We Alone Can Fix It: Donald Trump's Campaign Rallies and the Rhetoric of Community

By

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Abstract

In this project, I employ rhetorical fieldwork methods to explore community construction at President Trump's campaign rallies. Since Trump's election, rhetorical scholars have analyzed Trump's rhetoric to discern recurring themes and explain his appeal despite his unconventional style and violation of norms. Based on a holistic analysis of Trump rallies that is informed by my firsthand experiences conducting rhetorical fieldwork at four rallies, I argue that explaining Trump's appeal requires attention to his supporters, who are often overlooked in analyses that focus upon Trump himself. This project explores not only Trump's rhetoric, but also more vernacular rhetorical activities that have becoming defining features of Trump rallies. I argue that rallies are a key site where identification is co-constructed between Trump and his supporters, through an analysis of the populist outsider persona constructed in Trump's rally rhetoric, the rituals performed by supporters at rallies, the violence that often occurs at these events, and the circulation of conspiracy theories at rallies. These findings improve understanding of the affective bond between Trump and his supporters, the rhetorical process of identification-building, and campaign rhetoric, while explaining the capacity of populist rhetoric, ritual, violence, and conspiracy theories to contribute to group-identity formation.

Keywords: *Donald Trump*, *Rhetorical Fieldwork*, *Identification*, *Political Rhetoric*, *Campaign Communication*.

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This doesn't feel like second place.

- Donald Trump, at a rally in Grand Rapids, during the early hours of November 8th, 2016.

Chapter I

Introduction

Inside the packed arena, anticipation builds. Before me sprawls a crowd of thousands, overflowing with red hats and stars and stripes, buzzing with excitement. The palpable energy belies the fact that many in attendance spent the day standing in line or making a pilgrimage across state lines to be here, all for a chance to see their hero. Suspense builds as lesser speakers tantalize the crowd. Sporadic chants of "lock her up!" and "U.S.A.!" erupt as the crowd senses that the festivities will soon commence in earnest. The throng of more than 10,000 devotees unleashes its most boisterous cheers yet as a security agent dutifully places the Presidential Seal on the lone podium found in the middle of the sea of red hats. Moments later, Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." blasts from the loudspeakers at top volume, announcing the arrival of the President of the United States. The roar of the crowd is now thunderous. As cameras flash and the crowd jumps to their feet to applaud the President's arrival, Donald Trump meanders out of a tunnel and onto the stage. His profile is unmistakable, even from a distance: a large, hunching man with yellow hair, in an oversized suit with a bright red necktie, basking in the crowd's adulation. The spectacle is overwhelming, filling me with both awe and dread. How does one man command the loyalty of these masses?

Donald Trump's victory took many analysts by surprise, raising questions that elude easy answers. Candidate Trump "crashed through the guardrails of traditional politics" by attacking "the family of a soldier killed in Iraq," inviting "Russian hackers to meddle in American politics," joking "about gun lovers assassinating Hillary Clinton," and linking his opponent "Senator Ted Cruz's father to the Kennedy assassination, among other lowlights" (Tur, 2017, p.

202). Political analysts have struggled to explain both the success of Trump's convention-shattering campaign and the fierce loyalty of his core supporters despite the numerous outrageous comments and gaffes that would have doomed almost any previous presidential candidate (Kruse & Gee, 2016; Struyk, 2017). The durability of Trump's base support continued into his scandal-ridden presidency, as he consistently posted about 90% approval among Republicans, a figure comparable to George W. Bush's popularity after the September 11th attacks (Coaston, 2019; Peters, 2018). Additional evidence of this resiliency can be found in data that shows "nearly half of Mr. Trump's voters have exceptionally warm views toward him: 45 percent rated their feeling toward him as a 90 or higher out of 100, a figure that is virtually unchanged since his election" (Cohn & Parlapiano, 2018, para. 21).

Although there continues to be debate about which factors were most influential in causing Trump's victory, "top political operatives" agree that the "seemingly unbreakable bond with his core supporters, no matter how provocative his words or deeds" was an essential variable (Lauter, 2016, para. 4). Fording and Schram (2017) argued that the unshakeable loyalty of Trump supporters remains an "understudied topic," and called for further exploration into why:

> Trump's base was so loyal to him during and after the campaign in spite of his profligate lying, reliance on outlandish conspiracy theories, constant name-calling and demonizing of his opponents, and his continual smearing of various "out groups" who he sought to denigrate for political effect. (p. 674)

Echoing this sentiment, Bostdorff (2017) recognized that a basic puzzle of the Trump presidency concerns the fact that, somehow, "enough voters in the right states were willing to take a chance on an outsider with no political experience—a billionaire with a track record in obvious

contradiction to his populist claims—as the means toward political transformation" (Bostdorff, 2017, p. 698). Curiously, Trump accomplished all of this while lacking a consistent ideological platform. Many Trump voters remained "unwavering in their support" despite Trump's uneasy appropriation of traditional conservative proposals such as tax reduction and deregulation and heterodox ideas such as trade protectionism (Chaput, 2018, p. 195). Trump's key proposals "only tenuously" connected (p. 195) with the interests of his white working-class supporters, raising the question of how he energized those "who share few, if any, economic interests" with both Trump and those whom his policies aid (p. 200). Trump's ability to maintain "such a stubbornly loyal political base despite what a majority of Americans regard as overwhelming evidence of his inconsistencies and incompetence" remains "one of the most puzzling, enduring and intriguing questions about the Trump presidential phenomenon" (Malcolm, 2018, para. 1).

Existing explanations of Trump's appeal remain unsatisfactory. To explain Trump's shocking win, scholars and commentators have often resorted to two seemingly competing explanations. Since Trump's victory, "a heated debate broke out among political commentators over the source of Donald Trump's support. Was it driven primarily by economic anxiety, as the early conventional wisdom often argued, or more by racism and other cultural factors?" (Casselman, 2017, para. 1).

Defenders of the economic explanation point out that "Trump won millions of working-class white voters in the Midwest, the constituency and the region hit hardest by globalization, who had previously voted for Barack Obama" (Douthat, 2018, para. 4). In its most reductive form, this perspective insists that many Trump voters could not possibly have been driven by racial prejudice if they "voted twice for the first black president" (para. 4). Economic explanations of Trump's appeal therefore downplay the importance of racial attitudes and point

instead to "economic anxiety." To defend this position, proponents cite data that Trump "beat Hillary Clinton in counties with slower job growth and lower wages" and that he "far outperformed her in counties where more jobs are threatened by automation or offshoring" (Kolko, 2016, para. 2; Monnat & Brown, 2017). The economics perspective credits Trump's victory to "a massive wave of voter discontent with the governing classes" and notes that similar dynamics propelled the candidacy of Senator Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries (Oliver & Rahn, 2016, p. 189). Although some acknowledge that actual "economic hardship doesn't explain Trump's support," defenders posit that Trump voters were linked by a shared pessimism about the country's future economic prospects (Casselman, 2017, para. 5). Economic theories of Trump's victory correctly identify that Trump's success was enabled by broad discontent with the establishment factions of the Democratic and Republican parties, and the unevenness of the post-2008 economic recovery, but ultimately offer only partial explanatory power.

Conversely, racial and cultural explanations of Trump's appeal emphasize how negative attitudes towards immigrants and minorities predict support for Trump while minimizing economic factors. This perspective holds that Trump's "explicitly racist and sexist appeals during the campaign, coupled with the presence of an African American president and the first major-party female nominee, made racism and sexism a dividing line in the vote in this election" (Schaffner, Macwilliams, & Nteta, 2018, p. 10). At a fundraising event in September of 2016, Hillary Clinton herself articulated an over-simplified version of this view when she remarked that: "you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables . . . they're racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it" (qtd. in CBS News, 2016).

Clinton would ultimately express regret for this comment, but a significant body of research confirms that anxieties about the nation's ongoing demographic changes were powerful drivers of support for Trump. Schaffner et al.'s (2018) study found that "while economic considerations were an important part of the story, racial attitudes and sexism were much more strongly related to support for Trump" (p. 10). Similarly, Hooghe and Dassonneville's (2018) multivariate analysis of survey data suggested that "negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants swayed independents and some Democrats to opt for candidate Trump, thereby considerably strengthening his electoral-support base" (p. 532). Smith and Hanley's (2018) multivariate logistic regression led the authors to conclude that "most Trump voters cast their ballots for him with their eyes open, not despite his prejudices but because of them" (p. 207). Racial/cultural explanations are important because they elucidate the persistence of racism and other prejudices in American life, but risk overlooking how the interlocking crises of economic inequality, industrial decline, and opioid addiction may have primed certain working-class white voters for Trump's exclusionary appeals (Atkins, 2017).

The stakes of this debate are high and far "more than an academic exercise" (Casselman, 2017, para. 3). Each diagnosis suggests drastically different approaches for how Trump's reactionary nationalism should be confronted. Paralleling the debate over whether support for Trump is economically-driven or racially-driven, political strategists and activists have waged a heated argument about whether Trump's opponents should prioritize "firing up" a multicultural coalition of progressives to overwhelm Trumpism at the ballot box through sheer demographic force, or whether Trump's opponents should prioritize "win[ning] back the white Midwestern voters who helped elect Mr. Trump" (Vogel, 2018, paras. 1-3). The economics perspective holds out hope that Trump voters could be convinced to support Democratic candidates if they become

disillusioned with Trump or if liberals forward "well-crafted and appealing initiatives" that create new economic opportunities for those who feel left behind by globalization (Smith & Hanley, 2018, p. 207). In contrast, extreme versions of the racial/culture perspective hold that attempts to persuade Trump voters are largely futile due to the entrenched nature of their prejudiced attitudes (Waldman, 2018).

Compelling evidence supports both the economic and racial/cultural explanations for Trump's appeal, yet this dichotomy is not always useful. Both theories rest on a "somewhat artificial" distinction that overlooks how "economic inequality and cultural backlash" may interact because "structural changes in the workforce and social trends in globalized markets heighten economic insecurity" which may stimulate "a negative backlash among traditionalists towards cultural shifts" (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 3). Just as economic inequality may contribute to the scapegoating of minorities, racial attitudes can shape voters' perception of the economy. Research demonstrates that "racial resentment plays an especially large role in negative views of the economy," and can help explain the "chasm between the economic views of racial liberals and conservatives" (Smith & Hanley, 2018, p. 206). Pitting economic anxiety and racial anxiety against each other may be "misleading" if these phenomena are reinforcing rather than separate (Fording & Schram, 2017, p. 673). Because determining the sources of Trump's appeal has significant implications for how the regressive forces he activated should be addressed, and because economic anxiety and cultural anxiety are interlinked, the task for scholars must be to craft an explanation of Trump's appeal that can incorporate insights from both perspectives.

In this essay, I contend that Trump's rallies are the key rhetorical artifact that offer a way out of this deadlock. I develop this argument in three parts. First, I explain why campaign rallies

are crucial for comprehending the Trump phenomenon, arguing that rallies are a vital aspect of Trump's relationship with his core supporters that have not received sufficient attention from rhetorical scholars. Second, I outline the insights that stem from this analysis. These findings improve our understanding of the puzzling loyalty of Trump supporters and the rhetorical process of identification-building more generally. Third, I conclude by detailing how I will conduct this rhetorical analysis of Trump rallies in subsequent chapters of this project.

Campaign Rallies: The Key to Understanding the Trump Phenomenon

It is somewhat counterintuitive to argue that a closer look at Trump's rallies will illuminate the sources of his appeal; after all, coverage of his rallies saturated the airwaves during the 2016 campaign. On one occasion, major cable news networks were reduced to broadcasting a live video feed of an empty podium prior to a rally (Grynbaum, 2016). Trump's longtime advisor Roger Stone (2017) described rallies as "the focal point of his entire campaign, amplified by the cable news networks that carried his rally speeches around the clock" (pp. 11-12). The capacity of Trump rallies to serve as "an identity festival," or a "dramatic enactment of a specific vision of America" deserves further analysis (Reicher & Haslam, 2017b, para. 6). Although media commentators correctly "dismissed Trump's obsession with the size of his rallies," Trump intuitively "understood that the crowd – activated and entrained in just the right way – made possible a self-sustaining affective conflagration" (Richardson, 2017, p. 753). It is this highly emotional, collective bonding experience that warrants exploration.

The Indispensability of Rallies to the Trump Campaign

A simple comparison of the Trump and Clinton campaigns illustrates that rallies were crucial to Trump's outreach efforts. By most metrics, Hillary Clinton ran a superior campaign to Trump. Clinton's campaign was more disciplined and professional, boasted a "ground game

advantage . . . as large as the one Obama had over Mitt Romney in 2012," and "spent almost twice as much money" as the Trump campaign (Silver, 2017, paras. 8-9). The Clinton campaign "was arguably the most data-driven in American history," whereas the Trump campaign's digital operations were "less sophisticated" and not deployed until late in the campaign ("The role of technology," 2016, paras. 1-4). Trump's campaign consisted of "a bare-bones team, debilitated by infighting, poor coordination with allies, and a message that change[d] with Trump's whims" (Tur, 2017, p. 172). Indeed, Trump arguably "had no real campaign beyond rallies" (Roberts, 2016, para. 36).

Given these weaknesses, Trump's rallies stand out as "the cornerstone of an unconventional, star-powered presidential campaign that eschewed traditional organizing and defied every expectation" (Colvin, 2018, para. 6). My argument is not that Trump's rallies are a silver-bullet explanation for his victory, given the litany of variables (the economy, racism, sexism, FBI director James Comey, Russian interference, etc.) that played a role in the outcome of the 2016 election. Rather, I argue that the rallies are important for understanding the relationship between Trump and his base. Given that Trump made little use of traditional "get out the vote" techniques, the hundreds of rallies he held throughout 2015 and 2016 are of great interest to those seeking clarity about the sources of his appeal. Michael Glassner, Trump's campaign chief operating officer, described rallies as "the driving force behind this movement" (qtd. in Bender, 2019, para. 7).

As President, rallies have remained central to Trump's public outreach efforts (Glasser, 2018). Rallies "played a central role to his first victory" and "are in many ways more important than ever" as President Trump has faced multiple investigations and impeachment (Bender, 2019, para. 3). These rallies are illuminating to those interested in the relationship between

Trump and his supporters, even though rallies are attended by only a fraction of the more than 60 million Americans who voted for him in 2016. Trump rallies are physically attended by thousands, but their reach is considerably enlarged by the extensive media coverage that they receive. Trump's competence as a public official and businessman is questionable, but he is undoubtedly a "master of media spectacle," and rallies are a key means through which he captures the national spotlight and forces himself into public consciousness (Kellner, 2016, p. 1). Local and national newspapers cover Trump's visits in the days before and after a rally, while the speech itself generates significant attention from cable news networks, who typically show at least portions of the speech live and then debate the latest offensive remark made by Trump at the rally afterwards (Cook, 2017; Kellner, 2016). Trump's rallies "become statewide media events, drawing local reporters and camera crews" to "report on thousands who show up to see the president, including many who camp outside the arena a day or two in advance" (Bender, 2019, para. 40).

