HEROISM AS A GLOBAL PHENOMENON IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

Edited by
Barbara Korte, Simon Wendt and
Nicole Falkenhayner

ROUTLEDGE

Routledge Studies in Cultural History

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/ Routledge-Studies-in-Cultural-History/book-series/SE0367

Heroism as a Global Phenomenon in Contemporary Culture

Edited by Barbara Korte, Simon Wendt and Nicole Falkenhayner

Contents

6 'This Beast in the Shape of a Man'

Right-Wing Populism, White Masculinity, and the Transnational Heroization of Donald Trump

Michael Butter

Politics, Heroes, and the Global Flows of Popular Culture

On August 25, 2017, many of Donald Trump's liberal critics breathed a short sigh of relief. That day, Sebastian Gorka was fired from his position as deputy assistant to the president responsible for developing strategies to fight Islamist terrorism. A controversial figure ever since he had been appointed, Gorka, who had worked for Hungarian populist Victor Orban in the late 1990s, had never received the necessary security clearance to properly do his job anyway, and the departure from the White House a few days earlier of Steve Bannon, who had served as the president's chief strategist, had fatally weakened Gorka's position within the Trump administration. Unsurprisingly, however, when talking to the press, Gorka did not admit that he had been asked to resign but claimed that he had voluntarily withdrawn from the White House because of frustration about the direction in which the administration was moving. In his resignation letter to Trump, which was swiftly published by several news outlets, he wrote that 'Regrettably, outside of yourself, the individuals who most embodied and represented the policies that will "Make America Great Again," have been internally countered, systematically removed, or undermined in recent months.'[1]

Gorka thus articulated a concern widespread at that time among those committed to what one could label the 'nationalist agenda' for which they and Trump had campaigned. Gorka, Bannon, and others who had been instrumental in getting Trump elected feared that the 'globalists'—Chief of Staff John Kelly, then national security adviser H. R. McMaster, but also Trump's daughter Ivanka and his son-in-law Jared Kushner—were winning the upper hand. Increasingly shaping White House policy, they were perceived to betray what Trump, whom Gorka fashioned in his letter as the last one still dedicated to the campaign's original goals, and those who had elected him really wanted. Gorka elaborated on this idea, and his alleged new role in the fight to restore the country to its former glory, a day later in an interview with *Breitbart.com*, the right-wing

news platform that played a major part in getting Trump elected and that continues until today to firmly support his 'Make America Great Again' agenda. Viciously lashing out against anybody who he believed deviated from this agenda, Gorka compared his departure from the White House to one of the last scenes of the original *Star Wars* movie:

> Do you remember what Obi Wan Kenobi said to Darth [Vader]? 'If you strike me down, I will be more powerful than you can ever imagine.' The left thinks they're winning. They have no idea what's coming around the corner, and it's going to be fun.[2]

Gorka's self-fashioning as Obi-Wan Kenobi speaks directly to complex connections between heroism and the global flows of popular culture that this volume is concerned with. Gorka draws on a fictional narrative extremely well known inside and outside the United States to characterize not only himself but also Trump: If Gorka is Obi-Wan, then Trump is, by implication, Luke Skywalker. Obviously, many people will consider this comparison not only odd but also deeply inappropriate. Even though Luke Skywalker's image may have suffered a bit through *The Last Jedi*, the saga's latest instalment at the time of writing, he remains the flawless hero of the original *Star Wars* trilogy—a force of good in the perpetual galactic fight against evil. Trump, by contrast, is one of the most controversial and least popular presidents in the history of the United States, and, for many of his liberal critics, it therefore would be far more appropriate to compare him to Darth Vader or even Emperor Palpatine and thus to the leaders of the evil empire that Luke Skywalker fights against.

However, 'good' and 'evil' are cultural constructions, and their meaning may vary widely between and within cultures and societies. The same is true for heroes and concepts of heroism.[3] As the editors to this volume stress in their introduction, heroes do not exist as such. There is no essence to heroism, but heroes are culturally and socially constructed in that individuals and groups label real-life figures and fictional characters 'heroic' and/or attribute to them characteristics that are considered heroic at a specific time and in a specific context. Accordingly, a hero is always a hero for somebody, and one group's hero can easily be another group's villain. The men responsible for the 9/11 attacks are a case in point, as they are vilified as terrorists in the United States but celebrated as heroes in some Muslim countries.[4] The case of Donald Trump is, arguably, even more interesting because, in this case, the dividing line between heroization and vilification does not run *between* cultures but, as we will see, *within* American and, more generally, Western culture.

Trump is considered a hero and is actively heroized by a considerable number of people both in the United States and in Europe, and, as I will demonstrate, references to popular culture are of the utmost importance in this regard. To be sure, such references are used these days, particularly

in American culture, to make sense of politicians in general. A week before Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009, Marvel published 'Spidey Meets the President!' as instalment #583 of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. While this comic already suggested that Obama himself was superhero material, it did not quite yet turn him into such a figure. However, countless image memes inspired by this association did, and others performed the same kind of cultural work by casting him as Superman or Captain America. Popular culture, then, appears to be increasingly used to make sense of politics, but this tendency, I would suggest, is particularly pronounced when it comes to Donald Trump. After all, Trump's successful presidential campaign hinged to a large degree on the fact that he was familiar to Americans as a figure of popular culture. He had spent more than a decade on a reality television show, *The Apprentice*, and constructed a persona for himself which he then transferred to the realm of politics. Thus, it is not surprising that ever since he announced his candidacy, the fans—and I am using this term deliberately here—of Trump the politician have been drawing on films, novels, comics, and computer games to heroize him. In on- and offline discussions, he is frequently compared to figures such as Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* or superheroes, such as Captain America, Thor, or Superman.

