counterblast to communist godlessness. Simon's presentation suggests the contingency of US values, which can so easily be rewritten in the face of threats real and imagined. More telling is Simon's depiction of the students with hands over their hearts. This scene is set in 1940. Until 1942, however, the pledge was marked by the “Bellamy Salute,” a straight-armed gesture identical to the Nazi salute.³² It is not clear whether Simon's anachronism is deliberate or simply a mistake. Either way, an awareness of the problematic undercurrents in the ceremonial assertion of allegiance to the flag suggests the validity of Bess's suspicions. It is not that Herman is wrong and Bess right, nor its opposite, but rather that both perspectives are to be embraced at once, and in so doing, the viewer might recognize the contingency of their perspective and, thus, the “stupidity” of embracing a final position in the manner of totalitarian states.

This tension between Herman and Bess is evident during their trip to Washington, DC, with Herman's insistence that they visit the nation's capital and reclaim America's symbols for themselves and Bess's desire to visit Canada to reconnoiter an escape route. Simon's pedagogy is evident in the family's two encounters with the police as representatives of the state. In the first, with the family holding up traffic as they search for their hotel, a motorcycle cop assists them, directing them around traffic and leading them to their hotel. For Herman, this is evidence of the American decency; for Bess, a source of considerable anxiety. “But how do you know where he is taking us, Herman?” she asks, wiping away tears. In the second instance,

the police enforce apparent anti-Semitism when the Levins are ejected from their hotel.³³ When the desk clerk threatens to call the police, Herman's belief in American institutions is such that he welcomes their summoning. Nevertheless, one of the officers sneeringly refers to Herman as "*Levin*," suggesting that his sympathies lie with the hotel and not its customer and that, in this moment at least, it is Bess who best understands the mechanisms of US bigotry.

The Herman-Bess dynamic is likewise repeated in the family's interaction with their tour guide, Mr. Taylor (Michael Cerveris). Herman consults Bess about the possibility of hiring him, with Bess's response—"I don't know. Who sent him?"—offering a counterpoint to Herman's trusting nature. Once again, the viewer is presented with two entirely plausible viewpoints, with Simon never choosing between them. Taylor remains something of a cipher: he does exactly what he says he will do and serves as an effective tour guide to the nation's capital; but equally, there is, perhaps, something that is unnerving about his affect and diction that makes Bess's anxieties seem justified. It is, nevertheless, Taylor who facilitates the family's trip to the Lincoln Memorial.

In Roth's *Plot*, the family visit the Memorial during the daytime; in Simon's, at night. The Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument are illuminated, the architectural embodiments of US ideals. Confident in these ideals, Herman engages in a testy exchange with a middle-aged couple. After Herman questions the woman's paralleling of Lincoln and Lindbergh, the man calls him "a loudmouth Jew." As the family gaze on the inscribed Gettysburg Address, Herman expresses anger about the slur being used against him in a shrine to Lincoln, demanding that Philip read the words. As Philip, sharing Bess's anxiety, fails to speak, Herman asserts, "All men are created equal. It's as plain as day," leading Bess to exclaim, "Herman, I can't go on like this."

The Herman-Bess dialectic between righteous idealism and the fear of seeking to make good on those ideals is echoed in the iconography and history of the Lincoln Memorial. Dedicated in 1922 before a segregated audience, it serves as a reminder of the ways in which the United States' alleged commitments have never been incompatible with racial oppression. Once again, however, the complexity and the contingency of these issues—which refuse ultimately to come down on either Bess's or Herman's side—are suggested by the way in which Lincoln rewrote the Constitution at Gettysburg,

incorporating into it the Declaration of Independence and its commitment to equality.³⁴ Lincoln reworked the nation's ideals in response to a crisis: the same method employed—to different ends—by Eisenhower with the Pledge of Allegiance. Simon reveals how the manipulability of ideals can be employed to multiple ends, further suggesting the contingency of the nation and its values and, thus, the usefulness of the Herman-Bess dialectic as a mechanism for understanding its politics. Such juxtaposition is a persistent trope in Simon's *Plot*. It is, perhaps, telling that the unsettling encounter at the Lincoln Memorial is followed by the Levins' ejection from the hotel for what seem to be—though not unequivocally—anti-Semitic reasons. As the Levins depart, the hotel's name is briefly glimpsed over Herman's shoulder. That their visit to the Lincoln Memorial is followed by their ejection from the Douglas Hotel suggests the way in which the nation to which Herman is dedicated has possibly been turned upside down, with the Lincoln-Douglas debates being won not by the forces of right but by Stephen Douglas's far less noble commitments.

