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The Voice in My Head is Populist. And White.

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The Voice in My Head Is Populist. And White.

I remember one thing from the film *A Beautiful Mind*: the scene where Alicia Nash is about to leave her brilliant but paranoid schizophrenic husband, John Nash, Jr., when he says something like, “I know they aren’t real, because they don’t age.” Nash has been running around with a bunch of imaginary people in his head making him do crazy things, but it’s this moment of self-analysis that helps him break out of his destructive behavior and get back on the path of being a husband and Nobel prize-winning economist.

Actually, I remember a second scene from *A Beautiful Mind* now that I’ve seen Charlie Kaufman’s *I’m Thinking of Ending Things*, which [spoofs](#) the former film’s obvious use of stage makeup to age the characters. In Kaufman’s view, *A Beautiful Mind* does a generally bad job portraying paranoid schizophrenia. More on that in a moment.

I’d like to think I had my John Nash moment this January, a moment when I recognized the voice in my head for what it was, permanently alerting me to the fact that it is there and forever changing the way I think.

And like in *A Beautiful Mind*, for me the precipitating event was a crisis.

I wasn’t exactly surprised by the January 6 insurrection. I live among people who have been whipped into a relative frenzy by Fox News, people who threatened to leave Facebook for Parler even though they’re not consciously white supremacists. In fact, I would have once counted many of these people as level-headed moderates.

No, the fact Donald Trump’s most loyal followers would storm the Capitol only verified one thing for me: words matter, and over the last several years those words have moved people.

In the aftermath of January 6, however, writers started uncovering the ideas underlying the insurrection, including theological ideas. Katherine Stewart’s [“The Roots of Josh Hawley’s Rage”](#) got my attention. I knew Senator Hawley was one of the most outspoken supporters of both Trump and the insurrectionists, but when Stewart traced Hawley’s theology to Abraham Kuyper, with Hawley going so far as to quote Kuyper’s famous line, “There is not one square inch of all creation over which Jesus Christ is not Lord,” I was very much alarmed. “Every square inch” is a favorite rallying cry of the school where I teach. Suddenly, the whole insurrection had struck way too close to home.

“Josh Hawley is a Christian dominionist,” I was told. “He’s missing other important theological points of Kuyper, like sphere sovereignty and common grace.” Fair enough.

Then, Janel Kragt Bakker published a piece in *Patheos*, [“Josh Hawley, Betsy Devos, and Abraham Kuyper: A Reckoning.”](#) Kragt Bakker takes the critique of Hawley much farther. While I felt I

could firmly say that Hawley was misusing Kuyper, DeVos was a more perplexing problem. I have long known that DeVos is a Reformed Christian, and I have read with growing consternation what many people in public education think of DeVos's work as Secretary of Education. For example, Kragt Bakker writes, "DeVos has used her time...to gut the most vulnerable public schools, serving black and brown students."

Gulp.

But Kragt Bakker goes further, to Kuyper himself. She traces Kuyper's politics to populism, specifically white populism. Kragt Bakker points out Kuyper's emphasis on the "*kleine luyden*"—the little people—as evidence that Kuyper was beholden to white middle class voters, that he worked to "protect their interests." Kragt Bakker writes,

And while it would be unfair to label Kuyper a white Christian nationalist, it is easy to see how his ideas could be employed in the service of white Christian nationalism, with its grievance ethos, its "color blindness" as a cover for its racism, its paternalism, its patriarchy, and its "populism" favoring white working-class interests.

That's when it hit me: When it comes to politics, the voice in my head is populist.

And white.

First, the populist part. Populism is defined as "a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups."

"What's the problem with that?" the voice in my head asks.

I trace my Dutch and Reformed roots back even further than Kuyper and the *kleine luyden*, to an earlier split in the Dutch Reformed Church, the *Afscheiding*, and to even littler people. My "little people" ancestors were not even middle class. They were un-propertied farmhands and maids and fishmongers, one even an ex-con. Bottom of the barrel scrapers. And the religion they took on was critical of the state church and no doubt very un-progressive. It drew the disdain of the government as well as the rest of the country and even apparently some [persecution](#)—mob violence broke up the group's meetings and a company of soldiers was even dispatched to the area, to be billeted by these poor outlaws. Yes, I'm trotting out a populist pedigree of sorts here, I suppose, one I only became aware of a few years ago. The point is that for me, this voice run deep—deeper than I ever thought.

Persecution no doubt left mental scars on my ancestors, as well as generational pride at resisting the empire, both of which are certainly traceable to people in my community today. As in many Reformed communities, men and women in this tradition continue to fund their own schools, with the right to operate them somewhat in the way they see fit. Yes, these are

“private schools” of a sort, I’ve told friends, but, at least in their founding, they’re often not moneyed schools. The high school I attended had a long history of scraping by, including, during especially hard times, paying faculty by barter—teaching in exchange for agricultural commodities like meat—which happened as late as the 1980s. I once heard a soft-spoken elderly man recount setting aside egg money to pay tuition, a bill his family couldn’t really afford in the Great Depression except by priority.

Today, almost unmistakably, people in this tradition—people who have an ancestral distrust of government—find themselves susceptible to populist lines of argument. “They want to take away your freedoms” is a lightning rod in my community. It’s also a go-to populist line: “The elites are coming and they are going to enforce their will upon you.”

These days, I find the lightnigest of rods in my community is this line: “They want to let boys into the girls’ bathrooms.” That line is dangerously populist, it seems to me, like yelling “fire” in a crowded theater. People react to it, and populists like Donald Trump have learned that they can throw lines like that around like Molotov cocktails, to great effect. Lines like that hit the populist nerve dead on.