Rallies represent a pivotal component of Trump's efforts to communicate with the public and are accordingly useful texts for analysis. Beyond the people in the room with him, Trump rallies command attention from users of Twitter and Facebook, sparking conversations among both Trump supporters and opponents worldwide. Social media platforms allow millions of people on a global scale to react to Trump's speech in real time, further expanding Trump's audience. After the crowd at a 2019 rally in North Carolina chanted "send her back" about Congresswoman Ihlan Omar (D-MN), Twitter erupted with discussions of the rally. The phrase "send her back" was echoed by thousands of accounts while competing hashtags of "#IStandWithIlhan" and "#IStandWithPresTrump" were among Twitter's top trending phrases and were repeated more than a hundred thousand times (Gstalter, 2019; Jasper & Murphy, 2019).

Thanks to amplification from both traditional media sources and social media, Trump rallies reach considerably more people than the immediate audience of around 10,000-20,000. Through an overarching mobilization strategy that combines "rallies and [Trump's] physical presence at them," "constant attacks on the media" and subsequent media "reporting of his attacks," Trump produces "an echo effect" that ensures widespread circulation of his rally rhetoric (Agnew & Shin, 2019, p. 88). Understanding Trump's rhetoric therefore requires attention to his rallies.

Prior Research on Trump's Rhetoric

Despite their centrality to the Trump campaign, rallies have not received sufficient attention as holistic rhetorical events. It is clear that rallies were an essential element of Trump's attempts to connect with the several thousand voters in a handful of states that would ultimately afford him a path to victory in the electoral college; less clear is exactly what occurred at these events that made them such a rhetorically potent force. During the 2016 election race, "Trump rallies were reported on primarily in terms of the violence that would sometimes break out at them or the falsehoods, misstatements, and attacks Trump would utter" (Allott & Allott, 2018, para. 11). Trump's rallies, and the rituals associated with them, remain poorly understood and have been dismissed as circuses or reality-free spectacles (Stiehm, 2016, para. 7; Lemon, 2018; Rubin, 2018). Although these criticisms of Trump rallies have merit, rhetorical critics cannot afford to neglect their centrality in how Trump directly engaged his supporters.

There is no shortage of literature describing the characteristics of Trump's rhetoric, but oftentimes these analyses create taxonomies categorizing themes in Trump's rhetoric itself, rather than considering the situations and contexts in which audiences encountered this rhetoric. In *The Twitter Presidency: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of White Rage*, Brian Ott and Greg

Dickinson (2019) explored the same critical puzzle that I have posed here, musing that "given the unwavering loyalty of his base, one cannot help but wonder what makes Trump so appealing to his followers" in spite of his outrageous behavior (p. 2). To explain this puzzle, Ott and Dickinson argued that "it is primarily Trump's style" that "account[s] for his appeal" (p. 2). Throughout the book, the authors link Trump's appeal to his followers to his unique personal "rhetorical style" (p. 2), "paying particular attention to its principal manner (i.e., white rage) and modality (i.e., Twitter) of expression" (p. 20).

Similarly, Appel (2018) applied "the rhetorical elements of burlesque drama to the primary and general election campaign rhetoric of Donald J. Trump" (p. 158). Appel, drawing upon Burkean theories, argued for the existence of five generic features of burlesque drama: (1) a morally disordered scene, (2) a guilt-obsessed agent, (3) a guilty counteragent, (4) a sacrificial act, and (5) redemptive purposes and means (p. 159). Appel then proceeded to chart the emergence of these rhetorical properties in Trump's rhetoric, but without extensive consideration of how audiences experienced these themes.

Several other existing rhetorical analyses of Trump employ a taxonomical approach. Johnson (2017) characterized Trump's rhetoric as a type of demagoguery seeped in white, victimized, toxic masculinity, and noted the centrality of "repeated invocations of disturbing concepts and images, such as death, destruction, humiliation, submission, and rape" (p. 236) and "masculine charisma" to his appeal (p. 237). According to Johnson, Trump himself "manufactures precarity through four key, interlocking themes: felt powerlessness as a sign of agency, democracy as danger, raced and gendered hostility toward otherness, and charisma as compensatory for lack" (p. 238). Stuckey (2017) attempted to make sense of the events of 2016 by outlining "the rhetoric of political change," or the "kinds of rhetorical action" that "signal that

change may be on the way" (p. 676). Stuckey then identified these "rhetorical markers" as "a dependence upon hyperbole; an accompanying tendency toward incivility; a certain vagueness regarding means and ends; and a reliance on hope and nostalgia" (p. 676) and argued that these themes were present in Trump's rhetoric during the 2016 campaign. Theye and Melling (2018) also observed that Trump's willingness to eschew norms of political correctness contributed to his perceived authenticity.

Rowland's (2019) analysis of Trump's nationalist and populist rhetoric emphasized a number of the same themes that I describe in Trump rallies, but focused almost exclusively on Trump's speeches, as opposed to the rally itself. Kelly (2020) argued that Trump engages in the rhetoric of *ressentiment* to create "fantasies of persecution that ennoble both him and his audience" (p. 9). Although Kelly acknowledged that Trump's "post-election rallies are spectacular, emotionally-charged events," he analyzed primarily "the agonistic drama that unfolds in Trump's address to his supporters" rather than other elements of these events (p. 9). Moreover, analyzing rallies holistically reveals important ways in which Trump's message is reinforced by aspects of these events other than Trump's address.

Other analyses highlight Trump's capacity to evoke various emotions. Richardson (2017) highlighted the "centrality of disgust to Trump's rhetoric and affect" (p. 748), forwarding that a desire to cleanse the nation of filth links Trump's calls to fortify the U.S.-Mexico border, expel foreigners, "drain the swamp," and bring the country back to a glorious, imagined past. Wahl-Jorgensen's (2018) analysis of Trump centered the emotion of anger, arguing that "the particular brand of exclusionary populism cultivated by Trump depends on the performance of anger as a way of dramatizing grievances" (p. 774). Studies such as these aptly chart recurring patterns in Trump's rhetoric and its corrosive effect on public discourse but would benefit from a greater

consideration of how actual audiences witnessed and consumed such rhetoric. The problem with these taxonomies is not that they are inaccurate or inflexible, but that they are incomplete because they assign Trump's supporters a less prominent place in the picture. When the medium or venue of Trump's messaging is considered, it is usually Trump's Twitter account that is given the spotlight (Ott, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2019). Although Trump's use of social media during the campaign was indeed novel, his rallies were another important venue where a great deal of concrete interactions between the candidate and his followers occurred.

The taxonomical approach has the effect of focusing on Trump while neglecting the active participation of his supporters in the rhetorical processes being analyzed. Since building shared political identity is always a matter of co-construction between rhetor and audience (Hauser, 2011, p. 164), neglect of how Trump supporters engage in this process amounts to a denial of their agency. I argue that Trump supporters are not merely passive listeners who are moved to fanaticism by Trump's demagogic rhetoric; they subscribe to his political movement to obtain real psychological benefits such as a feeling of membership in a larger community. Rallies are the key rhetorical sites that illustrate how Trump supporters were enthusiastic participants in the co-construction of the besieged community described in Trump's rhetoric.

Moreover, taxonomical analyses may misdiagnose Trump's resonance as a matter of charismatic leadership or rhetorical skill, overlooking the role of audiences in building identification (Johnson, 2017; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Ott & Dickinson, 2019). Charisma is indeed "the outcome of careful craftsmanship" by a speaker, but also involves a co-constructive process where "the group being led is on equal footing with the leader" (Haslam & Reicher, 2012, p. 44). Analyzing Trump's rhetoric in a vacuum without attention to contextual dynamics hinders our understanding of how Trump supporters made sense of Trump's appeals and the issues at stake

in the 2016 campaign. This approach replicates an oft-criticized flaw of public address studies, which is that scholars focus so obsessively upon the speaker as a "great man of history" that they overlook everyday rhetorical practices and impoverish "our understanding of public address as significant human activity" (Zarefsky, 2010, p. 74; Morris 2007). With regards to the Trump phenomenon, the unlikely bond built between the candidate and his core supporters was not solely a unidirectional transmission from speaker to listener but was ritualistically enacted at campaign rallies. Taxonomical analyses of Trump's public addresses need to be supplemented with rhetorical criticisms that delve into the ways that identification was co-constructed between Trump and his supporters.

Trump rallies deserve to be taken seriously by rhetorical scholars, and not merely because they hosted Trump speeches that were ostensibly the main attraction. Reicher and Haslam (2017a) posited that "a Trump rally is about more than a Trump speech" (p. 29). Through several recurring features – the speeches, the long lines that formed hours in advance, the chants, the music, the merchandise, and the sometimes violent interactions between Trump and his audience and between various members of the audience – these rallies constituted "the performance of a particular worldview" and should be analyzed accordingly (Reicher & Haslam, 2017a, p. 29). To understand Trump and his unique relationship with his followers, rhetorical critics must "start by looking at what went on inside a Trump event" (Reicher & Haslam, 2017b, para. 3). Rallies demand attention *in toto*, or as a whole or a rhetorical totality: the rhetorical performances of rally-goers that became habitual features of these events should be analyzed just as rigorously as Trump's verbal remarks.

Implications of a Holistic Study of Trump Rallies

The analysis of Trump rallies that follows produces several important scholarly benefits. These insights not only improve our understanding of the Trump phenomenon, but also extend previous rhetorical scholarship regarding campaign rhetoric, presidential rhetoric, and the process of identification-building. In conducting this analysis, I investigate not just Trump, but the phenomenon known as "Trumpism." At times, I use the term "Trumpism," "rather than Trump, to de-emphasize the President himself, while acknowledging the particular, and to some extent unprecedented, alliance of forces that have coalesced around his campaign" (Chinn & Entin, 2018, p. 3). Trumpism therefore refers to the broader political movement and ideas associated with Donald Trump as opposed to the man himself.

As an ideological framework, Trumpism represents a departure from previous iterations of conservatism, by substituting Reagan's "optimistic and inclusive brand of conservatism" with "dystopian nationalism" (Justice, 2018, p. 30). However, there is also significant continuity: "Perhaps the most fundamental point to make about Trumpism is that it is a rebranding, a repackaging of far right-wing ideas, mixed in with a little inspiration from Trump himself" (Morris, 2019, p. 22). Lee (2017) highlighted the fluid nature of conservative political identity and noted that Trumpism represents a "redefinition" of conservatism rather than a total repudiation (p. 721). Farber (2016) argued that Trumpism contains some deviations from traditional conservative orthodoxy (such as trade protectionism) but nonetheless relies on tried-and-true tactics utilized by conservatives to gain power, such as the stigmatization of outgroups and defense of hierarchies. In many respects, Trumpism is a radical "entelechialization," or symbolic over-extension, of patterns of nativist, reactionary thought that have long existed within conservatism (Rowland & Frank, 2002, p. 303). Data showing a "dramatic uptick in incidents of

racist and xenophobic harassment across the country" following Trump's victory indicates that certain violence-prone Trump supporters have taken the President's exclusionary rhetoric to its logical extreme by resorting to violence against the scorned enemies commonly railed against in Trump's rally speeches (Okeowo, 2016, para. 1). It is precisely Trumpism's capacity to foster such anti-democratic and dangerous practices that creates an exigency for scholarly investigation.

Importantly, Trumpism is a phenomenon that is interrelated with international developments. Paralleling Trump's rapid rise in the United States is the ascendance of authoritarian populist movements across the world. Although "right-wing populism across Europe and the United States does not come with uniform, clearly defined characteristics" and "takes different forms depending on nationally specific factors such as political history, system and culture," Trump and his international counterparts nonetheless share a similar rhetorical frame (Greven, 2016, p. 4). Authoritarian populism, which has arisen in a variety of international contexts, is an illiberal, anti-pluralist variant of populism that explains politics as a competition between pure, ordinary citizens and corrupt elites (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Zürn, 2018). The United Kingdom's Brexit movement, France's Marie Le Pen, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, and Trump all espouse a similar worldview that "directs tribal grievances 'upwards' toward elites" and "'outwards' toward scapegoat groups" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 7). Aside from these rhetorical similarities, the rise of populism in the United States, Europe, and other places is in part a reaction to the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the West's foreign policy failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere (Cox, 2017, p. 16). Investigating Trumpism may therefore provide limited, but nonetheless valuable, insights into the phenomenon of authoritarian populism generally. In what follows, I argue that applying a

rhetorical perspective to Trump rallies will provide key insights into the nature of Trump supporters, the sources of Trump's appeal, and the process of identification.

A More Holistic Portrait of Trump Supporters

First and foremost, a closer look at rallies will improve our understanding of Trump's ironclad relationship with his base of core supporters and our comprehension of his supporters themselves. By Trump's "base" I refer generally to the 80-90% of Republican voters who consistently express approval of Trump, but also more specifically to the dedicated few that attend rallies to celebrate Trump and signal their loyalty to him. Johnson (2017) noted that Trump's ideological and rhetorical "incoherence is opaque to his critics but meaningful to his adherents" (p. 230). Similarly, Katy Tur, a frequent attendee of Trump rallies during her time as NBC's embedded reporter covering the Trump campaign, described the confusing nature of these rallies in her book *Unbelievable*. According to Tur (2017), Trump supporters are a difficult group for outsiders to make sense of, since

> they seem divided between people who believe all they see and hear, and those who
> know it's partially a performance. The scariest thing about being at a Trump rally is that
> you don't know who believes it and who doesn't. (p. 96)

Media commentary has often attempted to make sense of Trump supporters by caricaturing them in sweeping terms as an angry mob, "deplorables," and simpletons, or conversely, as a downtrodden class of blue-collar everymen populating rust belt diners who are deserving of sympathy (Uberti, 2017).

Rhetorical scholars have also participated in such stereotyping. Ott and Dickinson (2019) articulated a distinction between "Trump voters" who "exercised poor judgement" but have "no particular allegiance" to Trump, and "Trump followers" who "blindly support Trump" (p. ix).

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The latter group, according to Ott and Dickinson, are defined by "their mindless, cult-like response to Trump" (p. ix). This characterization not only disparages Trump supporters but casts them as essentially passive: the targets of his demagoguery but not rhetorical or political agents themselves. Such crude stereotypes are neither accurate nor useful for understanding Trumpism. The millions of Americans who voted for Trump are not going away; even factoring in demographic change, they will continue to influence American politics for years to come. Rather than dismissing them as "mindless," those concerned by Trump's rise would do well to consider their point of view. Even if one considers Trump's followers beyond persuasion (a debatable proposition), it is still instructive to study what motivates their support. Both caricatures – Trump followers as working-class heroes and Trump followers as bigoted lemmings – are unhelpful if the goal is to gain a fuller understanding of Trump and his actually-existing supporters. To understand the resonance of Trump's message for his supporters, it is important to "rescue Trump supporters from caricature" (Younge, 2018, para. 10). The Trump phenomenon, and the loyalty of his supporters, will continue to appear unintelligible so long as critics focus primarily upon Trump himself rather than the ground-level rhetorical interactions associated with his campaign, which is where much of the hard work of group-identity formation occurs. Rather than analyze Trump's rhetoric from the outside-looking-in as many rhetorical analyses have, critics must attempt to understand the inner workings of the Trump movement.

In his prescient analysis of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Kenneth Burke defended his focus on such a scorned text as necessary for reasons comparable to those I have outlined here. The distinctions between Trump and Hitler are many and significant, but Burke's justifications for study are nonetheless worth detailing. Burke argued that Hitler's ability to "[swing] a great people into his wake" made it urgent for scholars to "watch it carefully . . . to discover what kind

of 'medicine' this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against" (Burke, 1957, p. 164). Similarly, dismissing Trump rallies or otherwise failing to take them seriously would contribute "more to our gratification than to our enlightenment" (p. 164). Burke attributed the resonance of Hitler's message to Hitler's ability to craft a comprehensive worldview "for people who had previously seen the world but piecemeal," arguing that "much of his lure derive[d] . . . from the *bad* filling of a *good* need" (p. 187).

