OTHERING, AFFECT AND POLITICS :
Images of the immigrant in future visions of the US

What role does ideas of "the immigrant" play in the current political landscape in the US? What can these images reveal about unspoken fears, desires and projected images of self, and how might these layers of affect play into political dynamics? Finally, where do these insights lead us in terms of strategies for moving forward in a political landscape defined by deep divisions, growing xenophobic sentiments and ever-increasing complexities?

I would like to start by properly framing the context for my inquiry, which is the rapidly changing political landscapes of the US, with many parallells to recent developments in Europe and other parts of the world. The issues at hand have exposed our deep entrenchment in what could be labeled as the school book example of a "wicked problem": "a problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize".[1] As the "defeated liberal side" is grappling to identify the elements behind the "Trump crisis" and understand their relationship to each other – is it primarily a matter of race? class? economical developments around globalization? city/rural divides? religious divides? constitutional inadequacies? – I believe one way of starting to unpack this scenario in a constructive way, and identify strategies of moving forward – is looking at the "mental models" or images of projected futures that are shaping our current political landscapes. Visions of the future always contain affective dimensions, rooted in conscious and

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[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem

unconscious needs, desires, hopes and fears. Just like the power of branding, they are extremely effective in confirming and speaking to deeply held beliefs connected to identity and self image, oftentimes with an implicit "other" or implicit "others" used to confirm this self image or identity.

A key projection surface of these ideal futures is, as this recent US election has made very clear, the element of the "non-white immigrant". In the readings "Global Detroit" and "Border walls gone green", we find two examples of extremely different projections of the future – one portraying immigrants as bright, hard-working and successful contributors to the US economy, and the other portraying them as a threat to the cultural and ecological future of the country. Together they expose the US as a battle ground for competing visions: an existential crisis of sort with no unified vision of what America is or what it should be. In this essay, I wish to examine these projections, with special focus on "Global Detroit" as this publication in many ways represents the "competing vision" used to "battle" the xenophobic vision of the conservative side. In my inquiry, I will look for gaps and interconnections in relation to the xenophobic visions examined in "Border walls gone green", hinting towards possible contradictions in spoken and implicit agency. Unpacking and scrutinizing "counter visions" of any kind of resistance strategy, I believe is of utmost importance for anyone wanting to achieve social change, as it can reveal gaps, inconsistencies between statements and actual behavior, and inherent but not acknowledged "othering" that unintentionally may act as agents in the web of relations you are trying to have an effect on.

INTRODUCING GLOBAL DETROIT

Global Detroit was released in 2010 by the regional development engine. Their declared mission statement is to leverage the "talent, ingenuity, entrepreneurial spirit, and determination of immigrants in Metro Detroit to power the regional economy" (acknowledgements). It is an apolitical publication in the sense that it does not display any particular party affiliation. It does however make a clear ideological stance in favor of immigration and multiculturalism, in a way that I believe in many ways corresponds with the liberal rhetoric in response to growing xenophobic and racist sentiments. The report could also be read as a sort of branding – encompassing pictures as well as words – that paints an overall image projected towards a future ideal state. A counter vision of sorts to nationalist or xenophobic visions of the conservative side, selling the image of a multicultural

and welcoming Detroit: "The pictures and media stories that emanate from Detroit

are circulated around the globe and shape the investment decisions of global

companies, enrollment decisions of foreign students, and vacation decisions of

families in America and across the world" (3). As Rashida Tlaib, Pakistani

immigrant, points out: "The conversation about limiting the flow of immigration

gives us the reputation of not opening our arms. We are creating a culture in our

state that is not attractive for anyone that wants to come here and invest" (71).

Apart from foreign investors, students and and tourists, the publication targets a

native US community hesitant to embrace immigrants because of culturally

ingrained myths about immigrants taking jobs from US workers, not wanting to

integrate, bringing down US workers salaries etc. "In many US communities, the

messages native-born community members hear about immigrants are, in large,

part, negative (…) For a Global Detroit initiative to be successful, we must retell

the story of how metro Detroit´s foreign born contribute to the region´s

success" (37).

HOW IS "THE IMMIGRANT" DESCRIBED IN GLOBAL DETROIT?