This chapter's argument about the heroization of Trump unfolds in two steps: I will first focus on the national level and discuss how Trump was heroized by his supporters, what they celebrated him for, and how they used images, tropes, and narratives from popular culture to turn him into a hero. I will focus on an image meme based on the computer game *Bioshock Infinite* to demonstrate how the digitally circulating products of popular culture can be used for the work of heroization, and how their original meanings and ideologies are at times completely reversed when consumers appropriate them for their own purposes. Moving from the national to the transnational, I will show in the second and longer part of this analysis that Trump is also revered in Europe. While this might seem slightly surprising at first sight because of his explicitly nationalist 'America First' agenda, it makes perfect sense upon a second look. After all, there are obvious parallels between Trump's most devoted supporters in the United States and their worries and the anxieties that concern increasingly large segments of the population in Europe.

The populist movements on both sides of the Atlantic, which have gained so much traction in recent years, are fuelled by a distrust of established politicians and global elites, and concerns about economic and cultural decline. As Jonathan Rothwell has demonstrated in a study based on the data of 125,000 Americans, Trump was supported by voters both considerably above and below the average income level. Predominantly white and male, these voters, however, were all concerned about what they perceived as the decline of the country and threats to their own status in society. Tellingly, these are the same concerns that drive, for

example, the Pegida movement in Germany.[5] Accordingly, just as much as Americans, some of these Europeans tend to see Trump as the remedy for what they regard as a broken political system and the threats to white supremacy, traditional masculinity, and the wealth of the nation in general that are posed by such diverse phenomena as, for example, globalization, immigration, feminism, and the growing acceptance of same-sex partnerships. What is more, adoring American *and* European representations of Trump frequently cast him as a 'charismatic strongman'—and, thus, as a type of populist leader 'often related to authoritarian regimes' and not to democratic ones. Since such strongmen are typically seen as 'm[e]n of action, rather than words,' they lend themselves to be heroized in very traditional ways.[6] A Swedish YouTube clip that I will discuss in some detail is a case in point here, as it conflates the notions of the traditional warrior hero and the populist strongman in its celebration of Trump.

My analysis of this clip will also show that popular culture is a driving force in the transnational movement and adoration of a figure like Trump, as it is, once again, internationally available images and ideas that are used to heroize Trump. However, despite much common ground, the specific concerns of European populists differ from those of their American counterparts to a certain degree. Hence, Trump is reconfigured and adapted to answer to their needs and anxieties as his persona travels across the Atlantic. Since heroes are screens onto which audiences project their desires, as Max Jones has pointed out, Trump, the hero, comes to stand for slightly different things in Europe.[7]

'To Save the American People': The American Heroization of Trump

When Donald Trump took the stage on November 8, 2016, shortly after the election had been called for him, he did so to the music of Wolfgang Petersen's 1997 film *Air Force One*, in which a heroic president fights a group of communist terrorists aboard his plane. While there is a certain tension between the agenda of global policeman that President Marshall (played by Harrison Ford) pursues in the film by intervening in international conflicts that do not concern the United States and Trump's campaign promise to put American interests above those of the world, the music was probably chosen to suggest that, like his fictional counterpart, Trump would be a president who would act rather than just talk. This, of course, had been one of his most popular claims on the campaign trail, and one can take the slogans often shouted for minutes at his rallies—'Lock her up,' 'Build the wall,' and 'Drain the swamp'— as celebrations and reminders of his promises to act. The last chant is particularly pertinent for my topic, as it projected Trump as the fearless defender of the rights of the people, as someone who would heroically go

to Washington and single-handedly drain it of all elitist corruption, just as Hercules cleaned King Augeas's stables. Referencing a film in which a president almost single-handedly eliminates a serious threat to the nation, for which the plane is a rather obvious metaphor, must thus be understood as a moment of self-heroization carrying the promise that Trump would honour his pledges.

To be sure, candidates who seek political office are always praised or criticized for their plans rather than what they have done already, especially when they are running for the first time and have no record of achievements. But much more than the average candidate, and especially his direct opponents, Trump was from very early on seen by his core supporters as somebody who would surely deliver. They appear to have arrived at this conclusion, on the one hand, from the persona of the self-made businessman that he had constructed for himself on *The Apprentice* and through other media outlets for years, and, on the other, from what others found offensive about him—namely, his complete disregard for political correctness. In his attempt to understand the widespread appeal of a candidate he found despicable, Silicon Valley businessman Sam Altman quotes one of the 100 Trump supporters he talked to after the election as saying, 'He says true but unpopular things. If you can't talk about problems, you can't fix them.' And Altman adds, 'This sentiment came up a lot, probably in at least a third of the conversations I had.'[8] Moreover, as media studies scholars have shown, the way Trump communicated via Twitter was perceived as unprofessional and therefore particularly authentic, enabling Trump to project himself in prototypical populist fashion not only as a man of action but also as one of the people.[9]

One might assume that such a self-fashioning was made difficult if not impossible by Trump's tremendous wealth and a lifestyle that could not have been further removed from that of the voters he particularly appealed to. However, many of his core supporters apparently perceived the fact that he was running for office to get the country back on track as a sacrifice of his privileged life to serve the people. As one widely circulated meme put it, drawing on the established trope of the hero as somebody who gives up his personal happiness to serve the greater good, 'Trump the man who gave up his billionaire lifestyle to be humiliated, ridiculed, and slandered in order to save the American people.'[10] Obviously produced after the election, another meme also projects Trump as a populist hero when it declares, 'He beat the Democrats, Republicans and the media. His only ally, the American people!!'[11]

