

POSTNORMAL WORDS

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It was a swastika.

It is such a strange word. Even by English standards. Swastika. This odd combination of consonants and vowels makes for something almost as startling as the symbol itself. The symbol which lies burnt into the lawn before me on a particularly steamy summer morning. It is a peculiarly cruel form of cultural genocide to so bastardise a religious peace symbol. Peculiar still that I find this pyrotechnic graffiti in Omaha, Nebraska: a micro example of the city's famous tradition. That being, the destruction of tradition. Out with the old, in with the new. Gentrification in Omaha takes on a meaning no other city could fathom. Excise the historical and lay out a new rug to forget. No memory to romanticise, no past to draw fear from. Only the newer and the better. A noncanonical interpretation of the American Dream.

If Omaha didn't invent gentrification it has, at least, perfected the model, making it widely available and applicable. Packaged for home use, cultural genocide has been neutralised to the point of it almost being a fun family outing for the weekend. My roommate and I laugh with a nervous accent as we drive by the numerous gentrification projects at work all throughout the streets of Omaha.

This nature dates back to the first staking out of the Nebraska territory during the United States' western expansion of the nineteenth century. Nebraska comes from the native Oto tribe's word for 'flat water' referring to the Platte River which bisects the contemporary territorial borders. Omaha itself was one of the tribes that roamed the great plains. The first white people to call Nebraska home were nicknamed 'tree planters.' This unusual moniker comes from the annual tradition turned state holiday known as Arbor Day. Arbor Day traces its origin back to the sojourn of one of the original American mythological figures, Johnny Appleseed. Bare-

footed with a tin pot upon his head, Johnny marched across the American frontier with his bag of apple seeds in a nigh biblical fashion ridding the land of useless grassland to lay the groundwork for the industrialised, production-ready landscape that Manifest Destiny called for. Indeed, the American Spirit! The first inhabitants of contemporary America rolled with the punches. Whatever nature gave, the early tribes made it work and in such a way that did not destroy the hand that fed them. They would attempt to teach the first Europeans how to farm so that they may survive those first treacherous winters. Leave it to the Western tradition to take a model and find a way to exploit it and bleed it for all it has to offer. The gift of the first thanksgiving would, unbeknownst to the givers of the first American tribes, be the instrument for their undoing. Military campaign, mass over-farming and slaughter of the Buffalo would provide the first wave of genocide and gentrification against the native peoples. The second wave would not only strike against the way of life for Native Americans but be a slap in the face of mother nature. A mass terraforming event that would set the ball rolling on the demonic mind of early developers of the largest Midwestern cities.

Year after year, more and more trees turned the endless sea of prairie grass into odd forest as the nineteenth century waxed and waned. The tradition of gentrification would not stop there. The twentieth century brought cars and industry, turning Omaha from a pit stop on the Oregon Trail, to a metropolis, a true American city. The fathers of contemporary Omaha had the Pacific Ocean in their sights but found that fortune and glory would be found easier in the journey than the destination. They settled in Omaha to finance those set on California gold and most importantly in transporting it back east. Bankers and businessmen sought to make Omaha the ultimate capital of a pan continental empire of business, managing trainlines, telegram (and eventually telephone) lines, and safe transport of mail and money to and fro. To the northern part of the town, the first kings and queens of Omaha (to this day they actually hold a ball every year where the city elites elect a King and Queen of Aksarben, which is Nebraska spelled backwards). A new way of life had taken root in the loose soil of the former plains. Symbols of the old Native American way were transformed and “made better” with the heavy use of Art Deco.

The mass immigration from Europe at the turn of the century created a refugee crisis for the Eastern coast of the United States. Just as the founders of the East fled the persecution of the Old World, the new immigrants moved west to flee the new persecutors. Tribes of Bohemians, Italians, and Slovaks built ghettos within the modern-day city limits of Omaha. Like any true American city ought to, the city developed along a classic grid system. North to south. East to west. Block by Block. The streets became as good walls as modes of transport, making sure every different group stayed in their own place. Eventually the rich elites of the North set their eyes for the West to recreate a Stepfordian paradise in the yet untouched land Johnny Appleseed left them. The South, the landing point for newcomers (due to the railroad's placement) became the labour capital and home to the working minorities. First Europeans, more recently the Latin Americans. The abandoned castles of the North would become a good a place as any for the recently freed slaves to settle upon the conclusion of the American Civil War. Malcolm X was born in the leftovers of Omaha's most royal families. The construction of major interstates would help solidify the artificial borders of segregation that keep all the different citizens of Omaha away from each other.