Lindbergh and Ambiguity

In March 2020, *Salon* illustrated a story with a famous photograph of Lindbergh giving a straight-arm salute at an America First Committee rally, captioned, "Charles Lindbergh . . . giving the Nazi arm salute during a rally on October 30, 1941."³⁵ A. Scott Berg nevertheless argues that the picture was taken during the Pledge of Allegiance.³⁶ That Lindbergh's 1941 audience made unequivocal Nazi salutes does little to resolve the question of whether the pilot—who espoused anti-Semitic tropes—was a Nazi. His cipher-like state in Roth's fiction, and in Simon's adaptation of it, likewise fails to resolve the question in the written world. "Everyone sees what he is," declares Herman of Lindbergh, but it would be more accurate to say that everybody sees what they *think* he is: hero pilot; fascist president; American savior. Nobody in Simon's production can, however, see Lindbergh (Ben Cole) at all: he is largely filtered through the media. When he does appear, he is seldom the focus of the scene. His stump speech is short and scripted. His politics remain elusive. Herman asserts that Lindbergh is a fascist, while Rabbi Bengelsdorf offers repeated assurances that Lindbergh is far from anti-Semitic. There is no way for the viewer to judge who, if anybody, is offering a full understanding.³⁷ Even the viewer's tendency to

side with the more sympathetic Levins over the creepy Bengelsdorf is less than reliable. Herman's reverence for Alvin's sometime boss, Abe Steinheim (Ned Eisenberg)—in the face of Alvin's account, and Simon's depiction, of Steinheim's odious behavior—suggests that any propensity to side with Herman should be resisted.

The theme of persistent misrecognition repeats itself throughout the series, such as when Philip mistakes the body of Seldon's father for his own. Similarly, with the character of Mrs. Finkel (Eleanor Reissa), Bess and Evelyn's mother, whose dementia makes her confused and prone to misperception, Simon employs her confusion about her circumscribed world as a metaphor for the similar confusion of those in the broader world of the show and of an audience unable to make sense of the Trump years. Similarly, Simon's decision to abandon the (unreliable) single narrator of Roth's novel and to employ another Rothian mechanism, "refracting his narratives through the voices of people who only know part of the story," serves to further the uncertainties faced by the characters and their audience.³⁸ That "everyone's point of view is comprehensible, if not necessarily sympathetic," adds to the sense of uncertainty pervading the show.³⁹

A similar dynamic is evident in the names of the government programs that punctuate the narrative. "Just Folks," a summer program that sends Jewish children to rural America, seems wholesome and insidious in equal measure. "Homestead 42" and "The Office of American Absorption" are similarly ambiguous and equally unnerving. It is this aspect of Simon's *Plot* that Lloyd misses when he declares, "Factoring out the speculative aspects of the story, one is left with a moderately diverting drama of a family under pressure, arguing about whether what looks like trouble is really trouble. (It really is.)"⁴⁰ The critic's certainty is not Simon's certainty; it is not the characters' certainty, nor, perhaps, is it meant to be the audience's certainty. Embodying Kundera's maxim about an answer for everything, Lloyd misses the value of Simon's democratic pedagogy predicated on the recognition of contingency and the cultivation of uncertainty.

Art and Democracy

The philosopher Jason Stanley recounts the story of his grandmother Ilse, who worked for the Jewish underground in 1930s Berlin, "venturing into the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, dressed as a Nazi social worker,