It is not always possible to track such memes back to their creators, but while many Trump memes originated in rather secluded online spaces, like the Reddit thread where many of his early supporters came together, they then spread over the Internet and were shared and liked by tens of thousands of users. They are thus indicative of how Trump was seen by a part of the electorate. And it was by no means only memes that

represented him in this fashion. In March 2017, journalist Jean Card claimed that Trump was

> the closest thing to Katniss [Everdeen] I could find in the moment. Our hero fires off tweets instead of arrows. But his framing of the enemy and his ability to capture our total attention is [*sic*] as strong as that of any science fiction hero.[12]

Trump, she thus suggested, was a hero of the common people just like Katniss, who in the dystopian *The Hunger Games* trilogy eventually defeats the corrupt and degenerate elites of the city, tellingly called the Capitol, to restore democracy and equality.

Card's comparison fits the populist drive behind the heroization of Donald Trump and is quite typical in that it draws on a popular culture reference. It is untypical, though, in that it compares Trump to a female hero. For apparent reasons, visual representations such as image memes drew on only male superheroes to heroize Trump,[13] turning him into Superman, Thor, or Captain America, and thus into a hypermasculine hero whose muscular body is emphasized by the tight-fitting clothes that these superheroes usually wear. Moreover, in such images, Katniss's bow—a weapon traditionally more readily available to women than swords or axes, as the myths of the Amazons and the goddess Diana show—is replaced by Thor's hammer or Captain America's shield—that is, by weapons that require physical strength to be used effectively. These memes thus highlight a notion of masculinity whose hegemonic status has been increasingly challenged in recent years. It is therefore safe to assume that, for many of his supporters, Trump's campaign was also about restoring this traditional—and, by implication, white and heteronormative—masculinity to its proper place in society.

What becomes rather obvious in these examples, then, is the intensification of a phenomenon that Roger R. Rollin observed more than 30 years ago: 'popular culture heroes . . . are . . . *communal* creations . . ., they bring about a kind of community, one whose citizens are the fans whose popularly supported leaders are the heroes.'[14] What Rollin meant was that fictional heroes such as Superman (and as I suggested earlier, Trump, too, is on a certain level a product of popular culture) were constantly adjusted by their makers to the shifting needs and desires of their audiences. Writing in the early 1980s, Rollin could not envision the advent of what Henry Jenkins labelled 'convergence culture' two decades later: a cultural moment in which 'people take media in their own hands.'[15] Under the conditions of digital culture, not only do fans provide feedback to the creators of their heroes, who then transform these heroes, but also fans themselves actively modify the heroes. They are both producers and consumers, makers and audiences of heroes, no matter if the hero is Superman or Donald Trump.

Significantly, the meaning of the images and narratives used in such heroization processes sometimes changes completely when they are appropriated by fans or supporters. This becomes apparent when looking at another widely circulated image meme that adds another element to the heroic persona of the charismatic leader constructed for Trump by himself and his supporters during the election campaign: his unrelenting stance on immigration and the barely concealed racism behind it. The meme (Figure 6.1) shows Trump in the attire of a Founding Father, the
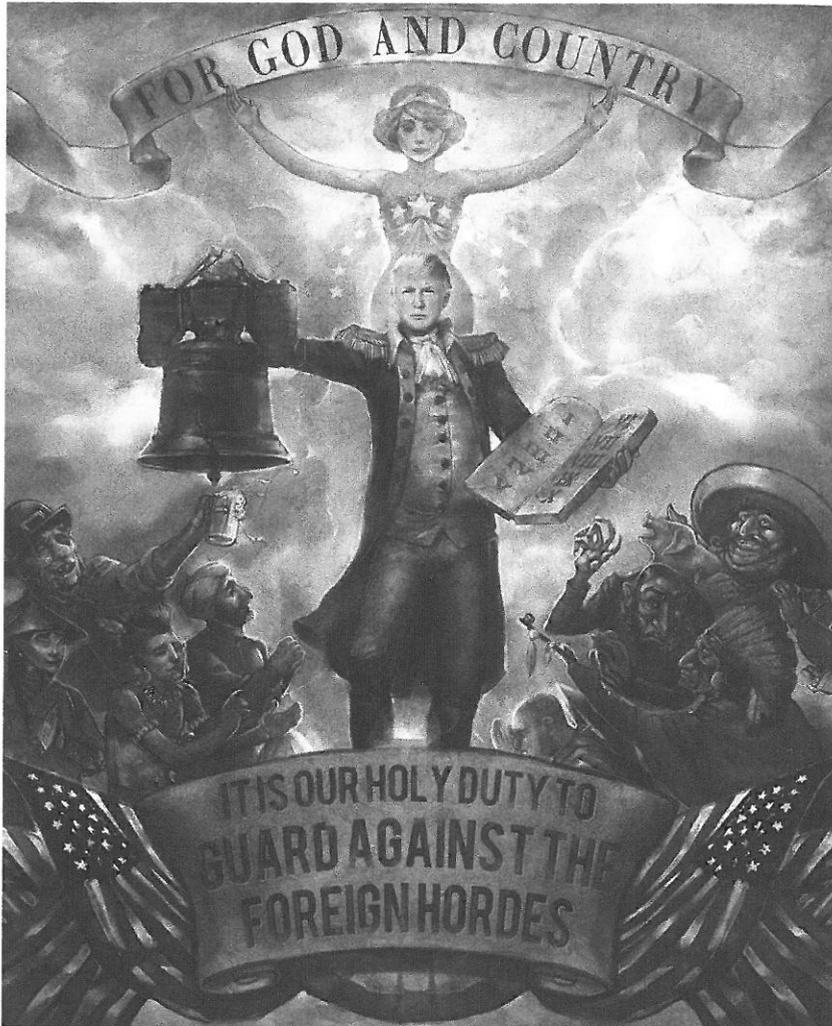