Omaha today is a microbrewery for racial and class tensions. Numerous structures in society seek to maintain the physical borders that the architects of Omaha put up to frame Omaha from the Missouri River westwards. Fairy tales told to scare children are reinforced by the five o'clock news. The South is for the lazy foreigners and is ruled by gangs imported from Latin America. The North is the capital of crime and hate, also noted as the most likely place in all of the United States for a Black Male to be murdered. Downtown (the East) is just where you go to work, but try to avoid the homeless and their plight. Even the mighty police force has trouble properly herding them away from the general public. They inspire an instant of empathy, but in truth the average American hopes they would carry on with decreasing the surplus population. West Omaha is safe. That is where home is, reeking of cleanliness and success. The American Dream imagined. No crime happens here (except of course for the crime which happens within the family unit, or within the closed boardroom, or any of that sexual misconduct occurring in front of the blind eyes of university campus leaders or church officials).

Omaha is America. That wonderful melting pot of culture, where only the filmy crud rises to the top and temperatures and tensions remain constantly high. Come visit our world-famous Henry Doorly Zoo. It houses a wide variety of species from all around the world! Like this world-famous zoo, Omaha itself is always tearing down old buildings to build new and better yet keeping little bits of romanticised memories in the façade. Shuffling new groups of immigrants around being careful not to let them mix too much. The immigrants of Yugoslavia and Africa from the nineties and the noughties are just beginning to carve their little bits of the city out, just in time as the latest influx of global refugees is beginning to develop bringing in new groups from the Middle East. Everyday more and more projects gentrify the old and decrepit. Upon the ashes of the old, Omaha builds up and outward, prices soar, and the class gap is kept well fed. Yet each group is kept sectioned off from each other, each in their own cage. A proud zoo of humanity. Something truly postnormal comes in Omaha's pride over its heritage, steeped in multiculturalism, yet emphasised in segregation and division.

What keeps it all together. The lie upon which the plot of the American narrative is carefully constructed. The lie is that America defeated racism, or at least that we have managed racism so effectively that to even count it as still existing is statistically superfluous. The Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement, Black History Month, the multitude of pan cultural holidays and school lesson plans. They all succeeded. Congratulations America, we did it. Blacks and Whites, Asians, Mexicans, Middle Easterners, even the Russians. We can all live in tolerant harmony. Even religious, gender, and sexual identity come together to sing Kumbaya or enjoy a cup of Joe, consuming and gentrifying *ad infinitum*. Score one for humanity!

This was the education I was served growing up an American millennial. It was the 1990s and we were at peacetime, things, by American standards, were quite weird. We were told to look around, there was no forced segregation, and to look at all the minorities that we share this wonderful country with. Measures had even been taken to pay for the sins of the father such as Affirmative Action and issued public apologies. It was the highest crime for our generation to make fun of anyone for being different, to refer to disliked things as being "gay" was outlawed, and a sort of

Ludovico sickness would develop in our stomach just for thinking of certain racial slurs. Change had finally come.

And then there was 9/11. No, that must have been a fluke. Americans are past hate. We love our differences. That which makes us unique. We stand together in our differences as one nation. We would rally behind the stars and stripes. The struggle occurred, and we progressed to the mountaintop. But had we? Why did the older generations use certain words or avoid certain places or banish certain types of music and film? Was this story more complicated? Did we miss a part? What if we had been lied to? It is a hard and nauseating thought, to realise that you might have been indoctrinated.

And then there was the election of 2008. Barack Obama. And just like that, the hate returned. Racism resurfaced, alive and flourishing. Those differences shifted into focus. To be American meant something different overnight. While we didn't fully understand it, it was something that none of us really liked. And then there was the election of Donald Trump. The seemingly impossible, now a reality.