rescuing from death hundreds of Jews confined there, one by one." She recounted, Stanley observes, "the disparity between the extremes she witnessed in the concentration camp and the denials of the seriousness of the situation, its normalization, by the Jewish community of Berlin." She "struggled to convince her neighbors of the truth: A concentration camp, for those on the outside, was a kind of labor camp. . . . There was no comprehension of the tragic reality." For Ilse Stanley's Jewish brethren, the relative normality of their lives prevented them from seeing the dangers, repeatedly misperceiving their circumstances. "We were still able to leave the country; we could still live in our homes; we could still worship in our temples; we were in a Ghetto, but the majority of our people were still alive. For the average Jew, this seemed enough."⁴¹ As Ilse Stanley's experience suggests, alerting people to the political dangers they face can be an impossible task, even with firsthand testimony. Simply telling, Ilse Stanley's story suggests, is insufficient, hence Walter Benjamin's assertion about the necessity of responding to fascism "by politicizing art."⁴² This is not, however, necessarily the same as engaging in polemic: an artistic form of the problematic telling that Ilse Stanley found so ineffective. While some critics have suggested that Simon's *Plot* is indeed a polemic, this might be a manifestation of the polarized political moment in which the show appeared.⁴³

The function of art, argued Alfred C. Danto, is the "transfiguration of the commonplace," the ability to reveal something about the world that could not hitherto be seen.⁴⁴ In a time of political uncertainty, when it is not clear whether assaulting of protestors is the momentary transgression of the law or something more sinister and systematic, it might be argued that seeking to cultivate uncertainty in the citizenry is redundant, artistically *and* politically. There is, perhaps, already enough uncertainty to go around. Nevertheless, as Ilse Stanley's experience suggests, it is all too easy to ignore not just what one is told but what one feels: the sense of uncertainty that might alert one to the possible abnormality of the moment in which one finds oneself. The persistent trope—"this is not normal"—about the Trump presidency serves, according to Jason Stanley, a valuable political purpose. "Normalization," he writes, "means precisely that encroaching ideologically extreme conditions are not recognized as such because they have come to seem normal."⁴⁵ Simon's capacity for polemic is suggested by his assertion that Roth's message in *Plot* was, "Pay attention, you assholes."⁴⁶

It may be, however, that it is in Simon's attempted cultivation of uncertainty in his audience by never resolving the uncertainty faced by his characters that he better achieves his goal of prodding his viewers to pay attention. Such uncertainty works against the normalization as a mechanism of, if not necessarily fascism, then "fascist tactics."⁴⁷ It is an approach that also works against the certainties offered up by what Connolly calls Trump's "aspirational fascism," in which "definitive assertion takes priority over extended justification."⁴⁸ Such an approach seeks to cultivate an attitude and ethos conducive to a pluralism in which there are no final answers, only an always ongoing debate about issues of concern.⁴⁹ The potential benefit to democratic politics is threefold. First, it cultivates an eternal vigilance against the normalization of any abhorrent deviation. Second, it offers the potential to generate in the citizenry an ethos essential to meaningful democratic practice, what Connolly calls a "bicameral orientation to political life . . . straddling two or more perspectives to maintain tension between them."⁵⁰ Third, the turn to the aesthetic over the polemical offers the capacity for the critical evaluation of alleged abnormality, drawing attention to the way in which the "not normal" may actually be its opposite.

Uncertainty and Democracy

The dialectic of uncertainty best evinced between Herman and Bess is omnidirectional: it interrogates everything with which it comes in contact. Thus, the genealogy of the Pledge of Allegiance and the palimpsest at work in the Gettysburg Address suggest the ways in which the supposedly eternal principles of the American republic can be reworked in good and bad ways. In *Plot*, Lincoln's positive palimpsest serves as a counterpoint to the anti-Semitic graffiti scrawled on the gravestones in the Jewish cemetery or to the swastikas superimposed on Philip's stamp collection in his nightmare. Simon's *Plot* captures the contingency of America and the contingency of democracy. "Our moral clarity regarding identities or forms of life that were once but are no longer excluded is a product of political victories," observes Bonnie Honig. "Victorious political actors *created* post hoc the clarity we now credit with having spurred them on to victory *ex ante*." Nevertheless, she suggests, "Things could have gone another way. They may yet do so."⁵¹