Figure 6.1   Trump's face photoshopped into a still from the video game *Bioshock Infinite* (2013). This meme has been circulated widely online since 2015

bluecoat of the Revolutionary Army, to be exact, which forges a close connection to George Washington, who, until today, remains one of the country's most revered heroes.[16] In fact, the iconography of the image—the light that surrounds Trump casts him at the very least as a divinely inspired leader—evokes associations with representations of Washington: for example, Constantino Brumidi's fresco *The Apotheosis of Washington* in the rotunda of the US Capitol, which imagined him elevated straight to heaven after death.

The Liberty Bell in Trump's right hand and the Ten Commandments in his left suggest that the values on which the country was founded and the Christian religion are inextricably intertwined. This connection is further corroborated by the banner at the top of the image, which declares, 'For God and Country,' and which is held by a female figure who appears to be a curious blend of the goddess Columbia, the allegorical representation of the United States in the nineteenth century, and a participant in a beauty pageant. The banner at the bottom of the image makes clear against which threat Trump must defend the country. 'It is our holy duty to guard against the foreign hordes,' it says, and on the left and the right of the banner representatives of these 'foreign hordes' are depicted in a highly stereotypical and racist manner: among others, a Chinese, an Arab, and a Mexican, all looking up at Trump in a mixture of awe, admiration, and fear. The presence of an Indian chief signals that the United States is defined here as an exclusively white nation whose 'holy duty' it is to dominate other races while preserving the purity of their own.

The fact that there is an Irishman (easily identifiable by his leprechaun face and a jug of beer) among these non-white people might suggest at first sight that the original, into which Trump's face has been inserted, is a product of nineteenth-century nativism since the Irish were not always considered white at that time.[17] This, however, could not be further from the truth, as the image comes from the 2013 computer game *Bioshock Infinite*. As far as it is possible to reconstruct the history of the meme, the image was first used by the Tea Party, which is not deplete of irony, as the game does not at all subscribe to nativism or racism but severely criticizes a nativist party inside the fictional world clearly modelled after the twenty-first-century Tea Party. From 2015 onward, then, Trump's supporters appropriated the image from the Tea Party and used Photoshop to turn the figure in its centre into Trump. As the image travelled first from the game to the Tea Party and then from there to the Trump campaign, its meaning first changed considerably and then again slightly.

All in all, then, the heroization of Donald Trump during the election campaign would have been impossible without popular culture. At times quite independent of the ideology that informed these products in the first place, the widely circulating narratives and characters of film, television, and (graphic) novels provided the material that his supporters could draw on and work with. The meme just discussed is a particularly strong example of how the meanings inscribed into a cultural artefact during the

act of production can be appropriated, subverted, and even negated during the act of reception in order to produce effects that are diametrically opposed to the original intention.[18] The meme employs an image from a computer game with an explicit anti-nativist stance to celebrate Trump for his nativism. Together with the other examples addressed in this section, it participates in the construction of Trump as a populist strongman, a hero who will defend the interests of the people against neglectful elites and immigrants. The meme suggests that only white Americans are real Americans, and this is quite typical of populist discourse, which usually restricts the idea of who the people are in some way or other.[19] An embodiment of traditional masculinity—highlighted in the image from *Bioshock* by his courageous and upright posture, which contrasts markedly with those of the various racial others—Trump was, and still is, widely imagined to be really taking up the 'white man's burden,' with emphasis on both white and man.

'Illegals Are Coming': Trump as the Saviour of Europe

Ever since he announced his candidacy, Donald Trump has been criticized and even ridiculed by most of the European media and large parts of the public. But Trump soon found fervent and vocal supporters on that side of the Atlantic, too. 'I am from Europe and I am disgusted by political correctness and by non-stop apologizing of terrorist attacks and rapes. I feel sad when I am in Paris, Amsterdam, or Prague, and see the changes,' a user wrote in a Reddit thread entirely devoted to the question of why people outside the United States supported Trump. He then went on to call Trump 'very inspiring' and closed by saying that he would 'build a wall and the wall will be a masterpiece.'[20] And when Trump controversially banned citizens of certain Muslim countries from entering the United States, he was applauded by many German Facebook users. One of them wrote, 'That's the only way. They [the refugees] can't be stopped any other way.'[21]

The admiration for Trump that permeates these and many similar posts should not come as a surprise. After all, anti-elitism, xenophobia, and the desire to restore 'proper' gender norms and relations are topics that also resonate with many Europeans, as the success of right-wing populists in countries such as Austria, Poland, and Hungary but also France, Germany, and the United Kingdom shows. Especially the refugee crisis of 2015 and its effects galvanized support for Trump in Europe because his strong anti-immigration stance—symbolized by his plan to build a wall on the border between the United States and Mexico—appeared to a considerable number of Europeans to be the right response to the problem Europe was facing, and the very opposite of what their politicians were doing. This notion was also projected by the alternative media which have emerged online all over Europe in the past decade and which claim

to present the real and objective news, whereas the traditional or, as they refer to them, 'mainstream' media are said to report in a biased fashion, to silence certain topics, to cater to the interests of the elite, and to spread fake news. The German journalist Ken Jebsen, for example, who used to work for public radio but has been running his own YouTube channel for several years now, has praised Trump repeatedly.[22]