What are the defining characteristics of "the immigrant" according to Global

Detroit? Keywords used to describe immigrants are innovative, successful, able

and entrepreneurial. Images of happy immigrants of all colors and cultural

attributes are accompanied with success stories and accounts of achievements in

the face of difficult circumstances. Stories such as: "Less than a century ago

Morris Tobocman emigrated from Lukov, Poland to America without much of a

formal education and most likely, without formal legal status. (…) Little could he

imagine that both his sons would become renowned architects from the

University of Michigan or that his grandson (…) would end up as the elected State Representative for three terms (…). It is a typical American story of immigration and it helps define a central piece of what makes the nation so economically and politically successful"(acknowledgements). Elaborate accounts of immigrant achievements in science, technology, engineering and mathematics are mentioned, as well as their high number of patents and Nobel prizes. Immigrants are further described as hard-working and productive, both supported by the accompanying text and by individual accounts from immigrants themselves. Monica Navarro from Colombia says that: "I think that defining characteristics of immigrants are what has always made this country great. We have always attracted that self-selected group of very, very bright and/or very, very hard working" (52).

Keywords to accompany the idea of the successful and hard-working immigrant, are "culture of innovation", "adaptation", "higher education" and "globally competitive knowledge economy". Immigrants are presented as the ones with the characteristics to take Detroit out of its pit of unemployment and poverty. In the words of Patricia Moo Radian, during her Henry Ford "advancing a culture of innovation" address: "Many people around the world think that our state is broken, done-for, intellectually bankrupt. We all know otherwise. History teaches us that our future will depend on how quickly, and how well, we innovate and adapt" (1). Immigrants are given a unique position within the economy as the fuel of growth and innovation, regardless of background and previous educational level: "What is truly significant is that across the board, from working class to highly educated, immigrants provide unique assets to the talent, innovation and

culture change of our economy" (12). Why? Because they "arrive ready-made to perform in knowledge-based, global economy. They´re often the best and brightest from back home, certainly the strivers. They have the risk-taking personalities of entrepreneurs, and they dream big and work smart" (5).

HOW IS "THE IMMIGRANT" DESCRIBED IN BORDER WALLS GONE GREEN?

"Border Walls gone green" by John Hultgren investigates a variety of xenophobic movements connected to environmentalism, linking protection of the environment to a need to reduce immigration, with various degrees of outspoken racism. What the movements share in common, is a nationalist sentiment, where "certain populations (e.g. immigrants) become perceived as threats against which the sovereign nation-state comes to understand and reproduce its identity, boundaries, and sense of social and ecological purpose" (9). On the "racism under cover"-side of the spectrum, we find that "racial anxieties over increased immigration are recast in terms of cultural values, economic costs, security threats and environmental degradation" (26). For instance – instead of focusing on immigrants in themselves, the number of immigrants becomes the problem, according to a logic where the more immigrants the larger the carbon footprint. On the far end of the "outspoken racism" side are ideas of the need to protect the racial (and ecological) purity of the US by reducing the amount of immigrants, according to a Darwinist logic of a survival of the fittest where white people need to preserve and protect their culture to avoid extinction. Members of these movements express things like: "Given that some ethnic groups, especially ones with high levels of ethnocentrism and mobilization, will undoubtedly continue to function as groups far into the foreseeable future, unilateral renunciation of ethnic

loyalties by other groups means only their surrender and defeat and disappearance – the darwinian dead end of extinction… the future then like the past will inevitably be a darwinian competition"(64). Or "as whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion? Why don´t non-hispanic whites have a group identity, as do Blacks, Jews, Hispanics?"(71). What the entire spectrum regardless of rhetoric or claimed racial identity share in common however, is exposed by the author as an othering of the "immigrant" as "democratically deficient, immature, lacking a respect for basic rights, and with little regard for nature" (56). Underlying this sentiment, a more visceral repulsion, where the immigrants are seen as "social and ecological savages – a teeming, brown horde of chaos" (56).

WHAT ARE GAPS AND INTERCONNECTIONS BETWEEN THESE VISIONS?

