

“Where No Human Being Would Want to Live,” or, Trump in Philadelphia: Maligning Black Neighborhoods and Delegitimizing Black Voters from 1865 to 2020

Susannah Mandel (Independent scholar)

Former U.S. President Donald Trump is notorious for the number and crudeness of his insults, to the point of inspiring archives and taxonomies of his invective. Notably, Trump did not limit this rhetoric to extra-U.S. targets, but attacked--and encouraged attack on--specifically defined U.S. places and populations. A 2019 Twitter attack on the Baltimore district of Black congressman Elijah Cummings called it “a disgusting, rat and rodent infested mess... dangerous and filthy,” “the worst run... anywhere,” and a place where “no human being would want to live”. This thematic imagery— filth, vermin, incompetence, corruption—reemerged in 2020, directed against a second majority-Black and Black-governed city, when Trump warned ominously that “bad things happen[ed]” in Philadelphia—a theme resurrected that November during that city’s critical vote-counting period, when Trump supporters Lou Dobbs and Eric Eggers called Philadelphia “a cesspool electorally,” where “sadly, we shouldn’t really be surprised” about “problems” with “election integrity”.

Drawing on the important recent work of Ibram X. Kendi and Michelle Alexander on propagandistic racialized U.S. rhetoric and imagery, I take a discourse-analysis approach to considering the intersections in contemporary mainstream U.S. political discourse among: Historical framings of Black and Black-led political and geographic regions within the U.S. as corrupt and/or violent “wastelands” (in fiction, film, and political speech); Contemporary right-wing discourse responding to the

Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest movement, including its frightening suggestions of uncontrolled Black violence, and what is, I argue, an increasingly pervasive 21st-century implication from rightwing rhetorical actors that Black Americans--considered en masse--are incompetent, untrustworthy and/or illegitimate political actors within the U.S.; and its resultant implication, supported by historical imagery and rhetoric, that largely-Black and Black-led polities (i.e., “Black” cities, districts and states) do not have an essential moral right, and hence should not have a legal/ political right, to determine overall U.S. leadership through their inhabitants’ votes—a position directly evoking arguments dating back to before the Civil War.