For his European supporters, Trump's nationalism is not threatening but rather makes him a kindred spirit: 'I think we can learn a lot from "America First Again",' yet another user wrote on Facebook early in 2017.[23] For her and others, Trump and his campaign are clearly models to be emulated; and like his American supporters, they stress Trump's authenticity and determination to act. Consequently, Trump's European supporters shared and liked the memes produced by his American fans, and, since the products of popular culture so instrumental to the heroization of Trump in the United States are as easily available and as well known in Europe, they have been adding their own share for the past two years. One meme, widely circulated on French Facebook, turned Trump into Jason triumphantly presenting Medusa's cut-off head, only Medusa's face had been replaced with Hillary Clinton's.[24]

However, the Trump adored in Europe is not quite the same as the Trump celebrated in the United States, and there is even a certain tension between the two versions. While both are charismatic strongmen and their heroic personas are characterized in both cases by anti-elitism, nationalism, and traditional masculinity, differences emerge when European supporters of Trump imagine him, as they frequently did during the election campaign, not merely as a role model for their politicians but also as acting on behalf of Europe and defending it against what they see as the Muslim threat to Western civilization. Another meme quite popular on French Facebook, for example, turns Trump into a crusader who conquers the Holy Land. Thus, it ascribes to him exactly the globalist agenda that he explicitly rejected, projecting him as the global policeman embodied by President Marshall in the film *Air Force One*.

A similar tension permeates a short video called 'Donald Trump Emperor of America,' which was produced and uploaded to YouTube in March 2016 by a Swedish user who calls himself Thorstein Memeson.[25] By early 2018, it had been watched more than 900,000 times, and there were more than 3,700 comments from people from all over Europe and the United States below the video. The clip dramatizes the idea of a religious war, a clash of civilizations, between Christian Europe and the Muslim world in drastic fashion, and it casts Trump as a warrior hero and Europe's only hope to escape complete Islamization. By way of its title and certain shots, the video suggests that what European countries need are leaders like Trump who will stop Muslim immigration—for example, a map of Europe filled with the American flag. But the video simultaneously articulates the desire that Trump should conquer Europe

to save its people from their corrupt elites. Such a call for international intervention, however, is at odds with the nationalist agenda that informs the rest of the video, including its soundtrack.

While the image track is a rapid collage of pieces from news reports, photographs, and scenes from computer games into which Trump's head has been copied, the soundtrack consists of only one song, 'The Lion From the North,' by the Swedish power metal band Sabaton. According to Wikipedia, power metal bands 'usually have anthem-like songs with fantasy-based subject matter and strong choruses, thus creating a theatrical, dramatic, and emotionally "powerful" sound.'[26] Like most songs by Sabaton, 'Lion From the North' possesses the qualities of an anthem, but its subject is not 'fantasy-based.' Sabaton's music usually revolves around warfare, historical battles, and traditional acts of military heroism. 'Lion From the North' is from the album *Carolus Rex*, whose title references Charles XII, king of Sweden between 1697 and 1718. The songs on the album are about either the Thirty Years' War and King Gustavus Adolphus, or battles fought under Charles XII at the turn of the eighteenth century. 'Lion From the North,' the second track on the album, belongs to the first category. It celebrates Gustavus Adolphus as Sweden's saviour from the Catholic foe and implicitly hails him as the one who made Sweden a major power in Europe.

By combining this song with an image track that focuses on Donald Trump's alleged battle against Islam in the present, the video heroizes Trump in the tradition of Gustavus Adolphus, implying that he is continuing the fight against an evil religious foe begun by the Swedish king 400 years ago. The video begins with a shot of a map of Europe, Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula, and a caption that says, 'Islamic expansion.' Another caption indicates the year 600; the area that is today Saudi Arabia and Yemen is coloured green, the colour traditionally associated with Islam, while the rest of the map is still white. But as time passes, Islam is seen to be spreading throughout the world, and a few seconds later, when another caption indicates the year 2015, the whole Arab world, large parts of Africa, and all of Europe, except Eastern Europe, have been Islamized. The next shot shows a mass of unidentifiable Muslims at Mecca, circling the Kaaba. This image of conformity and anonymity is then juxtaposed with a close shot of Donald Trump—or rather a figure in a suit onto which the head of Trump has been photoshopped—who gives the finger to an invisible interlocutor, by implication, of course, the Muslim masses. As the rhythm of the guitars accelerates, the next couple of shots show the launching of a nuclear missile and then a mushroom cloud, suggesting that Trump takes action against the Muslim enemy.

At this moment, one minute into the video and the song, the lyrics set in. Calling Gustavus Adolphus a 'lion' and 'a beast in the shape of a man,' the lyrics cast the Swedish king as a mighty warrior who does God's will and destroys his enemies. Although the text is not difficult to understand,

Memeson has added subtitles to the video. This allows him to make one crucial change—the 'Catholics' of the soundtrack become 'socialists' in the subtitles. However, as the image track makes clear, 'socialist' is not to be taken literally but functions as a cipher for all politicians who oppose the ultranationalist and anti-immigration stance that the video promotes. It aligns, among others, Angela Merkel with François Hollande, and Barack Obama with Jeb Bush. The enemies of Christian Europe, then, are not only all Muslims but also the countries' own leaders because they do not act against the 'invasion' but, on the contrary, enable it. Trump and his followers, by contrast, meet the challenge as it must be met: with force and determination.