And then I found myself in Omaha's Memorial Park on a phenomenally humid day. Sweat dripping and my morning jog reduced to a dumbfounded loiter with an exhaustion-induced *contrapposto* stance. My lungs rapidly disrupting the air pressure around me. The salinity of my sweat burning my eyes. And a swastika lay burnt into the hallowed ground of Omaha's highest war memorial. Aside from housing the granddaddy of all high hills for snow day sledding, Memorial Park is the sight of memorials honouring those who died from Douglas County in America's various foreign conflicts. World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, all meshed together. Memorial Park is a collage of patriotism, organic as with the tallying of each new death toll for each new American military operation, one could bet that another statue or plaque will be added to the grounds. Among the names of the fallen Nebraskans is an exorbitant number of American flags and the fast and loose use of classic patriot phrases. Each one more mind numbing than the last, derived from sound bites delivered to force homogeneity amongst a people ready to tear each other apart in accordance with Hobbes' nightmare.

Give me liberty or give me death. United we stand, divided we fall. Live free or die. You're either with us or you're against us. Forgive but never

forget. Freedom is not free. All of them dated. All of them ridiculous. Pathetic attempts to unite a people simply to be against the other. Simple platitudes and threatening contradictory mind traps. If Freedom is not free, then perhaps what it is that we are talking about is anything but. We utter these words without thought or reflection just as we recite the anthems and light the fireworks and gather around the heart-warming glow of patriotic nationalism.

And then, as I wipe the sweat from my forehead, I realise I have discovered what it is that Omaha is missing in all its infinite diversity. Nazis.

Just as it takes the latest fashion trends time to travel from the coasts to Middle America, perhaps postnormal times has also lagged in reaching the Heartland. But it is unmistakably here. This swastika was no random event. This is not something that can be passed off as a childish prank or the ravings of an isolated lunatic. A ripple of thunder is rocketing across America as Nazis are returning, if it is the case that they actually went away. Even in Omaha, reports spoke of Nazi propaganda leaflets appearing in various neighbourhood Little Free Library boxes. While defamation of property is a bold statement, do we know what is actually being talked about?

Language is a strange thing and postnormal times has made it even stranger. What I propose here is not some duel of wits and semantics. Instead I wish to point out the fragility of the very semantics by which we structure our logic and the fundamental fallibility of our wits. The damage already done leaves us with words, starved of definition, which we take for granted. Wilfully sipping this nectar of ignorance, we pass through time and space with reckless regard speaking to such phenomenon as unpatriotic nationalism, contingent independence, and subjugating freedom. A blissful ignorance side kicked to an unrelenting uncertainty self-perpetuates the postnormal state. Those in the know, or, perhaps at best, aware of their own unknowing, are perplexed to a crippling degree. The problem is an issue of not having the correct tools. The physicist finds their theories reaching beyond their experimental range. Thus, their practice is more philosophy than fact challenging science. The postmodernist attempts to eradicate grand narratives, creating a grand narrative against grand narratives. The posthumanist dives head first into the robot revolution untroubled by the multiverse of potential ironic consequences that can and

are resulting in such neglectful investigation. Each master tries to capture the future in their own image and direct it towards their own utopic ideal.

At this point we are faced with two problems. First the future is not singular, it is a plurality of futures. Second the future cannot be controlled, managed, or placed upon a shelf. The complexity and contradictions, uncertainty and chaos of our times, coupled with breathless accelerating change, does not allow for the old-fashioned luxuries of control, efficiency and management. The present is not just weird; it is constantly getting weirder. Our systems and routines are becoming obsolete. The jogging paths we've come to know by muscle memory are not taking us to the destinations we desire. So, is this where the road ends?

Where to go next. This is an interesting dilemma. The approach favoured by the most academically minded is to grapple this problem, wrestle the angel, dissect and experiment, and look for the definite solution. But the beasts of uncertainty and ignorance cannot be defeated. We need to learn to navigate our way from postnormal times. Beyond this point, we require tremendous creativity, distillation of foundational value, acceptance of rapid change, living with uncertainty, awareness of our ignorance, and thinking the unthought. Even mastery of those tools does not guarantee smooth seas for navigation. There is no assurance of safety, sanity, or indeed survival in postnormal times.

Postnormal times does not come without signs. Indeed, those of us wrestling with postnormal times are constantly refining and building up our awareness of these signs. The menagerie of postnormal times serves our purpose best here. Black elephants are the first member of the menagerie. Black elephants are those events which are otherwise easily identifiable possibilities that had been ruled out due to confirmation bias or simple ignorance. The second member of the menagerie are black swans. Black swans are the inconceivable, at least within given worldviews and systems, the seemingly impossible. These game changers alter our imagination's ability to perceive what is possible, trigger a flurry of positive and negative potentialities. The third member of the menagerie are black jellyfish. These creatures are the true bulls in the china shop of postnormal times. Rapidly becoming the symbol of these climatically challenging times, black jellyfishes are those events that, though often starting as small, 'normal' occurrences, are driven, through positive feedback, to grow in

geometric proportions challenging the structural integrity of global systems. They are 'high impact' and have a great potential to make things postnormal – rapidly.