To extend Burke's medicinal metaphor, the societal sicknesses that facilitated Trump's rise – declining faith in the two major political parties, political gridlock, burgeoning inequality, racism and other cultural tensions – are unlikely to dissipate soon, ensuring that Trumpism will not recede when Donald Trump departs the office of presidency. Regardless of Trump's fate, there will be demand for political figures who promise alluringly easy fixes to various real and imagined needs. There is, for example, a strong possibility that "Trump's strategy of using explicitly racist and sexist appeals to win over white voters may be followed by candidates in future elections" (Schaffner et al., 2018, p. 31).

A hypothetical successor to Trump, who claims his populist mantle and stokes a similar set of anxieties in their supporters, may enjoy more success in shepherding the nation toward revanchist authoritarianism if they can avoid the dysfunction and self-inflicted wounds that have bedeviled the Trump administration: "A more cunning populist would be far more dangerous" (Boot, 2019, para. 6). To "forestall the concocting of similar medicine" by a future demagogue, we must look closely at the perceived needs of Trump supporters and the way campaign rallies have emerged as a means of coping with them (Burke, 1957, p. 164). Rallies are the key rhetorical text that promise keen insights into the Trump phenomenon: "There is no understanding Donald Trump without understanding his rallies. They are the crucible of the

Trump revolution, the laboratory where he turns his alternative reality into a potion to be sold to his followers" (Pilkington, 2018, paras. 1-2).

Transcendence of the Economics Versus Racism Debate

Second, a rhetorical analysis of Trump rallies can test the economic and racial/cultural explanations of Trump's appeal. Trump's supporters are not a monolith and cast their ballots for him for a multitude of reasons. Given that Trumpism threatens to outlive the Trump presidency, it is "vital that we understand" what "attracted Americans to the real estate mogul in the first place" (Jacobs, 2018, para. 1). Further investigation is needed to improve our understanding of what motivates Trump supporters beyond dualistic notions of "economic anxiety" or "racism." Although a complete profile of Trump supporters is beyond the scope of any single project, an investigation into Trump's campaign rallies will help illuminate what motivates the devotion of Trump's most diehard loyalists.

Trumpism is driven by both economic changes and nativist anxiety about the influence of demographic changes on "American identity" (Childers, 2013, p. 192). Through an analysis of Trump rallies, one can discern the multifaceted nature of Trump's appeal, and the way that his narrative of American decline simultaneously resonated with his audiences' fears of economic stagnation and their various prejudices. At any given Trump rally, attendees witnessed Trump delivering jeremiads against entrenched corporate interests that would sound more at home in a Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren speech, and also encountered arguments consonant with the hateful bile of white supremacists such as David Duke and Richard Spencer. In addition, Trump rallies featured recurring rituals wherein participants reaffirmed their status as members of a victimized community, whose perceived marginalization is experienced in both economic and cultural terms. This study will demonstrate that the economic and racial/cultural dimensions of

Trump's appeal are more interconnected than many analyses would suggest. Reconciling the contradictory data that shows economic and racial/cultural factors to drive support for Trump is crucial: "correctly assessing the forces that led to Trump's victory is . . . central to figuring out what happens next" and determining what "counter-measures would be effective" (Casselman, 2017, para. 3). These findings, which are based on multiple first-hand accounts of Trump rallies, may therefore serve as a humanistic complement to the more scientific profiles of Trump supporters that have been produced by psychologists (Crowson & Brandes, 2017; Pettigrew, 2017).

Enhanced Understanding of How Trump Bonds with His Supporters

Third, this analysis provides a deeper account of the multidimensional bond between Trump and his supporters than has been provided to date. A significant amount of research has established that Trump appealed to his supporters by dividing, excluding, and demonizing. For example, Oliver and Rahn (2016) described how Trump's "construction of a 'we' [was] facilitated also by the invocation of the people's enemies, both internal and external—the 'people' often come to know who they are by who they are not" (p. 191). Although it is undeniable that Trump built identification with his supporters by defining their imagined community in opposition to external enemies, an important dynamic that many "Trump critics have missed so far" is that "Trumpism, like many forms of non-secular worship, makes its believers feel good" (Wagner, 2018, para. 20). Aspects of Trump rallies that build identification in positive terms remain poorly understood.

Trump rallies have often been framed by observers as frightening events full of vitriol and hatred. Complicating these negative accounts are descriptions of Trump rallies that describe a positive, affirming atmosphere. Molly Ball, a writer for *the Atlantic* who attended a Trump

rally in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina in 2015, remarked that the rally did "not feel dark and aggressive and threatening," or "like a powder keg about to blow, a lynch mob about to rampage. It [felt] *joyous*" (para. 31). Similarly, Ed Pilkington, a reporter for *the Guardian* who attended five rallies in the Fall of 2018, admitted to being "confronted by an uncomfortable truth . . . you have to acknowledge the love. It may not be pure and selfless. It may be narcissistic and at times even threatening. But love is very much in the air" (para. 7).

These accounts, and others like them, provide texture to our understanding of the Trump phenomenon by demonstrating that Trump rallies were not solely a site of negative "identification *against*" a vilified "other." Trump rallies were also a site of community-formation in positive terms, of "identification *with*," and therefore a site of hope. These events provided their attendees a sense of identity by supplying scapegoats such as immigrants and corrupt politicians; but they also fostered a sense of belonging during a time of cultural fragmentation through rituals that affirm the value of those participating in them. At Trump rallies, attendees had no shortage of foes to rail against; but they also learned "the strange joy inherent in the shouts of self-designated 'deplorable' status" (Wagner, 2018, para. 19).

This finding helps reconcile the tension between accounts that describe Trump rallies as events defined by toxic rage and other accounts detailing a hopeful atmosphere by reminding us that these rallies were simultaneously sites of both great love and great fear, anger, and hate. More broadly, the uneasy mix of emotions present at Trump rallies indicates that building political identification requires that members are provided a coherent worldview containing clear friends and clear enemies. An enemy is necessary to provide the community self-understanding, so that they can better comprehend themselves by reference to what they are not; but members must also find some tangible benefit to subscribing to this community, rooted in a "perceived

'sameness'" and "shared values, interests, and beliefs" (Vigil, 2015, p. 23). Certain political narratives, when reinforced by rituals, offer such a benefit by affirming the community's values and the self-worth of its members.

This in turn demonstrates the growing power of partisan political affiliation for creating community at a time when traditional religiosity is declining in the United States (Wagner, 2018). In the chapters that follow, I argue that the rise of Trumpism has been enabled in part by the breakdown of common frameworks that provided a modicum of stability to American life. Ideological enclaving and hyper-partisanship have exacerbated longstanding divisions along lines of religion, race/ethnicity, gender, and other axes of identity. Liberals and conservatives inhabit segregated information ecosystems, consuming news media that increasingly portrays the state of the nation in irreconcilable ways (Matsa, Mitchell, Gottfried, & Kiley, 2014; Justice & Bricker, 2019). Simultaneously, trust in institutions such as the media and Congress has markedly declined (Friedman 2017, 2018). Alongside these trends, national myths that once contributed to social cohesion have frayed. The civil religion of the American Dream, a narrative that holds that any person can succeed in America with work ethic and initiative, has been shaken by burgeoning inequalities (Gass, 2015; Graham, 2017). Rituals where Americans commemorate foundational stories or national heroes are now scarce. Cumulatively, widening societal divisions and the breakdown of mythic systems has produced a widespread feeling that Americans are strangers to each other: sharing a common physical location but lacking shared values. In such a "fragmented age," "fellowship is a valuable feeling" and a "lucrative commodity" (Serazio, 2019, p. 152). Protecting against future demagogues and healing the scars left by partisan battles will be made easier if these yawning divides are narrowed.

How this Analysis Proceeds

Theoretical Lens

This analysis utilizes several theoretical tools to explain the rhetorical potency of Trump rallies. First and foremost, the investigation into Trump rallies that follows is heavily informed by Kenneth Burke's concept of "identification." In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke (1969) argued that rhetoric's power comes not only from its ability to persuade, but from its ability to induce unlike individuals to perceive a likeness of interests. According to Burke, one of rhetoric's chief functions is to construct a unity of interests between a rhetor and audience that might otherwise be divided in some sense. Burke viewed division as an inevitable aspect of the human condition and isolated rhetoric as a means by which identification between disparate individuals can be built in the interest of advancing cooperation.

In the analysis that follows, I posit that identification, or the dissolution of divisions between a rhetor and audience, is the key concept needed to understand the relationship between Trump and his base. I explain how various aspects of Trump rallies facilitated creation of an identificatory bond between Trump and his supporters. In doing so, I extend previous scholarship that outlines the capacity of populist rhetoric, rituals, violence, and conspiracy theories to contribute to group-identity formation.

Selection of Texts

In the process of analyzing Trump rallies, I draw upon a wide variety of texts to gain broad perspective regarding the identification-building that occurs at these events. Pundits and commentators who have analyzed Trump from the outside-looking-in have characterized Trump and his arguments as incoherent, unintelligible, and nonsensical (Johnson, 2017, p. 231). This project helps makes Trump's appeal more intelligible by synthesizing the perspectives of

scholars, journalists, and citizens who have attended Trump rallies and created vivid accounts of their experiences (such as: Ball, 2015; Glasser, 2018; Guilford, 2016; Homans, 2018; Palmeri, 2018; Pilkington, 2018; Saunders, 2016; Schumacher, 2018; Stelter, 2018; Terrill, 2017; Tur, 2017). By drawing upon a broad range of accounts, as well as my own experience, the shortcomings, biases, and partialities of each individual recollection can be minimized. Analyzing multiple Trump rallies is necessary to explain these events as a genre of discourse defined by a "recurring occasion," perceived needs, limiting purposes, and societal limitations, in order to make generalizations about their characteristics, rituals, and functions (Rowland, 1991, p. 143). In conducting this analysis, I follow Burke's (1973) suggestion that rhetorical critics "use all that there is to use" (p. 23) by making use of a collection of accounts from a diverse group of witnesses, as well as my own experience, looking for recurring patterns in the rhetorical behaviors of Trump and his audiences.

Two accounts of Trump rallies stand out as particularly useful for this analysis and are referenced extensively. First, I utilize Katy Tur's (2017) book *Unbelievable*, which contains invaluable first-person descriptions of multiple Trump rallies, spanning from the earliest, most amateurish days of his campaign in the Summer of 2015 to election night of 2016. Tur was a fixture at Trump rallies throughout the campaign and earned a Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in part for providing "unique insight into Trump voters" while covering the campaign for more than five hundred days (Norman Lear Center, 2017, para. 8). Tur's (2017) recollections in *Unbelievable* are derived from "thousands of pages of reporting," cross-referenced against the experiences of "those who experienced the same moments alongside" her, in addition to her extensive field notes, all of which were examined by "a professional fact-checker" to ensure rigor (p. xi). Second, I also lean upon journalist Gwynn Guilford's (2016) ethnographic account

of three Trump rallies in Ohio during March of 2016. Guilford's account is notable for the great depth and detail of its observations and was also the basis for Reicher and Haslam's (2017a; 2017b) psychological research on Trump rallies. I also make extensive use of transcripts of Trump's remarks at rallies, video footage of these events, as well as my extensive field notes from attending multiple Trump rallies.

Methodology

To supplement and build upon previous accounts of Trump rallies, this project is additionally informed by my experiences as a "participant observer" of Trump rallies (Tracy, 2013). In the interest of encountering Trump supporters as living, breathing human agents rather than distant "others," I conducted "rhetorical fieldwork," hoping to gain insight into the affective bond between Trump and his followers (Endres, Hess, Senda-Cook, & Middleton, 2016). Given that the rhetorical power of Trump's rallies stems from their capacity to serve as a highly-emotional communal bonding experience, ethnographic methodologies are useful for gaining a greater understanding of what motivates support for Trump: "it is through actually engaging in the activities and environments we wish to learn about that we come to know them" (Pink, 2015, p. 105). Rhetorical fieldwork allowed me to witness and participate in the rites of passage that Trump rallies are organized around. I detail this methodology further in chapter II.

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Conclusion

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This analysis provides a window into Trumpism by highlighting not only Trump's campaign rhetoric, but the concrete activities that Trump supporters habitually engaged in at rallies to constitute a community. One might reasonably object that this argument misdiagnoses the causes of Trump's durable popularity with his core supporters, by overstating the importance of rallies and understating the importance of the nation's atmosphere of hyper-polarization and

"negative partisanship," which in turn fosters "stronger party loyalty," "straight-ticket voting,"

and "more nationalized voting" (McRainey, 2018, para. 13). There is merit to this point,

especially given the tendency of conservatives to consume partisan news media sources

(Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). The influence of extreme partisanship is so significant that it is

difficult to see how Trump could have emerged without the existence of *Fox News* and a

polarized electorate.

Nonetheless, to attribute the bond between Trump and his supporters to these dynamics

alone would be deterministic. This argument ignores that some conservative media opinion

leaders on *Fox News* initially opposed Trump's candidacy in favor of more traditional candidates

such as Jeb Bush or Marco Rubio (Matthews, 2016; Mayer, 2019; Sherman, 2016; Silver, 2015).

Trump's success in overcoming opposition to his campaign and then transforming the

Republican Party into the party of Trump is consistent with Baldassarri and Goldberg's (2014)

research, which argues that "beneath the ideologically dichotomized rhetoric promoted by

politicians and the media lies an ideationally heterogeneous public" that is receptive to rhetorical

appeals (p. 77). Political bonds between a candidate and his/her supporters are not an automatic

outcome of partisan affiliation or consumption of partisan media, but instead result from an

interplay of factors including political rhetoric, which "plays an important role" in activating

certain belief systems and "building the cognitive framework within which people operate" (p.

80). Since identification with a certain candidate is not preordained by partisanship, it makes

good sense to study how Trump cultivated such sturdy bonds with his supporters through

campaign rallies. My argument is not that Trump rallies entirely explain the durable bond

between Trump and his base, but rather to utilize rallies as "representative anecdotes" for

analyzing that relationship (Burke, 1945, p. 60).

There is clearly a need for rhetorical analysis of Trump's campaign rallies. Despite voluminous literature debating the sources of Trump's appeal, the seemingly unshakeable bond between Trump and his core supporters remains mysterious. Because rallies are one of the key mechanisms by which Trump's followers enact devotion to Trumpism, an analysis of Trump's campaign rallies is vital to improve our understanding of this phenomenon. Given that political identification is constructed through rhetoric, applying a rhetorical perspective to rallies is particularly important: "understanding [Trump's] appeal is the province of rhetoric and, thus, rhetorical scholars are uniquely well positioned and equipped to assess Trump's improbable political success" (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. 2). My rhetorical analysis of Trump rallies proceeds through six subsequent chapters. Chapter II explains the rhetorical fieldwork methodologies that inform this analysis. Chapter III argues that Trump, through his addresses at rallies, constructs a populist outsider persona that insulates him from critiques delivered by the media and elites. Chapter IV argues that Trump supporters use recurring rituals at Trump rallies to constitute a community. Chapter V argues that violence at Trump rallies contributes to the constitution of this community and activates the authoritarian personality of certain supporters. Chapter VI argues that conspiracy theory is another tool through which Trump supporters build community and make sense of politics. In chapter VII, I conclude by explaining the implications that this project has for the study of rhetoric, campaign communication, and American politics.

