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Introduction to “Poetics of Fact, Politics of Fact”

ON 22 JANUARY 2017 PRESIDENT TRUMP’S SPOKESPERSON KELLYANNE CONWAY CLAIMED THAT THE ADMINISTRATION HAD OFFERED “ALTER-

native facts” to counter the estimates provided by the National Park Service on the size of the crowd at the recent inauguration. The outcry was loud and immediate, and many people questioned whether there was a difference between alternative facts and outright lies. Legitimate as the outcry was, the term itself was not as preposterous as it may have seemed. What Conway, a trained lawyer, did was, under certain circumstances, permissible in civil as well as criminal legal proceedings: plead in the alternative. Whether the practice of setting forth multiple claims alternatively could be transferred from a court of law to the political arena, however, was a question that Conway may or may not have considered.

The Conway episode and the outcry it elicited illustrate perfectly Hannah Arendt’s insight that “facts and events—the invariable outcome of men living and acting together—constitute the very texture of the political realm, [but they] are infinitely more fragile things than axioms, discoveries, theories—even the most wildly speculative ones—produced by the human mind” (“Truth” 50). Triggered by the present moment, in which facts and their fragility have been thrust to the forefront of political life, this *PMLA* feature takes its theoretical cue from the insight Arendt offered half a century ago. But Arendt’s analysis also prompts us to ask how facts “constitute the very texture of the political realm.” Moreover, Arendt’s observation about the fragility of facts prompts us to inquire how facts are established. This question is also about poetics, in the sense that narrative, style, genre, interpretation, and aesthetic effect play key roles in establishing facts. We asked our contributors to investigate, from a number of disciplinary and historical vantage points, the ways in which the politics of fact is inflected and informed by the poetics of fact. They also took up this challenge to query when the poetics of fact collides or colludes with a politics of fact, and how the poetics of fact negotiates its relation to the art of the lie, which endangers

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the factual by undercutting the epistemic regimes that rely on it.

The consideration of epistemic regimes is crucial for any assessment of the work that facts do in the world. As Conway's invocation of alternative facts indicates, law operates by complex procedures of establishing facts, which require a lengthy education to understand and which often bewilder non-lawyers. In science, the methods of establishing facts are not only highly complex but rapidly evolving. Yet that does not justify politicians' denying the validity of the scientific method and dismissing the existence of amply documented phenomena like climate change. Meanwhile, historiography, psychology, journalism, and other epistemic practices have their own methods and procedures of constructing facts and of testing their validity. In sum, facts are always produced in an institutional framework or a scholarly discipline and adhere to specific evidentiary, testimonial, and representational norms. By taking into account the role of such institutional and epistemic regimes in the making of facts, we are able to think about the political in more nuanced ways.

Those nuanced ways need to account for the damage that facts in particular and epistemic regimes in general can do, especially to disenfranchised people. They are also complicated by the positive outcomes that a counterfactual politics can have as part of a subaltern poetics; especially in contexts where the politics of fact have consistently created injustices, the ability to draw on the poetics of fact to counter the politics of fact has been crucial for bringing about social justice. Take historiography as an example. The process of creating and finding facts underlies analyses of the power dynamics that determine what counts as factual to begin with. The old adage that history is written by the victors has occasioned revisionist work that has questioned what we mean by facts in the first place. Diana Taylor has addressed that question in her

now-familiar distinction between the archive and the repertoire. According to Taylor, the repertoire can become an alternative repository of embodiment, trauma, postmemory, and alterity, speaking to the importance of the other for progressive politics and of the value of offering facts that form an alternative to the official narrative. For example, we might think of "I Have a Dream," by Martin Luther King, Jr., as a speech act that articulated a vision of American social justice that did not reflect its historical moment in 1963 but helped bring about civil rights legislation. Both on the political stage and in the courtroom, speech acts have the ability to establish facts. But context matters. There is a marked difference between invoking counterfactuals to solidify power, as a political incumbent may do, and invoking counterfactuals to challenge the injustices of power, as those who have historically been disenfranchised might attempt to do. As we know from J. L. Austin, speech acts always require us to examine the felicity conditions, reflective of social power structures, by which they remain rhetoric or become fact.