As the song gets even faster, we see very short clips—never more than a few seconds—of American soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, and countless images of Trump, both unchanged and photoshopped. We see Trump on the campaign trail and at press conferences, but also a photograph of an ancient Egyptian relief in which Trump's face is imposed on that of the pharaoh and the modified image from *Bioshock Infinite* discussed in the previous section. What dominates, however, are stills or short clips from computer games in which Trump, thanks to image-processing software, becomes a warrior in full armour who slaughters his enemies, mostly orcs and similar creatures but in one case Hillary Clinton, with swords and axes. Most of these clips and images are visible for only a second or even shorter. This may have to do with the poor quality of some of them, but it is also because the individual shots and the sources they come from do not matter. What matters instead is the image of Trump that they create together.

The video casts Trump as a medieval warrior hero and thus as exactly the type of hero that the band Sabaton—whose name is drawn from the word for the iron shoe of a knightly armour—has been interested in throughout its career. Trump is not merely projected as the leader of his troops, as, for example, George Washington was, but also heroized in the tradition of Gustavus Adolphus, who always fought alongside his troops in battle and fell during the Battle of Lützen in 1632. The heroism ascribed to Trump is characterized by bravery, bodily strength, and superior fighting skills. He is represented as a deadly warrior who slaughters his enemies mercilessly, and the video clearly revels in the excess of violence that it projects.

In order to make sure that Trump is not perceived as a fantasy figure completely detached from reality, the video alternates images of him as a warrior with images and short clips of real-life Trump from both the campaign and before. The video thus constructs a metonymic chain between the Trump everybody knows and its own version of Trump. Campaigning is cast in the fashion of a heroic act that continues the work of war done by earlier heroes and by the digitized version of Trump in the excerpts from the computer games. After all, just as in one of the longer passages

of the video, the opponent during the campaign was Hillary Clinton, a figure cast as a demon in this video and countless other images and narratives produced by Trump supporters in 2016. The video further suggests that Trump not only rightfully belongs to the long line of warrior heroes but also is an everyday hero.[27] This is achieved by a shot that remains on screen a little longer than most others and that shows a 1991 article from the *New York Daily News* which reports how Donald Trump interfered in a mugging and scared the bat-wielding attacker away.[28] Finally, the gap between this 'ordinary' heroism and the 'extraordinary' one of a warrior is bridged by a clip that shows Trump participating in a celebrity wrestling match in 2007. This clip achieved some notoriety in 2017 when Trump retweeted an altered version in which the face of the opponent he was battering on stage had been replaced by the CNN logo. Memeson's video includes the original version, and the images of Trump beating up his 'enemy' and then violently shaving his head strongly suggest that Trump truly is a warrior and possesses all the characteristics usually ascribed to sword-wielding knights in full armour.

As my analysis has so far established, the video takes the traditional masculinity Trump was celebrated for by his American supporters completely over the top. This is not at all unusual for heavy-metal songs and videos because, as Deena Weinstein has put it, '[a]t its core, . . . metal is an expression of masculinity.'[29] While recent criticism has challenged the stereotypical image of the 'heavy metal fan as white, male, teenage and alienated,' of somebody whose 'masculinity [is] in crisis' and for whom 'the exercise of aggression' is a way to overcome this crisis, the cliché nevertheless holds true to a certain degree, and the video is a case in point.[30] It exudes a profound sense of anxiety that white men are losing their rightful and privileged position in society to women (embodied by Hillary Clinton) and people of colour (embodied by the Muslim refugees). This threat, the video implies, must be answered with extreme violence and Trump, described by the lyrics at one point as 'this beast in the shape of a man,' is cast as the one capable and willing to exert such violence.

Besides actively fighting those enemies already inside the United States, the video suggests in best Trumpian fashion that closing the borders completely is an equally important step. This notion is conveyed by a shot that lingers a little longer than others on screen and that also serves as the video's thumbnail image on YouTube. Trump is cast here as Jon Snow from HBO's *Game of Thrones*, and this comparison makes a lot of sense, not only because for large parts of the show Snow guards a wall, while Trump wants to build one, but also because on the other side of the wall in *Game of Thrones*, there are uncivilized 'wildlings' and even an army of zombies.[31] As several critics have argued, in the post-9/11 world, the zombie has become, among others, a trope for Islamist terrorism. It represents ultimate otherness, displays complete disregard for its own life and safety, and cannot be negotiated with. Hence, complete annihilation, celebrated throughout the video, is the only way to deal with this threat.[32]

While the different anxieties the video is concerned with—fear of Muslim immigration, distrust of one's own elites, and a crisis of masculinity—seem unconnected at first sight, the video uses the conspiracy theories of the 'great replacement' to tie them all together. This conspiracy theory, which was first articulated by the French philosopher Renaud Camus, has gained a lot of traction in Europe since 2015. It holds that the Christian population of Europe is currently being replaced by Muslims, and that this has been planned and is now carefully orchestrated by a group of conspirators. These evildoers orchestrated the attacks of 9/11 to justify the invasion of Iraq to destabilize the region and eventually trigger the mass migration of refugees. Using the European Union and European politicians like Angela Merkel and François Hollande as its puppets, the conspiracy also orchestrated the Schengen Agreement to allow refugees to move freely within Europe. Moreover, the conspiracy has also been working hard to subvert traditional gender norms to ensure that European women have fewer children and that European men lack the masculinity to effectively resist the Muslim invaders. The masterminds behind the plot remain obscure in some accounts, while other accounts, including the video, focus on the American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros. A montage shot that shows him together with Barack Obama, Jeb Bush, and Angela Merkel before an Israeli flag suggests that he is the representative of a larger Jewish plot against Europe.[33]