After my *Beautiful Mind* moment, I can clearly identify that one voice in my head is populist.

But then Kragt Bakker brought out another aspect of this voice.

It’s also white.

The day after Joe Biden’s inauguration, I knew I had to replay Amanda Gorman performing her poetry for my classes. Gorman’s performance was iconic and about the brightest spotlight that poetry gets these days. Plus, Gorman is a member of Gen Z not much older than my students.

That’s when I heard the voice: What about the students who will see you playing this clip as a political stunt?

I immediately began crafting an answer. And I thought of Kragt Bakker. And *A Beautiful Mind*. And *I’m Thinking of Ending Things*. It was the populist voice I was hearing, but not just populist. I couldn’t sort out the part that was upset at lauding something—anything—from Biden’s inauguration from the part that was skeptical of the figure cut by Gorman, who is black, while the overwhelming majority of my students are white.

Of course, this might not be their problem, I realized, but mine. It’s the populist voice in *my* head that is white.

Which by definition means it’s not really populist at all. Here’s why.

If populism is really concerned about the interests of “ordinary” people, of non-elites, then populism should cut across racial and cultural lines. In some ways, I suppose, it does. I would

bet the bathroom line creates a specter for many conservative Black and Latinx voters, for example, the way it does for many whites. You don't have to look far on social media to find evidence that some Black voters supported Trump. Of course they did; this is America, another voice in my head says, we contain multitudes.

In the case of Trump, however, the exception clearly proves the rule: Trump is anathema to many voters of color because of his overt white supremacy.

For the white populist voice in my head (and in case any populists may be reading this article, which I doubt, since we so rarely read across political lines these days), a few of these highlights include Trump's reference to people from "sh-hole countries," his suggestion that undocumented Mexicans are rapists, and even simply the way that "Make America Great Again" points to a time when America was controlled by, well, white people.

One problem with Trump's populism—and with the history of American populism—is that it's not really populism. It's white populism.

But we also should be aware that history is against us in overcoming the "white" part. Let me give several quick examples.

Historian Timothy Tyson has [written](#) about the populist "fusion" movement that united whites and blacks to win state elections across North Carolina in the 1890s. How would opponents break the power of fusion? White supremacist rhetoric, which resulted in the horrific Wilmington massacre, or Wilmington insurrection of 1898.

Or try the PBS documentary, [The First Rainbow Coalition](#). The populist voice in my head wants to already bracket this one out, simply for the word "rainbow," but the story the film tells, about voters uniting across racial and cultural lines, kind of stunned me—if only because we're so used to populist voters being divided and conquered along racial lines.

The third example isn't historical but artistic. *SNL*'s now classic skit "[Black Jeopardy](#)" featuring [Tom Hanks](#) is a very populist experiment: if we put a MAGA-hat wearing "Doug" (played by Hanks) on a game show for lower middle class black people (as evidenced by the sponsors, things like "car tape" to fix broken car windows), what happens? It turns out Doug and the Black contestants are distrustful of many of the same things: automatic withholding; thumb print identification on iPhones ("I don't trust that," says one of the black characters, and Doug replies, "I read that goes straight to the government"); and that "every vote counts": Hanks says, "Come on, they already decided who wins even before it happens," to which the host, Darnell Hayes (Kenan Thompson) says, "Yes! Yes! The illuminati figured that out months ago!" It's funny, convincing, human, and populist. And it ends on a perfectly ironic note that underscores what keeps populists apart: race.

So what do we do, those of us who find voices in our heads we don't want there?

Janel Kragt Bakker says we should get more voices and better ones, including voices that are truer to the experience of the place and context we find ourselves in—Martin Luther King over or at least in addition to Abraham Kuyper, for example. We should diversify our portfolio of voices, so to speak, but not just to hedge our political bets for when the tide turns but with the hope of being saved from our worst devils—politicians who might manipulate our populist buttons, say, to overthrow an election. Diversifying the voices in our head is really just old-fashioned Americanism, going back to at least Walt Whitman, that other voice in my head. “Do I contradict myself,” Whitman asks in his American epic *Leaves of Grass*, “Very well I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes).”

Opening ourselves to many voices still scares the white populist voice in some of us. “With so many voices won’t we just become nondescript?” this voice asks, “Schizophrenic?”

Consider the alternative: recently, my wife came across a mention on social media that the Southern Poverty Law Center had named a now independent but formerly Christian Reformed Church in Michigan as a white nationalist hate group. Among the theologians that church proudly named itself in the tradition of, all white and Dutch, was the name “A. Kuyper.” When we enshrine only certain voices, we do in fact become susceptible to our worst devils.

Which brings me back to both *A Beautiful Mind* and Charlie Kaufman.

Apparently, [Kaufman](#) doesn’t find *A Beautiful Mind* to be worthy of awards or very realistic about paranoid schizophrenia. His film *I’m Thinking of Ending Things*, also about the working of the mind, is a whole lot darker about getting out of, well, here, this individual consciousness we’ve come to call “mind.” We don’t just escape that consciousness by recognizing the voices in our heads, by identifying that they’re there and then going about our business as if they’re dealt with—not without community support, therapists, pastors, medication, struggle, scripture, regression, hospitalization, church, etc.

That wouldn’t be good psychiatry, nor is it good Calvinism. Total depravity, like paranoid schizophrenia, is just too powerful.

Nor is it good politics.

We are all susceptible to the voices in our heads, and to the way politicians echo or manipulate those voices. It’s time we helped each other to identify those voices, to trace the roots of those voices, and to make those voices as diverse as the kingdom coming.