The most obvious example of the contingency that Simon depicts and seeks to cultivate occurs in the show's finale. In the novel, Lindbergh's

disappearance is followed by the reelection of Roosevelt, and an attack on Pearl Harbor draws the United States into World War II. For some, Roth's ending was too neat, seeming to reduce the Lindbergh presidency to an unfortunate interlude in US history.⁵² While there is something to be said for this reading, Jason Siegel suggests a more compelling account of the novel's conclusion: "Roth's overly contrived resolution to his counter-history emphasizes the mere contingency by which we do not find ourselves living in a fascist state to argue that the potential for American fascism remains present."⁵³ Simon weaves his similar understanding into an alternate ending. Concluding with an undecided election, Simon reemphasizes the contingency of American democracy. "Democracy," he observes, "is precious, and it's something that has to be attended to, like an orchid."⁵⁴ Indeed, inadvertently perhaps echoing Sheldon Wolin's work on the "fugitive" nature of democracy, Simon declares, "Democracy, and freedom . . . can never be completely won. Every day is a quotidian struggle. . . . You're never going to finish the job. There's never a moment where you dust off your hands and say, 'Well, there it is. That's our republic. It's perfected.' It's struggle. It's the hardest form of government there is, is to attempt self-governance, and it's utterly imperfect. But freedom can be lost and lost quickly, and all you have to do is stop fighting for it."⁵⁵

The cultivation of uncertainty might, nevertheless, be considered an inadequate response to Donald Trump—fascists, aspirational or otherwise, are not known for the commitment to nuanced critical thinking—especially given the violence that has bubbled under, and to the surface of, his politics. Tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades will, in the short term at least, inevitably triumph over Connolly's "bicameral orientation." A commitment to contingency does not, however, preclude the use of violence, neither in Simon's fictional world nor in the world in which it opposes the political forces embodied by Trump and his followers. Simon embodies Angela Davis's demand "not to lay down the gun, but to learn how to set the sights correctly, aim accurately, squeeze rather than jerk and not be overcome by the damage": a call for any political violence against oppression to be informed by critical thought rather than unthinking reaction.⁵⁶ When Alvin and his friends assault two patrons of a German beer garden in an ostensible retaliation for an attack on their friend, there is no indication that their targets were responsible for the assault. It is telling, then, that Simon intersperses the assault with scenes of Nazi violence and Japanese atrocities.

What could be seen as a justification for Alvin's attack might better be understood as a paralleling of Alvin's assault with fascistic violence: when one of Alvin's accomplices says that their targets look drunk and asks if their proposed actions are fair, the question of justice is instantly dismissed. The subsequent violence of which Alvin is a part tellingly draws no such questions or parallels from Simon. Indeed, what appears to be Alvin's role in Lindbergh's disappearance is bloodless and dispassionate: the execution of a violent act informed by careful thought. Simon's commitment to contingency reveals, then, a problematic violence at the heart of American life. Alvin's attack becomes a microcosm of Native American clearance, slavery, lynching, and colonialist expansion—violence underpinned by attitudes that make Trump's politics not just possible but endemic to the American experiment. Simultaneously, however, Simon demonstrates how violence might be employed in the fight against such politics without becoming that to which it is opposed.

Conclusion: Contingency, Democracy, and Political Action

"In its own history," observes Jason Stanley, "the United States can find a legacy of the best of liberal democracy as well as the roots of fascist thought (indeed, Hitler was inspired by the Confederacy and Jim Crow laws)."⁵⁷ This acknowledgment demands a recognition that, far from being "not normal," "Donald Trump was produced by America."⁵⁸ Trump's abnormality, Simon suggests, is a matter of style not substance: a fundamental brazenness in a dog-whistle age. This understanding only emerges from a recognition of the contingency of US democracy: its history, its problematic present, and what Roth calls its "relentless unforeseen" future.⁵⁹ By cultivating an awareness of US contingency and seeking to inculcate contingency as a democratic ethos and perspective in the viewer, Simon's *Plot* constitutes an intervention into the present political moment—concerned with protecting American democracy in the face of the manifold threats against it—that also offers to go beyond that moment. It is a perspective in which Donald Trump is the embodiment of both a potentially fleeting and, simultaneously, possibly permanent historical moment. The suggestion is not that Trump is a toothless figure who poses little threat to the republic but rather that if, as Roth asserts, the artist's job is not "the solution of the problem" but "the correct presentation of the problem," the contingency depicted and

cultivated by Simon does the latter, alerting viewers to the multiple dimensions of Trump's politics and thus enabling them to engage in informed action in the face of it.⁶⁰ Simon's reworking of Roth's conclusion was partly inspired by an HBO executive who noted that the show would air during the 2020 election cycle and would "speak directly to . . . what's at stake."⁶¹ By ending his *Plot* with the contingency of an undecided election, Simon turns over the potential political import of the series to his audience, inviting them to engage in action themselves, informed by their contingent perspective. It is a truly democratic act in undemocratic times, suggesting with Sheldon Wolin that "the possibility of renewal draws on a simple fact: that ordinary individuals are capable of creating new cultural patterns of commonality at any moment."⁶²