Not all conditions—felicitous or otherwise—for establishing facts are rational. Consider the psychological dimensions of hope. At the intersection of fact and feeling, hope often operates as a counterfactual. Adrienne Martin has analyzed the history of hope and its relation to religious traditions as well as to psychological processes, and has shown that hope depends on the interplay among probability, reason, and desire. While this scheme is not overtly political, cultural theorists such as Terry Eagleton have focused on what he calls "hope without optimism," which rejects rationalization and offers a realistic view that can nonetheless envision transformation. What Lauren Berlant calls "cruel optimism" straddles an affective line between what is and what is perceived; facts align and misalign with feelings. Especially because of politics' affective dimensions, facts are often in dialogue with the possibilities of generating

other facts—as Barack Obama explored in his campaign book *The Audacity of Hope* (2007).

The essays in this feature examine what poetics might teach us about the politics of fact, and vice versa, how the politics of fact might offer insights into poetics. What light do literary studies in particular shed on the poetics or politics of facts? Might the distinction between fact and fiction blind us to their interconnection? And where do counterfactuals fit into the evidentiary frame that literature can construct and the interpretive critiques it can offer? From what vantage point can we ask and address such questions? What are the political functions and implications of the facts generated by scholars working in academic disciplines, and how do we affirm their value in an era when even measurable quantities—like the number of people at an inauguration—seem to have moved from the realm of the factual into the realm of the interpretive? If rhetoric itself can perform versions of fact making, can it also enable fact-checking? If facts lay claim to authority or even absolute authority, in what realm can they be critically assessed?

Even though the present moment offers a particularly rich opportunity to raise these questions, we wanted this feature to interrogate concerns that extend beyond the here and now and to look for insights in historical and cross-cultural analyses. If anything, the present moment is a case study for the larger question of how politics frames facts and defines what they encompass. There is an urgent need for poetics to be understood as part of *and* as a critique of that process.

While the writers in this feature composed their essays independently of one another, shared concerns thread together their work. We have tried to order the essays to reveal the fabric they collectively form, but we will also offer some additional connections here, as we suggest entry points into the dialogue with which the essays are engaged and imagine the new vistas of inquiries they might open.

Peter Brooks and Marianne Constable both offer insights into the way that legal discourse helps us reflect on the poetics and the politics of facts. Showing how courtroom lawyers present the “facts on the ground,” Brooks demonstrates that without narrative “there could be no more verdicts.” He enables us to understand the strange absence of any formalized understanding of “the rules of storytelling” in the courtroom, strange especially because the appeals process relies on retelling. The significance of the structure of that retelling extends beyond any one case: legal precedent is itself premised on narrative recurrence, “on how actions are enchain[ed] in a narrative.” That holds true in particular for Supreme Court decisions, which uphold the past (the Constitution) and become precedent (for further constitutional questions). Yet the malleability of these decisions might not apply to the facts on the ground themselves, Brooks allows. Nonetheless, those facts depend on narrative for comprehension, and that narrative leads to judgments that render their legal significance—or, we may say, their sentencing.

Similarly engaged with the power of words and their relation to legal facts, Constable wonders what happens when words are used as a specific kind of speech act, the threat to sue someone. Asking what impact such a weaponization of words has on law as a matter of fact, Constable’s essay troubles the role of interpretation, which is needed for words as well as for facts and is at the core of judicial proceedings. While this question might seem to be limited to the facts in certain legal cases, the weaponization of words and legal facts is currently widespread in our society and raises a bigger concern about the fact of law as such, not just its incidental deliberation about specific facts. Law’s strength and its vulnerability come from the fact that law is quintessentially verbal. Perhaps paradoxically, it is therefore in acts of interpretation that law can again resist speakers who would claim the authority of their own speech

acts to represent law itself as what it is rather than what it does—namely, offer a realm of language and interpretation where even judgments are expressed in sentences, in both the judicial and the linguistic sense of the word.