On a surface-level, these two visions could be perceived as standing in sharp contrast to one another. What is oftentimes the case with "vision" and "anti-vision" however, are hidden similarities and connections in deeper logic. In Border Walls gone green, Hultgren describes this dynamic within the context of (presumably white) anti-racist environmentalist groups who seek to counter a racist discourse by introducing a discourse "that rests on an ahistorical and oversimplified version of immigrants as "noble savages" which prevents immigrants from full inclusion and participation in environmental politics" (29). I see some of this same dynamic in "Global Detroit", where the dominant "image" of immigrants reduces them to "successful puppies" of sorts, included because of their contribution to the (capitalist) system defined by white dominance, not as innovators of what that system is, who it benefits, what values it stands for, or

what purposes it serves. The implicit others in this scenario are the "unsuccessful immigrants", the ones struggling with racial or socio economic disadvantages only briefly touched upon in the text, the paperless, the refugees.

I would also claim that both these visions serve a strong purpose of confirming the identity and ideology of the ones projecting these images. In the case of the ideologies investigated in "Border Walls gone green", this self-image is one of purity, morality, civilization and order – classic racist discourse – with added "neo racism" in the form of superior democratic, feminist and environmental sensibilities. In "Global Detroit" the confirmed identity is one of an open, colorblind, globally-minded and educated society, efficiently glossing over deeply ingrained structures of racism and class issues through a multicultural marketing campaign. This identity also reveals another implicit "other" in this vision, which is the one of the racist, rural, uneducated and provincial white person. The kind of vision "Global Detroit" exemplifies thus alienates both large proportions of the immigrant population and the very real struggles these people experience, as well as large proportions of the white population who don't fit into the global innovation economy or the grandiose and very unreal ideas of achieved level of openness and non racism.

WHAT MAY BE THE RELATIONSHIP OF THESE VISIONS AS ELEMENTS OF THE SAME SYSTEM?

As exemplified through the discussion above, both of these visions can be seen to uphold – or maintain – a system of white dominance, by denying immigrants the right to have agency or be anything outside of their roles as "successful

immigrant" or "environmental and cultural threat". In this system these visions play quite different roles however, in a dynamic where I believe that the underlying layers of more or less conscious self images and othering, play crucial roles as agents in the events manifesting on the surface. This functions largely through the dynamics inherent in othering. According to my research and experience, "othering" of all kinds has influence on deeply affective layers and oftentimes psychologically "locks" the one who is "othered" into the category to which they are assigned. Thus, the multicultural glossy surface of the global innovation economy – failing to address the underlying systemic issues of racial struggle in the US which would involve a careful scrutinization of one´s own participation in these structures – may function as an agent feeding the racist sentiments of the "othered" whites.

Another very crucial element to the dynamic between these elements is how the multicultural "counter vision" does not address the topics raised by the xenophobic ideologies. In the example of visions involving "the immigrant", they simply put don´t talk about the same immigrants. Where the xenophobic ideologies speak of a non-white "flood" of (illegal) immigrants, the multicultural counter vision speaks of highly educated immigrants with white as well as non-white backgrunds. The counter vision thus fails to address the issue at hand, in an easy-to-see-through way of maneuvering away from what seems like an open invitation to formulate an actual counter vision that holds.

CRITICAL REFRAMING OF THE SITUATION

Looking at the situation at hand, we can conclude that the "counter vision" as exemplified through "Global Detroit" fails to address the racial history, struggles and contradictions of the US, which are very much at play in relation to issues of (non-white) immigration. It also fails to function as a sustainable vision of a truly multicultural, just and inclusive society. As a designer however, I always search for ways to reframe situations in ways that points to inherent opportunities for growth and transformation. In my view, the current political situation in the US is a very timely opportunity for whoever wants to see a different US to step up their game. Engage in "creative battle" to use a hiphop metaphor – use your opponent for you to grow stronger, more true and real in your own expression. In the case of the (predominantly white) liberal side pushing the vision of a multicultural society devoid of conflict and non-white agency, it means an opportunity to self-reflect. Look honestly at one´s own projections and mechanisms of othering. Search for agency effecting the situation both outside of self and within self. Engage a very real and honest discussion about class as well as race, based on an understanding of how constructions of race have affected whites as well as non-whites, on structural and socioeconomic levels, but also on psychological ones, connected to self-image, identity, fears and desires. As James Baldwin points out in "On Being White…and Other Lies": "It is a terrible paradox, but those who believed that they could control and define Black people divested themselves of the power to control and define themselves" (3). Thus – by defining "the Other" you lose your ability to define yourself, and any change in your relationship to the "Other" also implies a fear of lost identity, or "existential death" because of an identity that is built on domination over an "Other" rather than culture or something more substantial. What would a conversation on race look like that

embraced this notion of the very deep interconnectedness of constructed ideas of "whiteness" and "blackness"? An anti-racist discourse that acknowledged the fragile identity of "whiteness" (involving a fear of extinction) built into the very concept of identifying as "white"? What would an anti-racist discourse look like that actually took a moment to look at the fears ingrained in constructed identities of whiteness – fears of filth, of chaos, of primitivism or moral imperfection?