Notes

The author is enormously grateful to Brittany Hirth and Catherine Morley for sharing their work during the COVID-19 lockdown when library closures made interlibrary loans unavailable.

- 1 Donald J. Trump, "Statement by the President," White House, June 1, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-by-the-president-39/>.
- 2 Ishaan Tharoor, "Is It Time to Call Trump the F-Word?," *Washington Post*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/06/03/trump-protests-fascism/>.
- 3 Philip Roth, "The Story behind 'The Plot Against America,'" *New York Times*, September 19, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/19/books/review/the-story-behind-the-plot-against-america.html>.
- 4 Jonathan Yardley, "Homeland Insecurity," *Washington Post*, October 3, 2004, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A63751-2004Sep30.html>; James Wolcott, "The Counter Life," *Nation*, November 4, 2004, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/counter-life/>.
- 5 Majid Shirvani, "Deconstructing Roth's *The Plot Against America*: The Making of the President Donald Trump," *Rethinking Social Action Core Values in Practice: Lumen Proceedings* 1, no. 1 (2017): 813; Brittany Hirth, "An Independent Destiny for America: Roth's Vision of American Exceptionalism," *Philip Roth Studies* 14, no. 1 (2018): 89; Frank Rich, "Trump's

- Plot against America," *New York Magazine*, July 18, 2020, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/07/frank-rich-trumps-plot-against-america.html>.
- 6 Charles McGrath, "No Longer Writing, Philip Roth Still Has Plenty to Say," *New York Times*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/16/books/review/philip-roth-interview.html>.
 - 7 Matthew Dessen, "The Plot Against America's Showrunners on Why They Changed the Ending," *Slate*, April 20, 2020, <https://slate.com/culture/2020/04/the-plot-against-america-finale-david-simon-ed-burns-interview.html>.
 - 8 Simon Stow, "Written and Unwritten America: Roth on Reading, Politics, and Theory," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 23 (2004): 77–87.
 - 9 Philip Roth, *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Vintage, 2001), 147.
 - 10 Roth, 158.
 - 11 Stow, "Written and Unwritten America," 79.
 - 12 Paul Berman, "The Plot Against America," *New York Times*, October 3, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/03/books/review/the-plot-against-america.html>.
 - 13 Simon Stow, "The Politics and Literature of Unknowingness: Philip Roth's *Our Gang* and *The Plot Against America*," in *A Political Companion to Philip Roth*, ed. Lee Trepanier and Claudia-Franziska Bruehwiler (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 71.
 - 14 Catherine Morley, "Memories of the Lindbergh Administration: Plotting, Genre, and the Splitting of the Self in *The Plot Against America*," *Philip Roth Studies* 4, no. 2 (2008): 148.
 - 15 Philip Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 100.
 - 16 Hillel Italie, "Does Trump Read? If So, What? Fiery 2005 Letter Shines Light on His Relationship with Books," *Chicago Tribune*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-trump-letter-literature-20180215-story.html>.
 - 17 Shawna Chen, "Donald Trump, Expert," *Politico*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/09/03/donald-trump-expert-227997>.
 - 18 Jeremiah P. Conway, "Compassion and Moral Condemnation: An Analysis of the Reader," *Philosophy and Literature* 23, no. 2 (1999): 289.
 - 19 William E. Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