Chapter II

Rhetorical Fieldwork at Trump Rallies

In this analysis of Donald Trump's campaign rallies, I employ a methodological approach that applies elements of rhetorical criticism and fieldwork methods that have been developed in rhetorical studies of environmental communication (Pezzullo, 2007; Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018), space and place (Blair, 2001; Dickinson & Aiello, 2016), and activism (Middleton, 2014a, 2014b; Paliewicz, 2019). Fieldwork methodologies are designed to allow critics to discuss the experience of "being there" in the field where rhetoric is enacted. Since conducting a holistic analysis of Trump rallies and their attendees demanded that I observe such events from start to finish, as opposed to analyzing rallies from afar, this analysis is informed by my firsthand experiences conducting "rhetorical fieldwork" at Trump's rallies (Endres, Hess, Senda-Cook, & Middleton, 2016).

Communication and argumentation scholars have outlined the need for such an ethnographic approach to Trumpism. While delivering the keynote address at the National Communication Association's (NCA) 2019 Summer Conference on Argumentation, Ronald Greene noted that rhetorical fieldwork approaches have been frequently applied by communication scholars to study vulnerable populations and activist groups (see: Dunn, 2016; Endres, Sprain, & Peterson, 2008; Middleton, 2014a, 2014b; Na'puti, 2019; Paliewicz, 2019; Poirot & Watson, 2015). However, Greene noted the comparative dearth of similar research about conservative groups and argued that understanding Trump's affect may require physically attending his rallies.

In an essay published in the NCA's *Communication Currents* newsletter, Rick Cherwitz (2019) also called for scholars to study Trumpism up close and personally. Cherwitz argued in

favor of research that is "intimate, personal, and grounded in the lived experiences of his audience" rather than "analyzing Trump's discourse from a safe distance" (para. 3). Given that persuasion is a bidirectional process that involves a rhetor and an audience, Cherwitz called for scholars to spend "less time on analyzing and critiquing Trump's speeches and Tweets" and to instead spend "more time attending the president's rallies and recording what is happening from the perspective of audience members" (para. 11). According to Cherwitz, such an ethnographic approach may give the public "a sharper image of America's political culture" and "a more enriched understanding of the rhetorical significance of audiences in the current political environment" (paras. 11-12).

This project answers these calls for ethnographic research of the Trump phenomenon. Studying the relationship between Trump and his base while outlining the community-building function of Trump's campaign rallies required me to adopt a specific theoretical lens and methodological approach that I outline in this chapter. This chapter proceeds in two parts. First, I argue that a rhetorical fieldwork approach to the study of Trump rallies will improve understanding of Trumpism. Second, I explain how I conducted this fieldwork while reflexively accounting for my "goals, interests, proclivities, and biases" (Tracy, 2013, p. 25).

Benefits of a Rhetorical Fieldwork Approach

Research informed by rhetorical fieldwork can serve as a useful supplement to existing scholarship about the Trump phenomenon. As a methodological approach, fieldwork takes as axiomatic that "the study of rhetoric is both enriched and perplexed by being present, *being there*, in the places where rhetoric does its work" (Rai & Druschke, 2018, p. 1). Rhetorical fieldwork can be defined as "a set of approaches that integrates rhetorical and qualitative inquiry toward the examination of *in situ* practices and performances in a rhetorical field" (Endres et al.,

2016, p. 514). This methodology affords the critic "flexibility to respond to a diverse range of rhetorical experiences" through the "incorporation of useful elements of qualitative research into rhetorical studies" (Middleton, Senda-Cook, & Endres, 2011, p. 386). Field methods are particularly useful for analyzing "situations in which meanings depend on places, physical structures, spatial delineations, interactive bodies, and in-the-moment choices" (p. 388).

Trump rallies are one such rhetorical situation ripe for analysis using field methods, for three primary reasons. First, field methods allow for "thick description" of these events (Cherwitz, 2019; Geertz, 2000). Second, field methods enable dynamic analyses of rally attendees as rhetorical agents rather than passive listeners. Third, field methods allow for insights into the affective dimensions of the relationship between Trump and his supporters.

Thick Description

Field methods are a valuable tool for analyzing rallies because they enable granular insights into the inner workings of the Trump movement. Geertz (2000) described ethnography as an "intellectual effort" defined by "thick description" (p. 6). This approach can help "give rhetoricians an insider perspective on the lived advocacy of individuals and organizations" and offers "scholars firsthand knowledge and experience" of the communities they study (Hess, 2011, p. 128). In particular, such an approach is invaluable for documenting and analyzing "ephemeral rhetorics" (McHendry, 2016, p. 549) by shifting "the role of the critic" to that of an "archivist cataloging fleeting rhetorical practices that would otherwise fail to be preserved as sources of rhetorical insight, as well as the creator of rhetorical texts through field notes that will be the object of the rhetorician's critical focus" (Senda-Cook, Hess, Middleton, & Endres, 2019, p. 2). Accordingly, "being there" is "essential to one of the core practices of fieldwork: the production of thick descriptions that richly narrate the dynamics of everyday life within a field

site" (Rai & Druschke, 2018, p. 4). Insofar as "being there" requires a "physical journey" where the critic comes into direct contact with "the place" and is in "the presence of other" persons interacting with the rhetorical text being analyzed, fieldwork methods are more conducive to thick description than "the act of seeing reproductions" (Blair, 2001, p. 275). Watching a "televised reproduction" of a "presidential speech" has the effect of distancing critics "from the bodily experience of going through security checkpoints to be present" and "the reactions of other audience members" (p. 276).

A "thin description simply reports facts," whereas "thick description" provides context for an act, states the "meanings that organize the action" and "presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted" (Denzin, 1989, p. 33). Thick description is a powerful way to bring "lived experience before the reader" that "permits a willing reader to share vicariously in the experiences that have been captured" by presenting "detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another" (p. 83). Understanding of Trump rallies—which remain under-analyzed from a rhetorical perspective and are at times misrepresented by the media—will be enhanced by thick descriptions derived from rhetorical fieldwork. Creating thick descriptions of Trump rallies entails devoting attention to conversations, music, merchandise, early speakers, applause and other audience reactions, interactions with protestors, and other rhetorical incidents both mundane and peculiar. In creating such detailed, textured accounts of Trump rallies I answer questions such as: what is the "mood" of the rally? What sights, sounds, and feelings can be found at the rally? How do attendees make sense of Trump, fellow Trump supporters, protestors, and the nation? What is it about Trump's rhetoric and the rallies that creates a shared sense of community and motivates strong supporters?

Audience Agency

A rhetorical fieldwork approach is additionally beneficial in this context because it allows scholars to analyze Trump supporters as rhetorical agents. Trump supporters are frequently caricatured as "mindless mobs led by primitive urges and stirred up by a narcissistic demagogue" (Reicher & Haslam, 2017, p. 29), including by rhetorical scholars (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. ix). Current analyses of Trump perpetuate the tendency of rhetorical scholars to focus upon "historically significant moments of public oratory" (Endres et al., 2016, p. 513). Such scholarship is "predominantly focused on larger discourses, such as presidential rhetoric or massively disseminated messages, at the expense of the everyday discourses" (Hess, 2011, p. 128). This top-down approach, which treats Trump's supporters as inert spectators rather than rhetorical agents, may "obscure our ability to appreciate" how "those who are present [at Trump rallies] see the world" (Reicher & Haslam, 2017, p. 29).

Field methods can provide a more holistic account of Trumpism than critical analysis of speeches alone by accounting for the contributions of everyday persons to the process of rhetorical community-building and supplementing existing scholarship about Trump. A rhetorical fieldwork approach reminds scholars that even "everyday micro-practices" such as standing in a line may become symbolically charged activities that create "grand narratives" and "systems of stories" about a community (Tracy, 2013, p. 222, p. 23). Indeed, anthropologists have explained how "waiting has been, and is increasingly used as, an instrument to elicit particular forms of subjectivities" and have called for scholars to engage in "ethnographic waiting" to reveal how seemingly mundane behaviors may carry political significance (Bandak & Janeja, 2018, p. 3, p. 22). A fieldwork approach can help reconceptualize "what constitutes a rhetorical practice" and "account for the ways in which everyday, mundane rhetorical practices

are developed" in "the spaces of vernacular rhetorical performances" (Senda-Cook et al., 2019, p. 2). Field methods are a way to expand the textual material available to critics and ensure that the vernacular rhetoric of Trump supporters receives attention befitting their significant role in co-constructing consubstantiality. By explaining the multiple ways that Trump supporters actively participate in the rhetorical creation of the marginalized community described in Trump's rhetoric, this fieldwork-driven project challenges the notion that Trump supporters are mere listeners or a mindless mob.

Affective Insights

Rhetorical fieldwork also allows recognition and appreciation of the affective dimension of Trumpism. By affect I refer to "a visceral mode of experience, consisting of bodily energy and intensity" (Cisneros, 2015, p. 248). Affect is interrelated with emotion, which is "the 'capture' of affect in the process of cognition and signification" (Cisneros, 2015, p. 248) and is the consequence of affect being "actualized or concretized in the flow of living" (Gould, 2009, p. 20). Although distinguishing between affect and emotion can be difficult, Landau (2016) described affect as "a visceral bodily sensation" and emotion as "a symbolic attempt at capturing an intensity of affect" (Landau, 2016, p. 76). Importantly, it is through rhetoric that "certain things become invested with affective and emotional value," as affect "can be channeled, mobilized, or 'stuck' to particular objects through the circulation and sedimentation of public discourse and in the service of particular interests" (Cisneros, 2015, p. 250). Rhetoricians have for centuries recognized the centrality of emotional appeals to persuasion, as Aristotle defined emotions as "all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgements" (Aristotle, 2010, p. 60). Scholars from a variety of disciplines have corroborated Aristotle's arguments highlighting the importance of emotion for persuasion, demonstrating that humans "are not

purely rational, and instead rely on values and emotions" to guide decision-making (Justice, 2019, p. 4; Kahneman, 2011; Lobel & Loewenstein, 2005; Westen, 2008).

Affect and Trump. After conducting rhetorical fieldwork at Trump rallies, my post-rally reflection process included a review of media coverage of the events to compare and contrast my experiences to those of other observers. While reading media accounts of a Trump rally I attended in Green Bay, Wisconsin in April of 2019, I came across a puzzling anecdote. A *Los Angeles Times* article discussing the 2020 campaign quoted Tracy Steinhoff, "a 46-year-old nurse" who "traveled three hours" to attend Trump's rally in Wisconsin, but, mere days later, also attended one of former Vice President Joe Biden's campaign events in Iowa (Halper, 2019, para. 32). Steinhoff told the *Los Angeles Times* that Biden "would be the only Democrat I would vote for; no one else is even close" (para. 32). I found it confusing that one person would feel compelled to support both candidates. At the Wisconsin rally, Trump and other speakers engaged in extensive attacks on both Biden and the Obama administration; conversely, the core argument of Biden's campaign is that Trump's presidency represents an affront to American values and that a return to the values (and normalcy) of the Obama administration is needed. Some readers may be tempted to dismiss Steinhoff's comments as the product of ignorance or misinformation. However, her story points to a deeper conundrum in American politics. How could somebody find both Biden and Trump appealing, given their divergent political platforms and arguments? How do we make sense of individuals that voted for Obama in 2008 and 2012 but then cast their ballot for Trump in 2016, the candidate who campaigned on undoing the legacy of the nation's first African American president? How could voters be attracted to two candidates with starkly different visions for the nation?

The answer is that candidate selection is often driven by affect rather than a reasoned consideration of policy alone. Although in an ideally functioning democracy voters would select their preferred candidates by considering their qualifications, policy platforms, and temperament, psychologists have shown that voting is an area where emotions reign supreme (Fitzduff, 2017, p. 6). Indeed, "studies indicate that fact-based assessments or ideological stands apparently have a less decisive role in the preference for leaders" and that "electing leaders in political campaigns is not necessarily a result of a thorough analysis" for many voters (Popper, 2017, p. 65). Nowhere is this more evident than with regards to Donald Trump, who utilizes "an instinctual form of communication that outpaces evidence-based models" (Chaput, 2018, p. 206). Trump's resonance "lies not in well-reasoned arguments, as he is clearly neither articulate nor cogent" and neither can it be attributed to his "beliefs or policy positions, as he demonstrates no allegiance to either" (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. 2). Trump's appeal is "not based on the policies that he defended" but is instead "tied to the affective connection he created with his supporters" (Rowland, 2019, p. 350).

Given that Trump's durable relationship with his core supporters is grounded in affect, rhetorical field methods will prove particularly insightful. The body is "an important participant observation tool" that enables researchers to "engage the scene with their whole person, taking notes on the details of activities as well as on their own emotional insights and gut reactions" (Tracy, 2013, p. 76). Through "feeling rhetorical criticism" researchers may analyze "emotion words captured by rhetorical critics" via fieldnotes and "bodily sensations that are felt by rhetorical critics" in the field (Landau, 2016, pp. 77-78). A rhetorical fieldwork approach can help reveal how "certain behaviors, objects, symbols, or practices become routinized and sedimented with emotional meaning" (Cisneros, 2015, p. 250). Field methods provide "access to

and insight into a wider range of texts, perspectives, and experiences than we might otherwise discover," including "the extra-textual aspects of persuasion and rhetorical performance that require our sensory facilities to perceive" and "situated rhetorical forces that can only be observed through inhabitation" (Rai & Druschke, 2018, p. 3). To more fully comprehend the affective bond between Trump and his supporters, rhetoricians should consider the perspective and feelings of ordinary Trump voters.

Navigating the Field at Trump Rallies

This analysis is informed by my experiences at four Trump campaign rallies. In the spring of 2019, I attended two Trump rallies in states that were formerly considered part of the Democratic "blue wall" in the upper-Midwest: a rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan on March 28th and another rally in Green Bay, Wisconsin, on April 27th. These rallies are particularly appropriate events to study, given that Michigan and Wisconsin were instrumental to Trump's upset victory in 2016. Trump voters in the Midwest, and particularly Michigan, have remained an object of popular fascination, as Michigan is the home of the storied "Reagan Democrats" of the 1980s and now the fabled "Obama to Trump" voters that supported Obama in 2008 and 2012 but flipped to Trump in 2016, delivering him Michigan's crucial 16 electoral votes ("Long-time Democratic pollster," 2018). Attending these rallies offered a rare chance to observe a pivotal group of Trump supporters.

Each rally I attended was contextually unique. Grand Rapids, an upscale city in Western Michigan, is traditionally conservative but began to trend towards the Democrats during the Trump era, as college educated voters and the suburbs have drifted away from the Republicans. By contrast, Green Bay, a blue collar, industrial town in Northern Wisconsin, remained a pro-Trump stronghold at the time of my visit. Both rallies were dominated by discussion of Special

Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into links between Russia and the Trump campaign, which was concluded shortly before Trump's visit to Grand Rapids. Although the Grand Rapids rally was met with large organized protests by liberal and anti-Trump activists, I encountered no protestors at the Green Bay rally.