Absurd as it may sound, this conspiracy theory is by no means restricted to the radical fringe to which the producer of the video obviously belongs, but enjoys a lot of popularity in the right-wing populist movements that have gained so much traction since 2015 because of the refugee crisis. As several shots towards the end of the video make clear, their leaders—for example, Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen—are seen as Trump's and the people's allies in the fight against conspiratorial elites and the Muslim Other. This idea, though, leads back directly to the tensions that run through the video. To be sure, the different European populist parties are currently cooperating, forming a somewhat unlikely international alliance of nationalists. They are organized in the fraction 'Europe of Nations and Liberty' in the European Parliament and organized a summit meeting in Koblenz in January 2017 that drew a lot of media attention. However, the idea that Trump might not only inspire a further nationalist turn in Europe but also literally come to the rescue of this continent is absurd, as such an intervention would run against everything he campaigned for.

The Trump, then, that his European supporters celebrated in 2016 had some things in common with the Trump heroized in the United States, but there were also significant differences. Still, as the Reddit thread I referred to earlier and the comments under Memeson's video amply show, there was a lot of exchange and agreement between Trump supporters on both sides of the Atlantic in 2016 and 2017. 'I'm from Sweden. Please, President Trump, save my country,' one comment reads, and another one adds, 'I'm from Poland, Poles are with you Trump,' while an American

declares, 'Europe we love you, but we hate Merkel! We love you, but we hate the EU and NATO!'

The transnational heroization of Donald Trump works because Trump functions in this discourse as what one could call—with reference to Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism—a half-empty signifier. As Laclau demonstrates in his analysis of Juan Perón during his time in exile in the 1960s, Perón was so successful in garnering support from various groups in Argentina because he was absent and thus came to embody contradictory ideas to different parts of the population. He became in effect an 'empty signifier.'[34] To some extent, this is also what happens to Trump, as there is an obvious tension between the nationalist agenda that he is celebrated for by his American supporters (and that he actually pursues) and the role as 'saviour of Europe' that heroizations outside of the United States tend to ascribe to him. Yet, unlike the different versions of Perón in Argentina during the 1960s, the 'European' and the 'American' Trump still have a lot in common: Both display an anti-elite and anti-Islam stance, oppose immigration, and seek to restore an embattled white masculinity to its former hegemonic position. And both are heroes fighting for the common people against neglectful and at times even corrupt elites.

Conclusion: Yet Another Alliance

In *The Other Alliance*, his study of the transnational entanglement of student protests in the United States and Germany, Martin Klimke argues that the movements on both sides of the Atlantic formed an alliance structurally similar to the one of their governments. He demonstrates that they shared 'an international language of dissent,' but also that German and European students did not simply copy everything from their American counterparts but 'selectively adopted, modified, and used American counter-cultural imports, thereby turning them into their own.'[35] The transnational heroization of Donald Trump investigated here could be labelled yet another transatlantic alliance. As this chapter has shown, Trump's American and European admirers agree in many respects but nevertheless see slightly different things in Trump. Most importantly, however, they share an international language of heroism, and their heroizations of Trump depend on and are enabled by a globally circulating popular culture that provides both the narratives and tropes for it.

What is more, in the age of convergence culture where production and consumption increasingly fall together, popular culture provides templates onto which political figures can be grafted not only ideologically but also, quite literally, materially. One can easily cast Donald Trump as Jon Snow because there are countless images of Jon Snow available online that Trump supporters can work with. Amazingly, to turn Trump into Jon Snow one does not even need Jon Snow, as becomes apparent

when one looks closely at the image of Trump guarding the wall in Thorstein Memeson's video. Clearly, the image is supposed to align Trump and Snow, and it succeeds because of the parallels I have outlined earlier. However, the body onto which Trump's face is imposed here is not that of Jon Snow but that of his alleged father, and, as it later emerges, his uncle, Ned Stark. I was unable to verify if Memeson worked with a meme that had already turned Snow into Stark, thereby suggesting that he was the legitimate heir as which he has by now emerged in *Game of Thrones*, or if Memeson simply took an image of Ned Stark, inserted it into a picture of the wall, and then replaced Stark's head with Trump's. At the end of the day, it does not matter. What matters is that Memeson could easily align Trump with Jon Snow and thereby participate in the forty-fifth president's transnational heroization—a heroization that almost entirely depends on a globally available popular culture.

Notes

1. Ben Kew, 'Sebastian Gorka Resigns from Trump Administration,' *Breitbart*, August 25, 2017, last accessed September 23, 2018, www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/08/25/sebastian-gorka-resigns-from-trump-administration/.

2. Matthew Boyle, 'Exclusive: "Like the Last Scene of Star Wars": Sebastian Gorka Compares Battle against Globalist Cabal to Rebel Alliance Fighting Evil Empire,' *Breitbart*, August 26, 2017, last accessed September 26, 2018, www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/08/26/exclusive-like-the-last-scene-of-star-wars-sebastian-gorka-compares-battle-against-globalist-cabal-to-rebel-alliance-fighting-evil-empire/.

3. On the cultural construction of good and evil, cf. Michael Butter, *The Epitome of Evil: Hitler in American Fiction, 1939–2002* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 38–45.

4. Cf., for example, Mahmoud Eid, 'The Two Faces of Osāma Bin Laden: Mass Media Representations as a Force of Evil and Arabic Hero,' in *Heroes in a Global World*, eds. Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008), 151–183.