- 20 John Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 61.
- 21 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 66.
- 22 Robert Lloyd, "'The Plot Against America' Depicts a Familiar Crisis. That Doesn't Make It Great TV," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2020-03-16/hbo-plot-against-america-philip-roth-david-simon>.
- 23 Charles Brameco, "'It Can't Happen Here': The Horrifying Power of 'The Plot Against America,'" *Guardian*, March 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/mar/30/the-plot-against-america-philip-roth-tv-hbo>.
- 24 Glenn Garvin, "*The Plot Against America* Is Not about Trump, Even If the Comparisons Are Inevitable," *Reason*, March 13, 2020, <https://reason.com/2020/03/13/the-plot-against-america-is-not-about-trump-even-if-comparisons-are-inevitable/>.
- 25 Glenn Kessler, "The 'Very Fine People' at Charlottesville: Who Were They?," *Washington Post*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/05/08/very-fine-people-charlottesville-who-were-they-2/>.
- 26 Melanie Phillips, "Mining for Hate in 'The Plot Against America,'" *JNS: Jewish News Syndicate*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.jns.org/opinion/mining-for-hate-in-the-plot-against-america/>.
- 27 Gabe Friedman, "I Cover Anti-Semitism. 'The Plot Against America' Is the Scariest Show I've Seen," *Times of Israel*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/i-cover-anti-semitism-the-plot-against-america-is-the-scariest-show-ive-seen/>.
- 28 "In 'The Plot Against America,' David Simon Finds Present Day in an Imagined Past," NPR.org, March 13, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/814602908>.
- 29 Dessem, "*Plot Against America's* Showrunners."
- 30 Michael Paulson, "Two Protesters Disrupt 'Julius Caesar' in Central Park," *New York Times*, June 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/17/theater/julius-caesar-central-park-trump-protesters.html>.
- 31 Charles McGrath, "'The Plot Against America' Imagines the Rise of an Intolerant Demagogue," *New York Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/arts/television/plot-against-america-hbo-david-simon.html>.
- 32 Richard Ellis, *To the Flag: The Unlikely History of the Pledge of Allegiance* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 118, 137.

- 33 Stefanie Boese, "'Those Two Years': Alternate History and Autobiography in Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*," *Studies in American Fiction* 41, no. 2 (2014): 286.
- 34 Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); see also Simon Stow, "Pericles at Gettysburg and Ground Zero: Tragedy, Patriotism, and Public Mourning," *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 2 (2007): 195–208.
- 35 Candace Fleming, "Charles Lindbergh's Unapologetic Bigotry: How He Became the Face of the America First Committee," *Salon*, March 29, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/03/29/charles-lindbergh-america-first-racist/>.
- 36 A. Scott Berg, *Lindbergh* (New York: Berkley Books, 1999), 515.
- 37 T. Austin Graham, "On the Possibility of an American Holocaust: Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 63, no. 3 (2007): 143.
- 38 Charles McGrath, "'The Plot Against America' Imagines the Rise of an Intolerant Demagogue," *New York Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/05/arts/television/plot-against-america-hbo-david-simon.html>.
- 39 Judy Berman, "HBO's Philip Roth Adaptation *The Plot Against America* Is Essential Viewing for All Americans," *Time*, March 13, 2020, <https://time.com/5802828/plot-against-america-hbo-review/>.
- 40 Lloyd, "'Plot against America' Depicts a Familiar Crisis."
- 41 Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018), 188.
- 42 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Mariner Books, 2019), 195.
- 43 Garvin, "*Plot Against America* Is Not about Trump."
- 44 Arthur C. Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
- 45 Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 190.
- 46 Dessem, "*Plot Against America*'s Showrunners."
- 47 Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, 190.
- 48 Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism*, 56.
- 49 Connolly, 84, 92.
- 50 William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 4.
- 51 Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 47, 49.

- 52 Timothy Parrish, "Philip Roth: *The Plot Against America*," *Philip Roth Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 98.
- 53 Jason Siegel, "'The Plot Against America': Philip Roth's Counter-Plot to American History," *MELUS* 37, no. 1 (2012): 148.
- 54 Dessem, "Plot Against America's Showrunners."
- 55 Dessem.
- 56 Bettina Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 210.
- 57 Stanley, *How Fascism Works*, xviii.
- 58 David Denby, "The Plot Against America: Donald Trump's Rhetoric," *New Yorker*, December 15, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/plot-america-donald-trumps-rhetoric>.
- 59 Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 113.
- 60 Roth, *Reading Myself and Others*, 50.
- 61 Dessem, "Plot Against America's Showrunners."
- 62 Sheldon Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 212.