Several months and countless news cycles later, I attended two more rallies. On October 10th, Trump visited Minneapolis, Minnesota, a city geographically nearby Grand Rapids and Green Bay but vastly different. As an urban area containing a college campus and a diverse population, Minneapolis was far less welcoming to the Trump campaign than either Grand Rapids or Green Bay. The Minneapolis rally had by far the heaviest security presence of any rally I attended, owing to the thousands of protestors who demonstrated nearby the venue where Trump spoke. Trump's speech was repeatedly interrupted by protestors being ejected from the arena and riot police had to physically separate Trump supporters and protestors after the rally. The Minneapolis rally represented the Trump campaign on the offensive, entering a Democratic stronghold to make inroads into a state that Clinton had won by a surprisingly narrow margin.

Exactly a week after I attended Trump's rally in Minneapolis, I saw Trump on the defensive in Dallas, Texas, campaigning in a state that has traditionally been a conservative stronghold, but where the Democrats made gains in the 2018 midterm elections. The Dallas rally was by far the most diverse of any Trump rally I had attended to that point. Although the attendees were still overwhelming white and middle-aged, there was a visible contingent of "Latinos for Trump" in attendance. Both the Minneapolis and Dallas rallies were dominated by discussion of the House of Representatives' impeachment inquiry into whether Trump improperly pressured the Ukrainian government into investigating his rival Joe Biden, which was initiated only several weeks prior.

Studying Trump rallies from within required me to negotiate a basic tension between the

need for extensive, rigorous documentation of my experiences and the need to assimilate into the

crowd, so as to not attract attention to myself and alter the behavior of other attendees and thus

corrupt my observations. In his account of a Trump rally, Pilkington (2018) drew attention to this

fraught dynamic, justifying his choice to blend in with the crowd by stating:

> I chose not to go to the rally as a card-carrying member of the media, given at this point –
>
> and this truth was borne out repeatedly over the course of the day – Trump supporters,
>
> like Trump himself, are exceedingly distrustful of the media. If I had a notebook or
>
> microphone out, asking questions, the answers would be guarded or rehearsed, if anyone
>
> spoke to me at all. Instead, I decided I'd stand in line with everyone else, knowing that
>
> the six or seven people around me would be my window into at least a small portion of
>
> the Trump supporter's mentality. (para. 7)

Following the example of Pilkington and other observers of Trump rallies (Guilford, 2016), I

wore inauspicious clothing and did my best to present myself as just another face in the crowd

rather than an academic researcher. Attending the rallies was simple: I printed off a free ticket

from the Trump campaign's website, waited in line outside the venue for about 5-6 hours, went

through security checkpoints, waited inside the venue for Trump to appear for about 2 more

hours, then listened to Trump and the other featured speakers. Throughout each day, I had

several interactions with other rally attendees. I made note of these interactions, and other

"everyday rhetorical practices" that I witnessed by taking notes on my cellphone (Endres et al.,

2016, p. 515). I took photographs throughout the day and made video recordings of parts of the

speeches, chants, and other intriguing interactions that I witnessed, also on my cellphone.

Consistent with Tracy's (2013) metaphor that ethnographers should act "like quilters, borrowing

and interweaving viewpoints and multiple perspectives," my recollections are supplemented by other transcripts, videos, and accounts that I found available online afterwards (p. 26). In conducting rhetorical fieldwork, I first and foremost endeavored to listen to the speeches, conversations, chants, and other snippets of talk that "illuminate understandings" of the Trump phenomenon (Cramer, 2016, p. 35). Ultimately, "for the task of figuring out *why* people think what they do," there is "no better substitute than listening to them" (p. 20).

In documenting and interpreting my experiences in the field, I strived to achieve "reflexivity" (Endres et al., 2016, p. 518). This entailed acknowledging that my social position renders me less than a purely objective observer. My perspective is necessarily limited by my own perceptual constraints and prior attitudes, although I have done my best to account for this by supplementing my recollections with other accounts of the rallies I attended and other accounts of Trump rallies generally. My interpretations of the material I gathered are necessarily colored by the subjective nature of my recollections, which has led me to treat my experiences not as an authoritative history but rather as an incomplete, "emplaced," and embodied perspective that is only one piece of the puzzle in the effort to develop a fuller understanding of the Trump phenomenon (Endres et al., 2016, p. 514).

Reflexivity requires "accounting for the critic's political commitments" (Endres et al., 2016, p. 514) and awareness "of issues of their own embodiment and of ephemeral rhetorics during the act of criticism" (McHendry, 2016, p. 549). My prior political commitments and personal history both enabled and complicated my rhetorical fieldwork. At the Midwestern Trump rallies, I was able to assimilate into the crowd on the basis of my Michigan upbringing. I lived in Michigan for more than twenty years and am familiar with the state, its culture, customs, and people, including the immediate area where the Grand Rapids rally was hosted. This shared

background made it possible to engage with Trump supporters in both Michigan and neighboring Wisconsin—which sits on the opposite shore of Lake Michigan and is physically connected to Michigan's Upper Peninsula—without seeming out of place. My social position as a cisgendered, able-bodied, heterosexual, middle-class, white, male additionally helped in this regard. Since the crowd largely shared these characteristics, my presence was not seen as unnatural. Although in certain contexts involving vulnerable populations such a privileged subject position may be an impediment to field-based research, in this case it made my task easier.

On the other hand, my political beliefs are starkly different from most of those who attended this rally. Each rally was filled with about ten thousand passionate Trump supporters, which, suffice to say, I am not. This analysis reflects my best efforts to consider the rhetorical interactions I witnessed on their own terms, without imposing my own terministic screen, prejudging the Trump supporters, or otherwise allowing my political views to unduly influence my interpretations of the material I collected. I did not attend Trump rallies to judge, condemn, or celebrate other attendees. I attended to gain a modicum of understanding about the Trump phenomenon. In the process of conducting fieldwork, I witnessed exchanges that challenged my preconceived notions of Trump supporters and was often treated with familial kindness and warmth by strangers. Above all, I witnessed the complexity of the Trump phenomenon, and walked away from my fieldwork finding it more difficult to mentally shoehorn Trump voters into various rigid boxes and categories. At the ground level of rallies where quotidian interactions between ordinary Trump supporters occur, Trumpism is a messy, complicated phenomenon consisting of real, living, breathing people who contain contradictions and idiosyncrasies.

My age also influenced my fieldwork. Although I was 27 years old at the time of attending my first Trump rallies, at times I stood out among the crowd of predominantly older

attendees. Being a relatively young person at a Trump rally sets you apart; on multiple occasions I saw older Trump supporters fawn over younger members of the audience, favorably contrasting young Trump supporters with their allegedly "brainwashed" peers at universities. At the Minneapolis rally, a group of middle-aged Trump supporters nearby me in line praised nearly every young rally attendee who passed by, beaming: "way to go kids," "millennials, we love it," and "yay! Young people for Trump!" To older Trump supporters concerned about the leftward shift of younger generations, the presence of young Trump supporters at rallies served as a heartening sign that all may not be lost with regards to the future of conservatism in America. My experiences at Trump rallies would have undoubtedly been different were I older or younger.

My approach "acknowledges and reflects the interconnection between researchers, what/who we study, and the production of knowledge" and recognizes that "no study is exhaustive" (Pezzullo & de Onís, 2018, pp. 116-117). The test of quality rhetorical fieldwork is not whether such research achieves perfect objectivity, since the very act of engaging in participatory fieldwork to create a record of fleeting rhetorical performances entails a degree of subjectivity. Rather, rhetorical fieldwork should be measured by its ability to "generate understanding and knowledge" of rhetorical phenomena and communities through "watching, interacting, asking questions, collecting documents, making audio or video recordings, and reflecting after the fact" (Tracy, 2013, p. 65). By this metric, I believe my ventures into the field were enlightening and fruitful.

Integrating Fieldwork into Rhetorical Criticism

After venturing into the field to observe Trump rallies, I used the material I generated in the field to document my experiences —field notes, videos, and photographs—as the basis for a rhetorical analysis of these events and for drawing conclusions about the Trump phenomenon

and what it reveals about American politics. During the analysis stage, I first conducted an

inductive consideration of fieldwork material to "conceptualize general patterns from these

observations" and discover recurring themes and key terms that emerged from the data as well as

rhetorical strategies that were utilized by both Trump and his audience (Tracy, 2013, p. 22). This

reflective process allowed me to make "tentative claims" about the rhetorical functions of Trump

rallies that I could then subsequently re-examine and refine during subsequent trips into the field

(p. 22). While analyzing the rhetorical patterns I discerned in the fieldwork material, I searched

for overriding principles that explain the resonance of Trump rallies, incorporating existing

rhetorical scholarship to identify the proper theoretical framework. Three theoretical concepts

emerged that from the data that seemed particularly relevant for understanding the rhetorical

functions of Trump rallies: (1) identification, (2) terministic screens, and (3) narrative.

Identification

Identification is central to rhetoric that creates a sense of shared identity (and therefore

community) and was for Kenneth Burke (1951) the "key term for the 'new' rhetoric" (p. 203).

Burke (1969) described identification as the state of two or more persons perceiving an

alignment of interests, wherein people become "both joined and separate, at once a distinct

substance and consubstantial with another" (p. 21). Identification is the counterpart of division

and entails the transcendence of difference on the basis of "common sensations, concepts,

images, ideas, attitudes" held by persons in a consubstantial relationship (pp. 21-22). Through

identification, a person feels belonging in a "special body" such as a "family, race, profession,

church, social class, nation" or other collective (Burke, 1973, p. 268). Although "identification

always is provisional and incomplete because people can never completely share substance,"

appeals to a shared essence are an important means of influencing audiences and creating communities (Jasinski, 2001, p. 305).

Rhetorical scholars have outlined many ways of achieving identification. Burke (1973) recognized a distinction between building identification "by the stressing of sympathies held in common" and "identification by antithesis," which paradoxically entails "congregation by segregation" where identification is created through the creation of a common enemy (p. 268). Subsequent rhetorical scholars have further developed this distinction between positive and negative identification. Positive identification stresses unity and common ground, as in President's Kennedy famous phrase "Ich bin ein Berliner" (Fay & Kuypers, 2012, p. 199). Another example of positive identification can be found in Jones and Rowland's (2007) analysis of President Reagan's 1988 address at Moscow State University, where the authors argued that Reagan "created a strong sense of identification" between the citizens of America and the Soviet Union "by describing the values and goals they shared in common" and stressing their "essential similarity" (p. 79).

Scholars have also recognized the power of identification that is created in negative, divisive terms. Negative identification unites through division, by "keeping people and their interests separated or segregated" (Watts, 2007, p. 13). Division is a powerful method for constituting community, as individuals "who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all" (Burke, 1957, p. 165). While analyzing legal discourses that posit piracy as the antithesis of sovereignty, Mills (2014) argued that negative identification requires "the ongoing presence of an antagonist to maintain structural coherence" (p. 108). Similarly, Goehring and Dionisopoulos (2013) argued that the white supremacist novel *The Turner Diaries* fosters negative identification "by offering the target audience portrayals of the 'other' against which to

unite," including "generalized others like the government and the media, and specific others like blacks and Jews" (p. 374). These studies of positive and negative identification illustrate rhetoric's power to both unite and divide, and the complementary relationship between identification and division.

A related concept that extends Burke's theory of identification is "constitutive rhetoric." Constitutive rhetoric theory holds that no public exists a priori to discourse; any given group "becomes real only through rhetoric" (Charland, 1987, p. 137). Constitutive understandings of rhetoric emphasize the ability of rhetoric to "constitute identity," concurring with Burke that rhetoric serves not only persuasive functions but also identity-building functions (Stillion Southard, 2007, p. 413; Stein, 2002). By addressing an imagined audience, constitutive rhetoric can "call into being" a public by collectivizing otherwise isolated subjects (Charland, 1987, p. 134). Through narrative, "rhetors constitute audiences," linking the individual experiences of their audiences with the struggle of a broader community (Zagacki, 2007, p. 275). In doing so, the rhetor "constructs a persona" for herself or himself that audiences can refer to when fashioning their own self-identities, encouraging "fundamental changes in the way they conceive themselves and are conceived by others" (Leff & Utley, 2004, p. 49). As such, rhetoric plays a vital role in shaping community identity.

Identification-building is an especially significant component of presidential campaigning. In her analysis of national convention addresses, Vigil (2015) argued that the creation of identification is crucial to a presidential candidate's success, and "can mean the difference between winning an election and becoming a barely remembered 'also-ran' candidate" (p. 16). Vigil elaborated that:

any candidate hoping to win election to the presidency must work long and hard to

convince a sufficient number of members of the public that the candidate shares the

hopes, dreams, interests, concerns, and values of the electorate. Today's

communication media climate requires candidates to demonstrate a perspective . . .

that convinces those citizens to perceive a consubstantial bond with the candidate.

Not being able to do so makes winning, and holding, the presidency considerably

more challenging. (pp. 11-12)

According to Vigil, modern campaigns must simultaneously build "identification with the

preferred party and its candidate" while blocking "bond building with the opposition" (p. 9).

Vigil linked identification to President Obama's re-election in 2012, arguing that "a close

reading of the 2012 convention speeches shows that the Democrats . . . present a wealth of

attempts to highlight consubstantiality between the public and the nominee that the GOP

speakers lack" (p. 398).

Taylor's (2016) analysis of Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign also emphasized the role

of identification in the resonance of a candidate's message. Taylor stated that "constitutive

rhetoric must be both *polarizing* (critical of the way things were currently ordered) and

synthesizing (creating a new electoral coalition)," and further argued that Goldwater's

unsuccessful campaign "succeeded in the former" but "failed at the latter" (p. 243). Causality

between identification and a candidate's success or failure cannot be definitively established, but

clearly, it is incumbent upon office-seekers to convince voters that they share some common

"substance" (Burke, 1969, p. 21). Analyses such as Vigil and Taylor's are useful but neglect the

contribution of supporters to the building of identification. A fuller picture of how identification

is collaboratively constructed in modern campaigns demands consideration of actors besides the candidate.

The concept of identification is particularly relevant for understanding Trump rallies. To explain the "the high levels of tolerance many of his supporters exhibited to the arguably unprecedented levels of mendacity in [Trump's] campaign" (Fording & Schram, 2017, p. 674), it is crucial to consider how the rallies cement identification between Trump and his supporters. Scholars have acknowledged that Trump "cultivates very specific kinds of identification, both conscious and otherwise" (Rudden & Brandt, 2018, p. 44). For his supporters, this identification manifests itself in a feeling that Trump "understands their situation" and "uniquely tells their truth" (Rudden & Brandt, 2018, p. 45). This remarkable identificatory relationship has been acknowledged, but its roots deserve further investigation.

Presidential campaigning is, by necessity, an impersonal business (Simon 2011; Stromer-Galley, 2014), with voters only seeing their preferred candidate from a distance. Candidates are required to travel to important electoral battlegrounds, make media appearances, and address large crowds, with opportunities for direct engagement with millions of potential voters few and far between. Developing a sturdy bond with supporters in these circumstances is not easy, and many candidates struggle to do so. How then did Trump align "multiple constituencies" with "disparate interests" under his banner (Chaput, 2018, p. 204)? This is a key question explored by this project that I answer in subsequent chapters.