Finally – it´s an opportunity to carefully strategize and think through alternative modes of politics and ways of exploring visions for the future. In "Global Detroit", this need for a careful consideration of possible futures on economical as well as existential levels is recognized through the following words: "Michigan suffers not only from an economic crisis, but a crisis of identity and a crisis of spirit. Who are we? What is our future? What makes us great or unique? How do we restore prosperity?"(25). What I am suggesting, is first to admit to the inherent inadequacies in building a new future vision though a prepackaged, marketing-driven "multicultural paradise" with the successful immigrant at its center. Instead, for anyone interested in true and sustainable change towards true inclusion and progress towards a shared future, I would suggest crafting these visions through a participatory process leaving space for conflictual agencies and input by a variety of stakeholders of immigrant and non-immigrant background. In the publication we actually find a number of very valuable suggestions on spaces for listening and community meetings across various barriers, that could easily be lifted as something that takes a front seat in the "Global Detroit" platform, replacing the static branded image that now overshadows all sensible attempts at addressing the underlying tensions of the situation. I would also make a note of

the importance in future visioning, to move from thinking in images to thinking in terms of space/platform/framework. Any future vision or ideal state tied to "images" (as in pictures and text combined through branding strategies) tends to become static, set, encouraging identity building, and the othering, protective measures and unintended consequences that comes with that. An image as future vision can rarely hold the tension of human plurality, affective dimensions of politics, or address underlying issues of a systemic nature. Neither do they allow for true participation, change, and transformative practice. The challenge in focusing on spaces on the other hand, or frameworks, in the exploration of future visions, is the need for careful scripting of these spaces for them to become enablers of conflictual participation, with this participation resulting in actual outcomes. They always involve a risk, or elements of unknowns. On a theoretical level, I think Chantal Mouffe´s could contribute much to the discussion of how these spaces would be scripted, through her concept of agonistic spaces, meaning a battle between opponents in a space of mutual respect as opposed to antagonism – a battle between enemies. Chantal Mouffe says, "I use the concept of agonistic pluralism to present a new way to think about democracy that is different from the traditional liberal conception of democracy as a negotiation among interests and is also different from the model that is currently being developed by people like Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. While they have many differences, Rawls and Habermas have in common the idea that the aim of the democratic society is the creation of a consensus, and that consensus is possible if people are only able to leave aside their particular interests and think as rational beings. However, while we desire an end to conflict, if we want people to be free we must always allow for the possibility that conflict may appear and to

provide an arena where differences can be confronted. The democratic process should supply that arena."[2]

How to bring about these spaces I see as a design challenge, requiring input and collaboration with a variety of disciplinary perspectives. If I were to prototype such a space, I would engage practitioners from fields such as psychology, political science, art, community organization, and theatre, each contributing with their perspectives on the spatial dimension, the rules of the game, the dramaturgy, the roles needed for facilitation, the synthesis process, and potential outcomes of such encounters. As I mentioned earlier, any attempt at breaking with current power structures of who gets to express agency and on what terms, or allowing space for affect or deeply conflicting perspectives in politics, naturally involves risk taking and discomfort, which would need to be carefully planned and accounted for. Suppressing affect however, and allowing forces with questionable agendas to cater to them, is a very serious risk taking as well – most likely much more so. Bringing the affective dimensions of politics up on the surface, is also a major opportunity for real, transformative change that rational thought and facts can never come near. Where our deepest beliefs, fears and desires rest, lies also a vitality and a transformative potential that cuts across any constructed identity of race or an "Other". This is the space where good art, or good therapy, or deep spiritual experiences operates, and it is a space that the current political developments might be pointing us to as the inevitable way home.

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[2] MOUFFE, C. (2000) The Democratic Paradox. London, New York. Verso.