It is important to note here that the menagerie is largely dependent on perspective. One individual's black swan could easily be a black elephant to an individual halfway around the world in a different socio-political context. But the purpose of the menagerie is to highlight uncertainties, our ignorance, and the limitations of our own worldview and situation. It is a much better way of navigating futures beyond the end of the road.

Jogging on the road, the body is in a super-heightened state. Smells, signs, sounds, feelings are all on their highest alert as the body struggles to maintain homeostatic control of itself. During a proper run, things out of place can startle, sending the body into a state of shock. On the numerous jogs I have taken in my life I have been startled by the happening upon of roadkill, animal scat, and even unnoticed fellow joggers. This was the first time I had been startled by the discovery of a symbol. I snap out of it, moving away from the swastika, reigniting my run for home, still a few miles down the road. My mind is racked by various words. Words we over use and others we don't use enough. And then there are the words we use and don't actually know the definition of what we are talking about.

Freedom. It is a most curious contradiction. Worse yet, it is a seductive contradiction. Like capital, it is never just satisfied with a unit or two of itself, it must always be more. Insatiable, freedom fights for itself even at the consumption of the freedom of others. Just as Adam Smith convinced the Western world that acting in one's self interest magically worked in the interest of the common, my freedom is your freedom and we must be willing to die for it at any given moment!

This could not be illustrated more perfectly than through the Constitution of the United States of America. While I could write volumes on the contradictions this particular document eludes to, I will try to remain focused on this one. Naturally, the first two amendments are the only ones the common American will remember by heart without having to consult Google. While the second amendment gets more airtime on the news (for the unfamiliar, that's the gun one) the first amendment is the one which tends to be invoked on a more regular basis. Within that one run-on sentence lies over two hundred years of legal philosophy, fundamental

building blocks responsible for American angst and arrogance, and a dangerous contradiction. It speaks to freedom of expression, speech, and assembly. It promises that if this great experiment fails, we have the right to tear it all down and build something better in its place. It allows one the freedom to be. But, it also allows one the freedom to take others freedom. Common sense and jurisprudence have done a little good in history. For instance, it is illegal to yell "Fire!" in a crowded theatre, as this would invoke mass hysteria. Though it gives both the oppressed and the oppressors the right to march in the streets with police protection. This freedom gives you the freedom to bind your fellow human in bigotry, racism, and xenophobia, of course with the adage that you ought to be able to consume what you dish out. The first amendment of the U.S. Constitution gives one the right to hate. It also turns freedom into a commodity, our commodity and one which can be stripped from the other if they don't play by our rules. A day doesn't go by in the United States without us proclaiming the sacred word freedom, with each use, we further bastardise its meaning deepening the contradiction. This black elephant is ripening towards postnormal fruition and soon those cries for freedom will find themselves being answered by something very different.

As the Americans have overused the word freedom into its own undoing, both Europe and the United States have underused another word allowing for a faded memory to return proudly and display its ugly face unabashedly. Fascism. Even to see the word written, carries with it an entire context. Yet, today we are told not to use this word. Not for fear of offending others or because it has become outdated. We have become so afraid of Fascism's return to global dominance, that we shun the slightest use of it beyond historical context. In fact, a black swan is identifiable in the concept of fascism ever rising to power again in Europe, or anywhere in the world for that matter. Those of us who find some or all of our life having been uploaded to the internet may be familiar with Godwin's Law. This is the law which states that eventually all online arguments devolve into comparing one's competitor to Hitler or the Nazis. The use of this comparison had become a cop out for finding the most insulting thing to say to one's opponent. Understandably, for the preservation of professionalism and dignity, many have refrained from making such comparisons entirely. But

what of the events in the contemporary era that actually are fascist and look a lot like or even one-up the deeds of the Nazis?