Terministic Screens

Trump rallies are a powerful force for building identification because they provide attendees a coherent worldview, although not a coherent ideology. Reicher and Haslam (2017) contended that "Trump succeeds by providing a categorical grid—a definition of groups and

intergroup relations—that allows many Americans to make sense of their lived experience" (p. 37). Another term for this phenomenon is "terministic screen" (Burke, 1966). Terministic screens are lenses or filters through which humans interpret and make sense of the symbolic world around them. According to Burke, "different screens" entail different "ways of directing the attention and shaping the range of observations implicit in the given terminology" (p. 50). A terministic screen is simultaneously "a *reflection* of reality," "a *selection* of reality," and "a *deflection* of reality" (p. 45). In communication as in photography, applying different filters to the same object will reveal vastly different qualities, textures, and details.

Trump rallies are rhetorically impactful because they provide attendees a shared terministic screen through which they can interpret the world, organized around mutual values, heroes, villains, and rituals. Because a terministic screen is the "perceptual filter through which an individual receives and interprets external events," a particularly ingrained screen can protect individuals from opposing viewpoints or alternative perspectives, as all screens "include some possibilities of meaning and action and exclude others" by "deflect[ing] attention from other possible selections of reality" (Simpson, 2007, pp. 147-148). I will explore how a shared worldview—that includes certain interpretations of reality while excluding others—is rhetorically constructed by Trump and his supporters at rallies.

Narratives

Walter Fisher (1985, 1987), rhetorical scholar and proponent of the "narrative paradigm," forwarded that humans are storytelling animals who communicate through narratives rather than rational argument alone. Subsequent scholars have extended Fisher's argument by demonstrating that narrative is a powerful mode of communication because of its "capacity to invite others to identify with characters in the story, despise villains, get caught up in the drama, and end up

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sharing the narrative's conclusions about shared values and knowledge" (Cloud, 2018, p. 43).

Political campaigns have been identified as an area of discourse where narrative is particularly crucial: "No presidential election has taken place since the early nineteenth century without an infusion of stories about the candidate's life and that individual's quest for the White House" (Gupta-Carlson, 2016, p. 71; Rowland & Jones, 2007). Throughout presidential campaigns, candidates "tell stories about themselves, members of their families, important moments in America's history, and average Americans," as "one of the most common means of identification construction is the use of narratives" (Vigil, 2015, p. 26). Indeed, "apart from other factors, the narrative presented throughout a political campaign is a decisive element for a successful run" (Hammer, 2010, p. 287). In the course of persuading voters to cast their ballot a certain way, candidates make an argument about the nation's past, it's present state, its future trajectory, and the role of both the candidate and ordinary Americans in the quest to fulfill the nation's destiny (Smith, 2015, p. 15). Narratives serve a valuable role for political campaigns by reminding "the electorate that it shares meaningful values with the potential new leader" and illustrating "in a personal fashion the candidate's understanding of the concerns and experiences of those he or she wishes to govern" (Vigil, 2015, p. 26).

To understand the Trump phenomenon, attention to narrative is critical: "Trump is one of the best storytellers in recent political memory" and (DeVega, 2019, para. 1) and "the Trump campaign was successful because its narrative practices motivated its target audience to participate" (Medvedev, 2017, p. 329). Trump rallies are meaningful to attendees because these events serve a narrative function, operating as a "dramatic enactment of a particular vision of America" that makes real the imagined community that "Trump and his followers would like America to be" (Reicher & Haslam, 2017, p. 29). During my ventures into the field, I witnessed

the centrality of narrative storytelling to the Trump phenomenon. Each Trump speech contains a recurring collection of protagonists, antagonists, and threatening "others" that each play a role in a narrative of national decline and utopian restoration. Trump supporters craft and circulate stories of their own at these rallies, building upon Trump's "Make America Great Again" narrative and making it their own through conservations, interactions, and rituals that they perform with fellow attendees. Trump rallies are rhetorically powerful because they construct a coherent narrative, containing clear friends and enemies, that explains the position of Trump supporters in the world and offers a "politics of hope" (p. 29).

Moving Forward

With this theoretical and methodological approach outlined, I next proceed to conduct a holistic rhetorical analysis of Trump rallies. Rather than focusing upon a single dimension of these events alone, such as Trump's address, I take care to devote attention to several important components of Trump rallies that are often overlooked by rhetoric critics. In the chapters that I follow, I analyze a specific aspect of rallies to explain its contribution to community-building, including Trump's populist rhetoric, communal rituals performed by supporters, violent confrontations with protestors, and the spread of conspiracy theories.

Chapter III

The Populist Outsider Persona

At a campaign stop in Sioux City, Iowa in January of 2016, Donald Trump made an off-the-cuff comment that would define his unusual relationship with his core supporters. Trump mused, "the polls, they say I have the most loyal people . . . I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters" (CNN, 2016). Trump is a known exaggerator, but so far this statement has been prescient. The list of scandals and offensive comments Trump has subsequently added to his resume is long, yet his base remains unmoved: "Politically speaking, the president is standing with his guns blazing in the middle of Fifth Avenue, and he's not losing anyone" (Wagner, 2018, para. 3). NBC's Katy Tur (2017a) observed that "the more Mr. Trump's candidacy was said to flatline, the more life I saw in his crowds" (para. 9). Ominously, a rally held three days after the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape, where Trump bragged about committing sexual assault, was described by Tur (2017b) as "just as big as ever and even rowdier" than those that came before (p. 243).

These stories underscore a deeper truth. In the Trump era, the "organising principle" of the Republican Party is loyalty, not to "an ideal, a vision or a legislative programme, but to just one man—Donald J. Trump" (The Economist, 2018, para. 2). Although the stubborn loyalty of Trump supporters has become a cliché in media coverage, credible evidence exists to support the notion. A series of interviews conducted by *The New York Times* involving dozens of "Republican voters at 11 rallies across eight states" revealed several recurring reasons for supporting Trump: that Trump feels their pain, fights on their behalf, and is trustworthy despite his flaws and penchant for spreading falsehoods (Shear, 2018, para. 5). Polls of Trump supporters continually attest to the "resilience" of this sense of loyalty (Peters, 2018, para. 5).

Trump's approval among his voters has been remarkably stable. A 2018 Pew Research Center report showed that "enthusiasts," who "gave Trump warm ratings . . . in both April 2016 and March 2018," continue to "make up the largest share of Trump voters" (p. 7). A 2017 Monmouth University poll similarly found that among those who approve of Trump's performance, 61% "cannot see Trump doing anything that would make them disapprove of him" (para. 9). Another poll conducted two years and many scandals later by Monmouth found that "62% of people who approve of the job Donald Trump is doing as president say they can't think of anything he could do that would cause him to lose their support" (Allassan, 2019, para. 1; Monmouth University, 2019; see also: Jones et al., 2019, p. 22). Election results further illustrate Trump's firm grip on his base: Republican primary voters have punished politicians who criticize Trump, such as former Representative Mark Sanford of South Carolina, and rewarded those who demonstrate allegiance (Alberta, 2019; Kamarck, Podkul, & Zeppos, 2018).

This phenomenon is both interrelated with and distinguishable from the general trend of hyper-partisanship in American politics. Americans have always mythologized their political heroes, but "Trump has taken it further. To his supporters, he can do no wrong, regardless of his willingness to mangle the truth, make racially charged statements, ignore diplomatic traditions and viciously attack his adversaries" (Shear, 2018, para. 19). This situation is nearly unprecedented in American history, as Trump has transformed the Republican Party into "a cult of personality exceeding anything the modern American system has ever produced" (Chait, 2018, para. 3). The fierce devotion of Trump supporters represents the realization of what presidential scholars have fearfully described as the "cult of the presidency," wherein citizens invest faith into their preferred presidential candidate as a messianic figure capable of

singlehandedly resolving the nation's crises (Burk, 1981; Healy, 2009; Koch, 2016; Nelson, 2008).

The cult of the presidency is corrosive on American democracy, mirroring the monarchism that the American Revolution overthrew, by aggrandizing the imagined powers of the president and miniaturizing the influence of citizens (Nelson, 2008, pp. 69-70). Within this framework, political disagreements become militarized. Political opponents "are not continuing interlocutors: they're enemies, to be exiled from the goods of the system" (p. 197). Trumpism may have emerged from this atmosphere of acute polarization, but it is not reducible to partisanship. Trumpism is more than a partisan identity; in many ways, it resembles a religious identity that provides its adherents a coherent set of "god" and "devil" terms to organize their existence around (Burke, 1970, p. 128; Weaver, 1970, p. 212).

Comprehending how Trump maintains the loyalty of his supporters requires attention to his rhetoric, as it is Trump's rhetoric that constructs and reinforces an "us versus them" narrative featuring recurring protagonists and antagonists. I argue that this narrative is encapsulated in the populist outsider persona, a rhetorical image-construction technique that synthesizes (1) fear appeals to a corrupt elite and threatening out-groups, (2) nostalgic appeals to a bygone golden age, and (3) appeals to the outsider as a decisive "man of action." Importantly, persona construction involves audience participation. Trump's populist outsider persona was crafted predominantly through the rhetoric of the candidate himself, but the collective ascription of this persona to Trump by his supporters and their subsequent re-circulation of this persona throughout other mediums was crucial to its persistence.

I develop this argument in three parts. First, I extend existing rhetorical theory on populism and persona-construction by outlining the three qualities of the populist outsider

persona. Second, I conduct a rhetorical analysis of Trump's rally rhetoric, arguing that Trump

enacts these elements of the populist outsider persona in his rally addresses. Third, I conclude by

explicating the implications derived from this analysis.

The Populist Outsider Persona

In American politics, few rhetorical moves are more powerful than pitting an authentic

"people" against a corrupt elite. Presidential candidates dating back to Andrew Jackson in 1824

and 1828 have recognized this and attempted to craft public images as crusaders against the

political establishment. By defining their candidacies as an outlet for populist sentiments,

presidential hopefuls can position themselves as leaders of a folk movement against technocratic

subjugation. I label this rhetorical technique the "populist outsider persona." Rhetorical scholars

have extensively analyzed populism and have also recognized that certain politicians present

themselves as "outsiders," but further investigation is needed to explain how such a persona is

constructed (Gibson & Heyse, 2010; Serazio, 2016).[1]

Rhetors, with the cooperation of their audiences, often construct public images to

enhance their *ethos*. In doing so, rhetors craft personas, which can be defined as "a role or roles

that a rhetor takes on for strategic purposes" (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997, p. 21; Ware &

Linkugel, 1982). Persona is not synonymous with "personality traits" but is better understood as

"a *textual* creation—a phenomenon manifested in *rhetorical* artifacts" (Hogan & Williams, 2000,

p. 2). Crafting a rhetorical persona is not exclusively the province of individuals, but instead

necessitates "active participation of particular authority figures and audience members in the

process" (Harrel, Ware, & Linkugel, 1975, p. 251). A persona is always built in relation to a

specific audience, and it is this audience that renders judgement on whether or not a candidate

can credibly masquerade as an outsider, insider, or other character. Moreover, a candidate's supporters are responsible for disseminating the persona throughout the broader public.

Persona-building has been an enduring phenomenon across American history, as "sizable publics can rarely get to know social leaders and have always relied on preferred constructions of a persona to make decisions about character in leadership" (Mahaffey, 2010, p. 501). When assessing a persona, it is crucial to recognize that "what is believed to be true" about a candidate "often displaces the truth itself," as Parsons (2009) observed about the image-centered (rather than issue-centered) contest between Jackson and John Quincy Adams in 1828 (p. 110). There is inevitably a gap between a candidate's preferred persona and the candidate themself. Critics of George W. Bush, for example, pointed out the contradiction between Bush's folksy, cowboy image and his Ivy League education. Well-constructed personas minimize this gap and favorably highlight a candidate's admirable qualities.

This analysis concerns the populist outsider persona. A multitude of significant figures such as Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and even Barack Obama have been described as outsiders because they campaigned against broken Washington D.C. politics (see: Donald, 1996; Foer, 2017; Ifill, 1992; Kamarck, 2016; Zelizer, 2016). "Populist" is a similarly flexible term that has been applied to a wide range of public figures that bear little in common, from democratic socialist Bernie Sanders to Trump. Lee (2006) noted that populist rhetoric has "chameleonic qualities" (p. 356). Consequently, designations such as "outsider" and "anti-establishment" are "both politically useful and empirically unverifiable" (Serazio, 2016, p. 191). The careless use of such labels points to the need to distinguish the populist outsider persona from other variations.

The populist outsider persona builds identification between the rhetor and audience by highlighting three interwoven qualities of the candidate. First, the populist outsider is framed as a corrective to deep-rooted political corruption. Second, the outsider serves as the symbolic embodiment of the nation's past virtues, building upon the rhetor and audience's shared nostalgic longing for a mythic past. Third, the outsider is understood as a metonymic stand-in for the "people," capable of acting decisively to single-handedly fix the nation's woes.

Purity

To don the guise of populist outsider, a candidate must first define themselves in opposition to an ineffectual political establishment. This involves crafting a stark Manichean binary between the "the pure people" whose interests are being trampled upon and "the corrupt elite" whose vices and intrigues are driving the nation toward ruin (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 43; Duffy, 2015; Maddux, 2013). Populist rhetoric has a long history in the United States. Kiewe (2019) argued that "the rhetoric of populism" helped "elect [Andrew] Jackson president" (p. 37). Jackson's populist rhetoric, developed in his campaigns and refined during his presidency, cast himself as "the people's president" by "pitting the few rich who abused public money against the majority of hardworking people who lacked such privileges and advantages" (Kiewe, 2019, p. 163). Agrarian populists of the late nineteenth century utilized a similar rhetorical style, envisioning themselves as a people's movement aligned against the forces of concentrated wealth and monopoly (Goodwyn, 1978).

Lee (2006) characterized populism as an empty "argumentative frame that awaits specific content" (p. 363), that nonetheless "has an enduring structure despite its elasticity and promiscuity" (p. 362). Lee identified four themes that compose this frame: (1) the celebration of ordinary citizens as the virtuous defenders of the nation's sacred values, (2) the naming of a foe

bent on destroying these values, (3) the portrayal of "the system" as perverted by elites against the will of "the people," and (4) a call for confrontation between pure citizens and corrupt elites. Although a "binary moral classification" that juxtaposes "a corrupt elite with a morally virtuous people" is endemic to populist rhetoric, "the identities of the vilified elites vary" considerably (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 10). Politicians and corporations are common villains in populist narratives, but also journalists, academics, and "outgroups, such as ethnic, racial, or religious minorities" that are accused of having "co-opted the elites for their own nefarious ends" (p. 10).

After it was first employed to great effect by Jackson, this iconic image of the "outsider, separated from the intrigues of Washington, became the model for many presidential campaigns well into the twenty-first century" (Parsons, 2009, p. 195). Because populism is an empty frame awaiting a rhetor to supply specific enemies and policy aims, it has been used and abused by figures across the political spectrum. Populism's malleability renders it dangerous at times, as Hofstadter (1955) linked populist agitation to provincialism, nativism, nationalism, conspiratorial thinking, and bigotry (p. 61; see also: Johnston, 2007). The reason for populism's ideological flexibility—and the reason that a rhetorical perspective is useful for understanding populism—is that populism is a "speech-level phenomenon rather than an actor-level one" (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 14). Populism is not "an essential attribute of certain political actors" or "an ideology" but is instead "a form of political speech" (Bonikowski, 2016, pp. 14-15) and "a style of rhetoric reflecting first-order principles about who should rule" that does not commit to "second-order principles" such as "what should be done, what policies should be followed, what decisions should be made" (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 4).