For Catherine Gallagher and Paul K. Saint-Amour, the question of facts comes into focus when we engage with counterfactuals. Constable's essay shows how important contingency is to the law, and contingency forms the basis of Gallagher's inquiry into a different area: history. Noting that *fact* emerged as a term describing events in time as opposed to those associated with eternal truths (of nature, of religion), she points out that this early distinction shows up in the later distinction between concrete specifics and generalizable abstracts. Counterintuitively, literature adheres to this distinction in its genres and in its desire to separate fact from fiction, a desire that lays claim to more generalizable meaningfulness as opposed to the more specific meanings associated with particular genres. And yet such claims seem to define the broader category of fiction in terms of one of its own subfields, realist fiction. To examine the link between realist and counterfactual fiction, Gallagher explores counterfactual speculation in literature. Instead of rejecting facts, counterfactual novels rely on readers to agree about the facts that are being countered, and in a sense those novels reaffirm the possibility of fact in the process of toying with specifics.

Saint-Amour approaches the relation of the factual to the real by way of Roland Barthes's notion of the reality effect, explaining that Barthes's embrace of word amounts to a rejection of world. Noting that science fiction and fantasy have changed the status of the reality effect, the essay turns to a particular type of speculative fiction to examine how the reality effect has changed. Focusing on the alternate-history novel, the essay shows that novels have to negotiate the historical timeline's reality and establish the plausibility of

the alternate timeline. That puts the reality effect in this genre in overdrive and ties it to checkable facts. Paradoxically, alternate-history fiction becomes the key literary site for concerns about historical evidence and, because of its grounding in history's contingencies, a genre opposed to historical relativism. While a parallel can exist between this kind of fiction and lying, that parallel does not apply to political lies, because unlike fiction these lies no longer attempt to maintain credibility.

Russ Castronovo uncovers the surprising reliance of facts on the logics of antiquation and faction, revealing their Roman origins as well as their uses in the United States' founding documents and offering a context that situates political polarization in the *longue durée* of what he calls the fact-faction circuit. His essay begins with an etymological-cum-semantic definition of the term *fact*, which could serve as a preface to this feature as a whole:

From an etymological point of view, facts are moments of making and doing that are no longer alive and kicking. Coming into English and other modern Western languages by means of both the past participle of the Latin word *facere* ("to make or to do") and the Latin noun *factum*, whose senses include the "result of doing" and "something done," *fact* denotes an action that has happened and is now preserved like a fossil in the accumulated sediments of history.

If facts are things that have already been made and done, why are there so many disputes over facts, or, in Coleridge's words, so many "rabious Polemics"? Castronovo's answer to this question goes a long way toward explaining the central concern of this feature—the establishing of facts. Facts may denote actions or occurrences that have already happened and are now lodged in the past, but establishing what the facts actually are—recuperating the actions and occurrences for a certain purpose—is an ongoing process unfolding in the present. Factions are the different parties engaged in establishing

facts. Originally referring to, among other things, groups that organized chariot races in ancient Rome, factions find their modern incarnations in the dueling parties in a court of law or, for that matter, in Congress. Castronovo maps out the maze of pathways and feedback loops, or, in his words, the circuits, that connect fact and faction. Facts give rise to factions in the process of being established, and factions produce further facts in their endeavor to establish what has happened. This fact-faction circuit has the potential to be a new theoretical model of reading and interpretation, a model that reintroduces the present tense of making and doing to the past tense of what was made and done, a model that rehabilitates anachronism.

Asking whether there is “a hidden legacy of the 1968 manifestos in today’s right-wing protest culture,” Albrecht Koschorke likewise offers a historical perspective, but in contrast to Castronovo’s focus on the historicity intrinsic to facts, Koschorke’s concerns center on the intellectual and historical roots of the so-called postfactual age. Based on the research projects he spearheaded at the University of Konstanz, in Germany—Koschorke’s is the only contribution from a scholar working outside the United States, although we tried to get more—his essay traces the crisis of factual truth in the present moment to poststructuralist theory and postmodernism, which have dominated humanities disciplines since the 1970s. Koschorke locates poststructuralist theory in the broad historical context of decolonization, seeing its epistemological as well as political thrust, including its constructivism in matters of truth and reality and its critique of institutions, as reflections of, and on, the decline of European cultural hegemony. The irreverent and radical gestures of poststructuralist theory, its avowed intent to destabilize, he points out, were paradoxically enabled by the tolerance and the stability of Western society in the postwar, postcolonial period. Now the intellectual

heirs of poststructuralism and postmodernism suddenly find their discourse and their subversive gestures taken over by their political opponents and turned into the right-wing attacks on institutions and on facts that we witness daily. The cognitive map drawn by Koschorke with broad strokes is clearly meant not to assign blame for the current crisis of factual truth but to identify new avenues and new territories for intellectual work that addresses this crisis.