Former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright throws the word at us in giant red letters on a black background in her latest book. In *Fascism: A Warning*, Albright seeks to re-inoculate public discourse with the word. She rightly points out that fascism has often been chalked up to meaning 'What Hitler or Mussolini did'. Distilling it from historical conceptions, Albright defines fascism as the belief in one opinion standing for the whole of a nation or state and the defence of that opinion being the justification of violence. She lays out a historical primer in fascism's approach to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and highlights the creep of fascism back into global politics. Most importantly she pushes for further study of the phenomenon so that it can be curbed and prevented from being the decay of contemporary political order.

Freedom and fascism have taken an interesting path into contemporary political rhetoric. Trump, Brexit, Fake News, Social Media, Big Data. Little of it has retained any intellectual value. As in Albright's work, there has been a small revival in reflecting on fascism and freedom. Thinkers like Timothy Snyder are not afraid of pointing towards a soft hijacking of contemporary democratic processes by tyrants and fascists. Like a good Aristotelian should, in his latest book, *The Road to Unfreedom*, he pits extreme political views of the now against each other so as to find a mean, the principle itself. Ultimately, this exercise proves futile in postnormal times. The extremes of the now are contradictions that fracture our opinions. There is a value to Snyder's discussion though. The struggle between extremes is important for beginning to comprehend the contemporary world. He also points out important historical trends we must remain cognisant of. He asks the reader to take control of the past so as to build a more preferred future. In terms of postnormal times, the past he speaks of is more properly stated as the Extended Present. This is the future before us if the status quo is maintained. Trends continue uninterrupted and all is business as usual. As things become more and more postnormal, the probability of this future coming to be is less likely. Understanding this limitation is key to fulfilling the request to the reader that Snyder states. Power is never given. No one is just offered the keys to history.

Postnormal times is not a spectator's game. It requires participation. This conversation must be kept alive. Reflection and constant correction control is needed to refine the language we use. Fear, irrational assumption, and hate have been allowed to control discourse at an unprecedented rate. Words need to be constantly on trial. What do we mean when we cry freedom? What are we doing when we mindlessly spout off patriotic diatribes and nationalist oaths and songs? What is truly being risked when we turn freedom, in its myriad of forms, into a motivation for action? Fascism is scary. But will we ignore it as it quietly grows in the dark? The confounding nature of the potential danger laced within language can quickly be manipulated into convincing people of their own opinions. This is populism at its most malicious. The calls for a return to the 'good ole days' or to make (insert your nationality/state identity here) great again are the smooth romanticising of the familiar and ultimately destructive.

Language has a unique power. It can time travel. At this particular point in time, we humans cannot. Because of this fact, we must rely on memory. Language travels through time and space, often unscathed by the journey. Memory is constantly recast and edited before the might of perspective, clever story telling (often by the winner of a particular historical moment) and the ever-flexible impact of emotion. The more eloquent of society can attempt to use words as they please and, if they sing a pretty enough song, can weave lie and fractured reality into language. We can be convinced to disregard history and let the sins of the father be just that. But remember, history matters. Futures matter and are always there before us. We can allow our words to be misused and morphed. Slowly they become the black elephants and swans that haunt our reality and historical trajectory. Heaven forbid they become the black jellyfish that can disrupt all, positive and negative, for better and for worse. Yet, words are words. Just as we can lose our own identity in the wake of populism, it can be recovered. Definitions must be held accountable. This is the first step towards owning the future, that together can begin the construction of a trajectory towards our preferred futures.

I am not sure if a dictionary can be made in postnormal times. Perhaps the philosopher in me needs that stability, and perhaps that stability may come in a form of unthought to our present selves. What is important is a self-awareness check on the language we use and the complexity,

contradictions and chaos that takes it to radically new trajectories. The confinement brought on by structures in language and society can equally be an opportunity and impediment. If a dictionary is to be attempted, it mustn't be a dead, hardened set-in-stone law text; it has to remain flexible and a living dictionary subject to change and to changing times.

I adore running in the rain. There is a comfort in the hazard. The combination of a thinned-out atmosphere and a slight temperature drop makes for an all too familiar world being made a new. You notice things you have once taken for granted. Postnormal times is like running in the rain, but that only means our bodies must be all the more alert for the dangers that accompany roads and rain. Be aware that the path you once knew so well might take you to an entirely different destination. We are blinded by the rain drops of our own uncertainties and ignorance, but we can take comfort in identifying the elements of the menagerie, judging the awareness of our limited perspective and begin to take the first steps that become the full-on sprint. We stand to be startled out of our run by things far stranger and more fear-invoking than swastikas burnt into a public green space.