5. Jonathan T. Rothwell and Pablo Diego-Rosell, 'Explaining Nationalist Political Views: The Case of Donald Trump,' in *SSRN*, November 2, 2016, last modified December 29, 2017, last accessed September 26, 2018, https://ssrn.com/abstract=2822059; and Hans Vorländer, Maik Herold, and Steven Schäller, *PEGIDA: Entwicklung, Zusammensetzung und Deutung einer Empörungsbewegung* (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 58.

6. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 63–64.

7. Cf. Max Jones, 'What Should Historians Do with Heroes? Reflections on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain,' *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (2007): 439–454.

8. Sam Altman, 'I'm a Silicon Valley Liberal, and I Traveled across the Country to Interview 100 Trump Supporters: Here's What I Learned,' *Business Insider*, February 23, 2017, last accessed September 21, 2018, www.businessinsider.de/sam-altman-interview-trump-supporters-2017-2?r=US&IR=T.

9. Cf. Gunn Enli, 'Twitter as Arena for the Authentic Outsider: Exploring the Social Media Campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US Presidential Election,' *European Journal of Communication* 32, no. 1 (2017): 50–61.

10. 'Trump International Supporters Movement,' *Facebook*, August 24, 2017, last accessed April 23, 2018.

11. 'He Beat the Democrats, Republicans and the Media: His Only Ally, the American People!,' last accessed April 23, 2018, https://s-media-cache-ak0. pinimg.com/736x/51/3d/35/513d350416c8d377163ef5aa75c9352f-trump-train-donald-trump.jpg.

12. Jean Card, 'Is Trump Our Hero?,' *U.S. News*, March 2, 2017, last accessed March 15, 2018, www.usnews.com/opinion/thomas-jefferson-street/articles/2017-03-02/is-donald-trump-the-right-hero-for-america-right-now.

13. For a general introduction to the different forms and functions of memes, cf. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, 'Online Memes, Affinities, and Cultural Production,' in *A New Literacies Sampler*, eds. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 199–227. They emphasize that memes habitually draw on 'shared popular culture experiences and practices' to be accessible to their audiences and evoke emotions (217).

14. Roger R. Rollin, 'The Lone Ranger and Lenny Skutnik: The Hero as Popular Culture,' in *The Hero in Transition*, eds. Ray B. Browne and Marshall W. Fishwick (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), 25–26. Emphasis in the original.

15. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 17.

16. The meme has been circulated widely all over the Internet. Cf., for example, https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1077489-donald-trump, last accessed May 16, 2018. On Washington as a hero after which subsequent presidents were modelled for decades, cf. Michael Butter, *'Der Washington-Code': Zur Heroisierung amerikanischer Präsidenten, 1775–1865* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016).

17. Cf. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

18. My take on culture here has obviously been shaped by the model of the 'circuit of culture' first developed in Paul du Gay, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

19. Cf. Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 2016), esp. 20–23, on this phenomenon.

20. Reddit, May 27, 2016.

21. Facebook: Donald J. Trump Fanclub Deutschland, January 28, 2017, last accessed July 20, 2017.

22. Cf., for example, KenFM, 'nachdenKEN über: Trump gewinnt die US-Wahl,' *YouTube*, November 11, 2016, last accessed September 26, 2018, www. youtube.com/watch?v=s_os6-AWZK8&t=32s.

23. Facebook: Donald J. Trump Fanclub Deutschland, January 21, 2017, last accessed July 20, 2017.

24. The image was available on Facebook, but has been removed in the meantime.

25. Thorstein Memeson, 'Donald Trump Emperor of America,' *YouTube*, March 26, 2016, last accessed September 26, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQCaWLF2gfs.

26. 'Power Metal,' *Wikipedia*, last accessed April 8, 2018, https://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Power_metal.

27. On the little-researched topic of everyday heroism, cf. Simon Wendt, 'Introduction: Studying Everyday Heroism in Western Societies,' in *Extraordinary Ordinariness: Everyday Heroism in the United States, Germany, and Britain, 1800–2015*, ed. Simon Wendt (Frankfurt: Campus, 2016), 7–24.

28. James Rosen, 'Donald Trump Reportedly Stopped a Bat-Wielding Attacker in 1991,' *Daily News*, November 20, 1991, published online February 27, 2018,

last accessed September 21, 2018, www.nydailynews.com/new-york/donald-trump-reportedly-stopped-bat-wielding-attacker-1991-article-1.3845008.

29. Deena Weinstein, 'The Empowering Masculinity of British Heavy Metal,' in *Heavy Metal Music in Britain*, ed. Gerd Bayer (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 17–31, 17.

30. Niall Scott, 'The Monstrous Male and Myths of Masculinity in Heavy Metal,' in *Heavy Metal, Gender and Sexuality: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Florian Heesch and Niall Scott (London: Routledge, 2016), 121–132, 121.

31. Of course, in the show's penultimate season the wall is breached and the zombie army begins its invasion of Westeros.

32. Cf., for example, Ruth Mayer, 'Virus Discourse: The Rhetoric of Threat and Terrorism in the Biothriller,' *Cultural Critique* 66, no. 1 (2007): 1–20, and Nicole Birch-Bayley, 'Terror in Horror Genres: The Global Media and the Millennial Zombie,' *Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 6 (2012): 1137–1151.

33. Cf. Michael Butter, *'Nichts ist, wie es scheint': Über Verschwörungstheorien* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018), 21–29, for a detailed analysis of this conspiracy theory.

34. Cf. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 216.

35. Martin Klimke, *The Other Alliance: Student Protest in West Germany and the United States in the Global Sixties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 6–7.