The crisis of factual truth rending the texture of political life in our time also concerns Haiyan Lee. Whereas Koschorke traces this crisis to the theoretical discourses that unsettled and then dominated the intellectual arena during the past half century, Lee goes further back in time, relating it to the totalitarian movements earlier in the twentieth century, the movements that preoccupied Arendt. With examples drawn from Mao’s China—the fact that it was a source of fascination for the first proponents of poststructuralism, such as Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida, links Koschorke’s and Lee’s stories in an unintended but eerily revealing way—Lee’s essay shows how dangerously close we are drifting toward totalitarianism, a political movement characterized by an “extreme contempt for facts as such” (Arendt, *Origins* 350). Thinking along with political theorists such as Arendt and Claude Lefort and social theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Lee conceptualizes the bald-faced denial of facts in totalitarian movements as radical attacks on institutions and on the expert knowledge that institutions foster and require. She drives her theoretical arguments home by scrutinizing the role played by literature in the totalitarian destruction of facts, identifying socialist realism as the literary form of totalitarian propaganda, “the original purveyor of fake news.”

Chenxi Tang’s concluding essay weaves together many strands of this feature as it tries to connect the twin themes of politics

and poetics by following up on Arendt's observation that facts constitute the texture of politics. Arendt first wrote about facts in her study of the totalitarian movements of the early twentieth century (*Origins*). She found that both Nazism and Stalinism reveled in the ruthless liquidation of factual truth, dissolving the contingency of facts in the implacable consistency of their deadly ideologies. It was against the dark background of totalitarianism that Arendt elaborated a political philosophy of the factual, arguing that facts must be the basis for deliberation and decision making in the political sphere. Tang distinguishes between the work of establishing facts on the basis of evidence and testimony and the work of using established facts for a certain purpose. Both, he argues, are a matter of poetics, for the former involves narration, visualization, and theatricalization while the latter involves recruiting factual particulars into a discursive chain, a narrative plot. This argument helps reformulate Arendt's insight, leading to the conclusion that the political is ultimately a matter of poetics. Like Lee, Tang emphasizes the institutional substrate of the factual. Facts are established by experts within institutions—such as the judicial system, research institutions, universities, and the media—while the use of facts aligns individual citizens with institutions, laypeople with experts. Denying facts, as radical political movements are wont to do, is therefore tantamount to dismantling institutions and dismissing expert knowledge.

The Conway episode we began with throws into sharp relief both the importance and the precarity of institutions. By invoking alternative facts, Conway appealed, unwittingly perhaps, to the authority of a crucial institution—namely, the legal system, for pleading in the alternative is permissible in a court of law. She also demonstrated her status as an expert, a legal professional who

knows how pleading in the alternative works. Yet Conway relied on the institution and her expert knowledge to undermine democratic institutions by destabilizing their factual basis. That institutions may be used to destroy institutions is perhaps the gravest danger in our political life today.

The essays that we have gathered here by no means exhaust the topic. Our original plan had been to incorporate additional pieces that address these questions from the perspective of racial difference, which can be one of the first things neglected when truth narratives construct majoritarian perspectives that make whiteness normative. We had also hoped to include more geographic and linguistic diversity than is represented here, to interrogate whether much of the theory on which we rely is itself inflected by the largely Western contexts from which it grew. We hope that the feature leads to more engagements with these concerns, and we trust that the essays here open pathways for these inquiries. We are deeply grateful to the contributors, whose work has stimulated our own thinking and will invigorate debates whose stakes could not be higher.

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