

“Only a Pawn in Their Game.” Reverberations of the *Poor White Man* in Donald Trump’s 2016 Presidential Campaign

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In his 1964 song “Only a Pawn in Their Game,” Bob Dylan describes the assassination of the African American civil rights activist Medgar Evers, who had been shot dead by a white racist of the lower class the previous year. The song quintessentially argues that the *poor white man* – economically and socially disadvantaged – is not solely to be blamed for this murderous act. Dylan construes whiteness as a kind of symbolic boundary, consciously constructed by the Southern white bourgeoisie in order to make the *poor white man* misconceive of his devastating economic situation: “A South politician preaches to the poor white man / ‘You got more than the blacks, don’t complain. / You’re better than them, you been born with white skin,’ they explain.”¹

50 years later amidst a stagnating economy another white politician consciously (ab-)uses the concept of race to foster his political ambition: Donald Trump’s overtly racist attacks on Muslims, Mexican immigrants, and Black protestors aim at strengthening and reinvesting the white identity constructions of his preferred audience. Matt Wray reminds us to “[r]econceptualiz[e] whiteness as a flexible set of social and symbolic boundaries that give shape, meaning, and power to the social category *white*[.]”² Trump’s conceptions of race make advances to the white, economically disadvantaged segment of US population in order to re-establish the symbolic – and social – boundary between white and non-white.

The first part of this paper contextualizes, historicizes, and problematizes Dylan’s theoretical insight into the political functions of the *poor white man*. In the second part, I will analyze the construction of whiteness in Donald Trump’s 2016 Presidential Campaign within this framework. My goal is to investigate Trump’s re-imagination of the intersectional boundaries of whiteness, class, and the nation, which aims at ‘Making (White) America Great Again.’

¹ Dylan, Bob. „Only a Pawn in Their Game.” Lyrics. <http://bobdylan.com/songs/only-pawn-their-game/>. Accessed July 30, 2016. Web.

² Wray, Matt (2006): Not Quite White. White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness, Durham/London: Duke UP, 139.