Nostalgia

Populist outsiders are also defined by a second quality: their symbolic linkage to a mythic past. The outsider is associated with nostalgic longing for a romanticized, bygone era, locating "political victory in the resurrection of a simpler idealized history" (Lee, 2006, p. 358). This aspect of the populist outsider persona takes the form of a "republican jeremiad" that blames present-day suffering on ignorance of "the virtues of the past" and identifies salvation in a return to the nation's "roots of egalitarian principle and the harmony of all social classes" (Kazin, 1995, p. 29). Appeals to a "golden age" when "beneficent nature provided abundantly for all" have been a mainstay in the rhetoric of populist outsiders across historical periods (Erlich, 1977, p. 143). Long before Trump promised to "drain the swamp" or to "Make America Great Again," Andrew Jackson pledged to "cleanse the Augean stable," alluding to a Greek myth where Hercules, through sheer strength, rerouted rivers to wash away filth created by thousands of cattle (Bromwich, 2017).

Nostalgic rhetoric serves an important function for citizens who perceive that a rapidly changing world is "undermining their settled notion of identity born in more stable, more settled times" (Cox, 2017, p. 14). This quality of the populist outsider persona is comforting to audiences frightened by the direction of the country and the accelerating pace of socioeconomic changes, reassuring citizens that the solution to present struggles is not an untested or radical departure from the current order. The public need only trust the outsider to act on the wisdom of the past and thus absolve the sins of the present. Nostalgic appeals can therefore "foster identification" with an audience through "emotion-filled renderings" of an idealized, collectively yearned-for, golden age (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2000, p. 428). This nostalgia is not

necessarily benign, as "a politics based on an idealized version of the nation's past relies on significant erasures" of historical injustices (Stuckey, 2017, p. 685).

Decisiveness

A third quality of the populist outsider is decisiveness. Capitalizing on popular demand for forthright, masculine leadership, outsiders draw "upon anti-intellectualism and a sense of urgency" to craft "an image of a man of action, rather than words, who is not afraid to take difficult and quick decisions, even against 'expert' advice" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 64). By emphasizing their quickness to action, the populist outsider persona combats the audience's feelings of despair and "powerlessness" by inviting followers to invest hope in the outsider as an instrument for redeeming the nation and confronting elites (Rohler, 1999, p. 320). Mudde (2004) has noted that supporters of populist parties and candidates "do not want to be ruled by 'the man in the street'" (p. 559). Instead, they desire representation by "a remarkable leader" who will act on their behalf and navigate the maze of intrigue and special interests currently contaminating the political system (p. 560). Because the populist outsider is viewed as an integral component of the "people" generally, the persona encourages identification through transcendence, wherein the audience mistakes the rhetor's "powers for [their] very own" (Burke, 1973, p. 269).

Cumulatively, these three qualities of the populist outsider persona – immunity to corruption, linkage to a nostalgic past, and decisive leadership – foster identification between the rhetor and audience. The populist outsider persona offers audiences a messianic figure capable of implementing simple solutions to the nation's complicated problems. Even though this outsider might not hail from the same social class as the audience, the outsider and audience are bound by a shared mission to rescue the nation from corruption. Mutual yearnings for a lost golden age in

turn reinforce the notion that the outsider and their followers are linked by common values and interests. By decisively acting on behalf of the interests of the "people" and not elites, the populist outsider additionally encourages audiences to view the candidate's political power as an extension of their own will. These three qualities of the populist outsider persona facilitate the transcendence of divisions between rhetor and audience.

Populist Persona-Building at Trump Rallies

Trump unifies his audience through their shared revilement of political elites. To exploit the growing disenchantment with both major political parties, Trump used his rally speeches to enact the three previously described themes of the populist outsider persona, thereby inviting collective investment of faith in him as a savior and representative of ordinary Americans against a corrupt and indifferent elite. Because Trump's appeal is inseparable from his reputation as a real-life enactment of the "American dream," persona is one of the key concepts necessary for understanding Trumpism. Years before Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower to announce his candidacy, communication scholar Daniel Lair (2011) recognized that Trump's celebrity owed more to persona-building than business acumen, arguing that "Trump's fame lies in his embrace of the excess of image" and "mastery of personal branding" (p. 84).

Research shows that "large swaths of the public," including both Democrats and Republicans alike, "believe the Trump myth" constructed by *The Apprentice*, which presents Trump as a self-made billionaire and minimizes the role of his family's inherited wealth (McDonald, Karol, & Mason, 2019, para. 3). The myth of Trump as a self-made success is contradicted by his actual financial track record; the *New York Times* reported that Trump incurred "$1.17 billion in losses from his core businesses from 1985 through 1994," a feat that gives Trump the ignominious distinction of having "lost more money than nearly any other

individual American taxpayer" (Paybarah, 2019, para. 4). Nonetheless, "Trump was propelled to the presidency, in part, by a self-spun narrative of business success and of setbacks triumphantly overcome" (Buettner & Craig, 2019, para. 2). Trump's glamorous celebrity image—crafted through years of media attention, branding, and reality TV stardom—distinguished him from his opponents in the Republican primaries and general election. Counterintuitively, Trump was able to build upon his pre-existing image as a real estate mogul to define himself as the presidential candidate best-positioned to confront the nation's elites, through several rhetorical moves that he performed repeatedly at his rallies. Through appeals to his immunity to corruption, nostalgic invocations of a lost golden age, and insistence on the need for decisive, masculine leadership, Trump cultivated for his supporters an image of a "man of action" who could both revitalize the nation and punish enemies.

Purity

Rhetors who hope to make a persuasive claim to being "anti-establishment" must clearly position themselves in opposition to the nation's political and economic elites. Before they can accomplish this, however, outsiders must rhetorically craft an exigence justifying a break from establishment rule. Trump accomplished this by cultivating a sense of threat and anxiety among the attendees of his campaign rallies. At rallies, Trump articulated a vision of "American carnage," wherein the promise of upward mobility at the heart of the American dream is dead and the nation finds itself terminally declining on multiple fronts (Justice, 2018, p. 30).

Domestically, Trump described a nation in turmoil. At a 2016 rally in Des Moines, Trump declared inner city violence as "a national crisis," and decried "high crime and crushing poverty," "bad schools, no jobs . . . and no hope" thanks to "failed Democratic policies – the policies of Hillary Clinton" (Trump, 2016b, paras. 52-54). Cities were not the only places

suffering from misfortune, according to Trump. He criticized the nation's "rigged economy," which leaves veterans "to die waiting for the care they need" and suffocates the prosperity of small farmers through over-regulation (paras. 27-32). This narrative of decline was bolstered by repeated use of unscientific yet powerful anecdotes. During his 2016 address at the Republican National Convention (RNC), Trump used the story of a young women killed in a drunk driving incident involving an undocumented immigrant to accuse the Obama administration of being callously indifferent to the safety of citizens: "to this Administration, their amazing daughter was just one more American life that wasn't worth protecting. One more child to sacrifice on the altar of open borders" (Trump, 2016a, para. 18). Although statistical analyses demonstrate that the supposed link between immigration and crime is a myth (Flagg, 2018), "vivid" anecdotal horror stories of criminal immigrants have "staying power" in the minds of many Americans, especially when amplified by conservative media, and contribute to the misperception that crime levels are increasing (Myers, 2019, p. 85).

In Trump's view, the nation was faring no better internationally. Trump's foreign policy rhetoric consistently described a nation humiliated and emasculated abroad thanks to Obama's supposed weakness and Hillary Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State. Trump rallies were rife with descriptions of international embarrassments due to the incompetent deal-making of the nation's leaders. At a 2015 rally in Hilton Head, South Carolina, for example, Trump remarked that China and Mexico's "leaders are too smart for us" (Federal News Service, 2016, para. 166). Trump frequently depicted an international scene characterized by a rising threat of terrorism, and pinned instability in key regions on a bipartisan preference for military intervention abroad, calling for a new foreign policy focused on defeating "Islamic terrorism, not nation-building" (Trump, 2016c, para. 118).

After painting this grim picture of terminal decline, Trump would next stake out a vision for how he would address these crises, albeit in impressionistic rather than concrete terms. In doing so, Trump enacted the first characteristic of the populist outsider persona by emphasizing his own purity and adopting the populist argumentative frame. While competing against candidates with stronger financial support during the Republican primaries, Trump repeatedly emphasized that "I'm the only one self-funding my campaign," contrasting himself from other politicians who can allegedly be "bought" by corporate donors (Federal News Service, 2016, para. 64). By this logic, Trump's elite status, rather than making him beholden to the political establishment, gave him the independence necessary to defy elites. During his 2016 RNC address, Trump further distinguished himself from an ineffectual political establishment by asserting that "the problems we face now – poverty and violence at home, war and destruction abroad – will last only as long as we continue relying on the same politicians who created them" (Trump, 2016a, para. 30).

At rallies, Trump portrayed himself as a symbolic stand-in for "the people" who would represent their interests while waging war against "the swamp." These populist themes manifested themselves in Trump's repeated assertions that he was "the voice of the people." In his RNC address, appealing to Americans who felt abandoned by the political establishment, Trump declared "I AM YOUR VOICE" (Trump, 2016a, para. 37). In Des Moines, Trump echoed President Richard Nixon's "silent majority" motif by aligning himself with "everyday people," who "work hard but who don't have a voice" (Trump, 2016b, para. 9). By contrast, Clinton was "all about protecting the powerful" and no more than a puppet for "Big Banks and Wall Street donors" (paras. 21-22). To support his claim to immunity from special-interest influence, Trump recounted his experiences consoling "crying mothers who have lost their

children because our politicians put their personal agendas before the national good," stating plainly that "I have no patience for injustice, no tolerance for government incompetence, no sympathy for leaders who fail their citizens" (Trump, 2016a, para. 38). Trump built identification through these statements, by portraying "himself as a clean actor, who is able to be the voice of the 'man in the street' since there are no intermediaries between him and 'the people'" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 44). In addition, the direct, immediate nature of rallies further broke down barriers between Trump and his audience.

In their examination of presidential campaign discourse from 1952 to 1996, Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) found that "representatives of an incumbent party are far less likely to rely on populist claims than those belonging to a challenger party" (p. 1608). At all four of the rallies I attended in 2019, Trump defied this expectation by reprising the populist rhetoric of his campaign as an incumbent president, railing against government corruption despite wielding the levers of government power. Although Trump's party controlled the presidency, the Senate, and had recently solidified a conservative Supreme Court majority, Trump portrayed himself and his followers as victimized and besieged by a ruthless elite-led conspiracy to overturn the public will.

Each rally was preoccupied with the political drama of the moment: in Grand Rapids and Green Bay, Trump excoriated Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation, and later that year in Minneapolis and Dallas, Trump inveighed against the impeachment inquiry launched by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives. In Grand Rapids, Trump denounced the Mueller investigation as "nothing more than a sinister effort to undermine our historic election victory and to sabotage the will of the American people" ("Rally in Grand Rapids," 2019). Extending this theme while speaking in Green Bay, Trump asserted that "this witch hunt was

never really just about me. It was always about stopping you, the millions and millions of freedom loving citizens who rose up on that incredible November day . . . and demanded a government that puts American first" ("Live in Green Bay," 2019). In Minneapolis, this dichotomy between the virtuous people and anti-democratic elites was encapsulated by Trump's salvo against the growing push to impeach him:

> Our bold pursuit of this pro-American agenda has enraged . . . the failed ruling class in Washington . . . these corrupt politicians and the radical leftists got rich bleeding America dry, and they knew that my election would finally end their pillaging and looting of our country . . . that is why from day one, the wretched Washington swamp has been trying to nullify the results of a truly great and democratic election . . . they want to erase your vote like it never existed, they want to erase your voice, and they want to erase your future. But they will fail because in America, the people rule again. ("Rally in Minneapolis," 2019)

Trump's rhetoric recognizes no distinction between his own interests and those of the nation's. According to this logic, which amounts to "a quasi-religious doctrine of infallibility," no institution, be it "Congress, the courts, or the press," can "be considered legitimate if they defy Trump, the only legitimate vessel of popular will" (Serwer, 2019, para. 14). Through this rhetorical move, Trump cast the various investigations into his conduct as a threat not only to his administration, but to the agency of "the people." In this narrative, Trump is the sole bulwark protecting the rights of ordinary Americans from an anti-democratic, elite conspiracy to strip their power. This narrative built identification by portraying a fundamental convergence of interests between Trump and his audience, a convergence so tightly interlocked that Trump

constitutes nothing less than the public's will incarnate and a champion for the people in the battle against corruption.

Nostalgia

One of the key rhetorical developments of the Reagan era was the transformation of conservatism, a political philosophy ostensibly dedicated to defending the status quo, into a forward-looking and optimistic posture that co-opted progressive values (Jones & Rowland, 2015). By contrast, the Trump campaign was perpetually backwards-looking, as emblemized by its core mantra "Make America Great Again," which ironically was used previously by Reagan during the 1980 presidential campaign. Accordingly, Trump rallies were sites for nostalgic mourning of the nation's lost glory, enacting the second characteristic of the populist outsider persona. Trump's narratives of decline were accompanied by promises to restore the golden age that came before. On the economic front, Trump promised to "make our country rich again" and "bring our jobs back to Ohio and to America" by undoing allegedly misguided trade deals. (Trump, 2016a, paras. 72-75). He also pledged to "repeal and replace disastrous Obamacare" so that Americans "will be able to choose your own doctor again" and assured that his administration would "completely rebuild our depleted military" (para. 83). For each, often imaginary, problem bedeviling Americans in the present, Trump identified a solution rooted in the past.

Trump's restoration narratives centered on icons such as "the great miners and steel workers of our country," who symbolize a bygone era of widespread blue-collar manufacturing jobs (Trump, 2016a, para. 81). The repeated invocations of coal miners, steel workers, automobile manufacturers, and similar professions served as wistful reminders of America's halcyon days as a producer, rather than consumer, economy. Trump's rhetoric honored the

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American tradition of producerism, an economic ideology that stretches back to Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson's celebration of the modest yeoman farmer (Hofstadter, 1955, pp. 24-25). Producerism lionizes citizens who tangibly produce material goods with their labor, in contrast to the idle, speculative classes, whose labors do not result in the "making of something concrete" (Farber, 1994, p. 305). Trump's rhetoric linked to this focus on production through constant reminders of his real-estate prowess, references to his personal experience "as a builder" of great skyscrapers (Trump, 2016b, para. 45), and frequent promises to build walls and restore America's tradition of producing its own cars, steel, and energy. Even before seeking the presidency, Trump publicly lamented that America doesn't "build things anymore" (Farley, 2011). In doing so, Trump symbolically linked himself to the nation's producer heritage for citizens traumatized by the fast economic and cultural changes brought on by globalization in the second half of the twentieth century.

Trump's rallies further solidified the nostalgic connection between Trump and the producerist economy of the twentieth century through video messages played for audiences by the campaign. At the rallies I attended in Green Bay and Dallas, these brief videos were shown repeatedly throughout the day on a large screen located in front of where the Trump supporters and I waited in line to enter the venue. The videos, which portray Trump as a champion of blue-collar workers and small business owners, feature Lara Trump (daughter in law of Donald Trump Sr. and wife of his son Eric Trump) touring the production facilities of a brewery and a coin manufacturer, discussing how the Trump administration created economic opportunity with the owners and employees (Trump, 2017, 2018). Both videos are teaming with industrial imagery: images of employees plying their trades and working with heavy machinery and raw materials, and then admiring the finished products of their labor.

One video features an entrepreneurial husband and wife who co-founded Shortway Brewing in North Carolina. Matt Shortway credits Trump's policies for creating business confidence and describes his brewery as "the embodiment of the American dream" (Trump, 2018). Later in the video, Shortway thanks Trump for "fighting for us, on our side, so that we can make things here in America again, with jobs, with things that are grown in America, whether it be the grains that we use, the hops, or now the American steel that is going into our production facility, and the equipment that we make." Another video touts an executive order signed by Trump to expand apprenticeships and vocational training by highlighting the successes of Medalcraft Mint, a coin and commemorative item manufacturer. An apprentice at the company is shown praising the Trump administration's focus on apprenticeships, stating "not everyone sits at a desk, we need trades. That's what makes this country great . . . it's people being plumbers, people being pressmen" (Trump, 2017). Later in the video, an engraver beams that his job "gives me a sense of pride every day."

These video messages dovetailed with a core theme of Trump's rhetoric that was reinforced later in the rally when Trump spoke. At campaign rallies, Trump and his supporters co-constructed Trump as a tireless advocate for the virtuous "real" Americans whose labor creates tangible things that other citizens can use and enjoy, as opposed to immaterial laborers who spend their time at a desk or on a computer. This theme resonates with Trump supporters— like the plumbers and steelworkers I stood in line with at a rally in Minneapolis—who remember an economy of yesteryear where employment in such fields was plentiful, rewarding, and capable of sustaining a comfortable standard of living, without requiring a college degree.

To keep this desire for national renewal front and center, Trump's rally speeches concluded by reinforcing these nostalgic themes through parallel structure and repetition. Trump's RNC address, for example, ended with his signature slogans:

To all Americans tonight, in all our cities and towns, I make this promise: We Will Make America Strong Again.

We Will Make America Proud Again.

We Will Make America Safe Again.

And We Will Make America Great Again. (Trump, 2016a, paras. 101-104; Trump, 2016b).

At every rally I attended, Trump's address ended with a variation of this repetitive nostalgic coda, followed by Trump's departure to the tune of "You Can't Always Get What You Want" by the Rolling Stones. Trump rallies provide an opportunity for supporters to reminisce upon more economically stable times, but also offer supporters a chance to denounce political correctness and commemorate a mythic past before the nation became consumed with cultural battles related to race, gender/sexual equality and immigration. Trump's nostalgic appeals were laced with both racism and sexism, "mobilizing supporters to be outraged . . . in defense of white cultural worlds that, in this formulation, are perceived to be under constant attack" and in the process defining "white male workers as the virtuous majority whom Trump claims to represent" (Maskovsky, 2017, p. 435). Despite the drastically different social stations of Trump and his supporters, identification was built by their shared investment in a lost golden age of producerism and white male dominance.

Decisiveness

Importantly, Trump presented himself as the only individual capable of delivering a national restoration through decisive action, enacting the third characteristic of the populist outsider persona. At rallies throughout the campaign cycle, Trump excoriated a lethargic political establishment that had grown unresponsive to the people's needs and incapable of addressing the crises facing the nation in a timely manner, ridiculing Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton as "low energy" (Federal News Service, 2016, paras. 67-68). Trump's insults were applause lines but also drew a contrast between himself, unshackled by norms of political correctness, and calculating, dithering politicians. The visual dynamics of Trump's campaign rallies further reinforced claims about his unique leadership capacities by centering him among the masses:

> Trump stands alone on a long platform, surrounded by a rapturous throng. Below and behind him—sitting on bleachers and standing on the floor—they fill this city's cavernous, yellow-beige convention center by the thousands. (Ball, 2015, para. 3)

Similarly, Trump's tendency of theatrically traveling to rallies aboard his private Boeing 757 jet (branded with his name in block letters) in 2016 or Air Force One during his presidency both flaunted his wealth and made plausible his claims to exceptional leadership skills (Guilford, 2016). Through careful staging and rhetoric that encouraged populist agitation against sluggish elites and their self-inflicted crises, Trump rallies illustrated the need for a decisive style of leadership that only outsiders possess.

Trump defined his decisive leadership in sexist and anti-intellectual terms, distinguishing himself from his opponents by performing aggressive masculinity and advocating blunt solutions such as a border wall and "bombing the shit out of ISIS." Instead of repeating rehearsed talking points, Trump made it clear he would "go with his gut," rather than listen to experts, signaling an

"utter lack of self-restraint" as "a refreshing antidote to the rote, superficial remarks" of conventional candidates (Todd, 2016, para. 10). This strategy initially allowed Trump to separate himself from his opponents in the Republican primaries but was even more pronounced during the general election where his opponent was a woman. Trump's appeals to his own stamina capitalized on the tendency of Americans to think of "political — especially presidential — leadership" as "male, and especially masculine" (Conroy, 2018, p. 120). This strategy is encapsulated by a moment at a campaign event in Cleveland on Labor Day of 2016, where Trump remarked: "Does she look presidential, fellas? . . . Give me a break" (qtd. in Benen, 2016, para. 1). Tur (2017b) also noted how Trump lionized masculinity while associating Clinton's leadership style with weakness and femininity, a move that was not lost on supporters who sold and wore T-shirts bearing phrases like "TRUMP THAT BITCH" and "HILLARY SUCKS BUT NOT LIKE MONICA" at campaign rallies (p. 239). Trump's claims to decisive leadership were therefore facilitated by the widespread misogynist conception of the presidency as a fundamentally masculine, paternal office (Nelson, 2008, p. 44).

Trump's construction of himself as a singularly effective dealmaker both divided and united. In perhaps the most infamous line of his RNC address, Trump proclaimed that "nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it. I have seen firsthand how the system is rigged against our citizens" (Trump, 2016a, para. 43). This statement is crucial to the speech's persona-building functions, as Trump appealed to his "business acumen to construct [his] status as a *political* outsider" (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 71). In this passage, Trump "defined himself as a bedrock figure in American culture: the figure who faces danger alone, who follows his own code of conduct . . . he is the man who uses his great wealth to protect the powerless from evil" (Greenfield, 2016, para. 6). Through Trump's assertion that "I

alone can fix it" he presented himself as a messianic figure who could deliver the nation from ruin. Yet, this statement also provided ground for identification, by allowing supporters to imagine Trump's leadership as an extension of their own, combatting feelings of marginalization and despair. By investing faith in Trump as a savior, supporters were afforded an opportunity to "strike back symbolically at their enemies," fostering a sense of collective identity (Rohler, 1999, p. 321).

Collaborative Persona Construction at Trump Rallies

The populist outsider persona fostered identification between Trump and his supporters through three interrelated means. Trump's adoption of the populist argumentative frame, pitting him and his supporters against a corrupt elite, constituted a community defined by shared economic interests and enemies, even if they occupied disparate socioeconomic stations. Trump's claims to be a mouthpiece for populist discontent were particularly compelling to his supporters because he could plausibly claim that his opponent, Hillary Clinton, was compromised by her longstanding membership in the nation's political establishment. The nostalgic themes of Trump's campaign additionally created consubstantiality, as Trump assumed an outsized symbolic significance for his supporters by embodying their desire for a return to the nation's mythic past as a homogenous, producer society. Finally, Trump's pledge to exercise decisive leadership on behalf of his supporters created a perceived alignment of interests, wherein empowering Trump would empower ordinary Americans as well.

Rhetorical fieldwork afforded me an opportunity to verify the claims made in this essay regarding Trump's persona. During my fieldwork at Trump rallies, I heard and interacted with Trump supporters who echoed and reinforced the populist outsider persona constructed in Trump's rhetoric. Many supporters viewed Trump's unconventional resume as an unqualified

good, believing that his business experience made him more effective than allegedly out-of-touch politicians. Others viewed Trump's wealth, and gestures such as the choice to donate his salary as president, as evidence that he was not prone to corruption or manipulation like typical politicians. Supporters frequently contrasted Trump with conventional politicians, describing Trump as less susceptible to the influence of big money and possessing a more straightforward leadership style. Variations on the phrase "Trump says what he means and means what he says" were among the favorite adages of the Trump supporters I encountered across the country.

At the Green Bay rally, several men sitting near me in the arena as we waited for Trump's arrival dismissed Obama as an "empty suit" with a "silver tongue," and derided Scott Walker, the former two-term Republican Governor of Wisconsin, as too much of a "boy scout." These supporters, and others I encountered at the rallies, appreciated that Trump's speaking style was blunt and unpretentious, as, in their view, this very crassness signified authenticity, sincerity, and proximity to ordinary Americans. In Minneapolis, a supporter described Trump as an equal opportunity offender who "doesn't care who he angers," unlike many politicians. Another supporter in Green Bay more bluntly asserted that "sometimes you need an asshole" to get results, describing Trump's style as superior to Obama's "lead from behind" method. Although Trump's economic station is drastically different from the average Trump rally attendee, his coarse speaking style intimated to these supporters that he was one of them.

At the Minneapolis rally, several supporters expressed similar sentiments. Two men standing next to me in the line to enter the arena commiserated about their loathing of conventional Republican figures such as Mitt Romney and the late John McCain. One supporter wished that he could "take back" his votes for Romney and McCain, expressing a feeling of betrayal that the former Republican nominees would criticize Trump. These Trump supporters

didn't associate Trump with the establishment Republican party, but rather viewed Trump as an outsider "fighting both sides" of the political aisle, locked in a struggle with the political establishment and "deep state" rather than a particular political party. While accepting the Republican nomination for Vice President in 2016, Mike Pence stated: "I'm a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order" (qtd. in Garcia, 2016, para. 2). Based on my fieldwork, I believe many Trump supporters would hierarchize their allegiances very differently. One supporter in Minneapolis described himself as politically inactive until Trump's emergence, while another woman I talked to described herself as a lifelong Democrat. Many Trump voters seemed loyal first and foremost to Trump rather than conservatism or the Republican Party.

Furthermore, these encounters illustrate the collaborative nature of persona-construction. Charismatic leadership is not "exclusively a top-down process" but instead emerges "out of a symbiotic relationship between leaders and followers" (Reicher, Haslam, & Platow, 2007, pp. 24-25; Parry, Cohen, Bhattacharya, North-Samardzic, Edwards, 2019). That is to say, persona-construction is not "an *I* thing," but "is actually a *we* thing" (Haslam & Reicher, 2016, p. 22). Trump's populist outsider persona is credible for his audience because he integrates "the group's history, hopes and values into a coherent story" about the nation, the community, and their shared foes (Haslam & Reicher, 2012, p. 44). This persona does more than describe Trump's qualities; the persona's populist themes explain the role of ordinary Americans in the nation's historical narrative and provide a terministic screen for understanding political conflicts, exploiting widespread disillusionment from both political parties and governing institutions generally. Importantly, this persona has proven durable in the imaginations of Trump supporters because it is consonant with their values and because they re-appropriate and re-circulate this understanding of Trump in their own interpersonal interactions.

Implications and Conclusion

Enhanced Understanding of the Trump-Base Relationship

Several implications from the analysis of Trump's rallies that I have conducted here should be apparent. First, the analysis makes clear how rallies facilitate creation of a shared worldview, in turn creating a durable relationship between Trump and his core supporters. The populist outsider persona provides audiences a clear set of friends and enemies, locates the sources of suffering in deviation from the lessons of the nation's glorious past, and suggests means of recovering this past through the outsider's decisive leadership. The cumulative effect is to create thick rhetorical insulation, as audiences become trained to scrutinize and disregard "insider" knowledge. The outsider is shielded from criticism by establishment figures, through "the rhetorical production of skepticism toward concentrated power and institutional structures of governance" (Lee, 2006, p. 362). This explains why "attacks by heavyweights of the Republican establishment—Mitt Romney, George Bush—only served to increase [Trump's] poll ratings," because "to be rejected by the political class only serves to consolidate a candidate's in-group status" (Reicher & Haslam, 2017, p. 36). Focus group research and polls have confirmed this, showing that Trump's status as "the anti-elite candidate . . . made him more or less immune to criticism from the mainstream parties or the mainstream media" (Guo, 2015, para. 18; Newport & Saad, 2016).

By framing society's conflicts through the prism of a populist, "us versus them" mentality, Trump and his supporters co-constructed a "device that unifies all those who share the same enemy" (Burke, 1966, p. 51). When the outsider/insider dualism is established as the interpretative lens or terministic screen through which candidates are evaluated, the chief advantages of insider candidates – experience, temperament, and attention to policy detail –

become serious liabilities in the eyes of those frustrated with the status quo. Efforts at constructing a shared identity were no doubt assisted by the country's hyper-polarization and the tendency of conservatives to consume partisan news media sources (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008).

Reconciliation of the Intractable "Economics vs. Racism" Dispute

The explanation for Trump's appeal that I have forwarded here is particularly important because it accounts for alternative interpretations. After Trump's victory, "commentators have devoted dozens of essays and think pieces to the question of whether Trump's rise is primarily a function of economic insecurity or racial anxiety" (Vance, 2016, para. 25). The argument developed here can be used to incorporate both perspectives. The first aspect of the populist outsider persona responded to widespread frustration with the political establishment and a feeling that elites had forgotten the economic plight of ordinary people, recurring themes of anti-establishment discourse. The second aspect of the persona, the rhetorical longing for an idealized past, drew on cultural fears about loss of white dominance and simple racism. Trump's call to return the country to a mythic past had great resonance, "especially for older white men" who fondly remembered an era when "American society was less diverse" (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 16). The persona also took advantage of widespread sexist attitudes that equate old-school masculinity with decisive leadership, casting Trump's opponents as too feminine to create lasting change. In the populist outsider rhetoric of Trump, one can discern "the equation of toughness, maleness, and whiteness" (Kazin, 1995, p. 21). This analysis therefore accounts for both of the seemingly contradictory economic and cultural explanations of Trump's appeal.

Implications for Rhetorical Analyses of Populism

The analysis of Trump's persona also clarifies the meaning of terms such as "populist" and "outsider," which are uncritically lobbed in political debates to describe a vast range of figures. Oliver and Rahn (2016) pointed out that the populist label has recently been applied to both "a Jewish, Democratic socialist senator from Vermont whose central concern is the billionaire class and a billionaire New York real estate developer whose central concern is illegal immigration" (p. 190). For these terms to have any meaning, the anti-establishment rhetoric of Trump must be distinguished from the likes of Sanders, Obama, Reagan, and others who utilized somewhat similar themes. Conceptual confusion regarding populism, which is often conflated with "nationalism, social and economic conservatism, and anti-immigrant discourse," has a real "analytical cost" by making it more difficult to comprehend populism's "implications for political change" (Bonikowski, 2016, pp. 9-10). This is an important task as populist factions gain influence in both the Democratic and Republican party, expressing "competing versions of populism" that could become a major dividing line in American politics (Burns, 2019, para. 5).

The populist outsider persona that I have theorized here contributes to this goal by distinguishing between various brands of populism. The populist outsider persona requires adoption of the populist argumentative frame by presenting a narrative featuring ordinary Americans pitted against an unaccountable class of elites. However, the populist rhetoric of Andrew Jackson and Donald Trump can be distinguished from other variants of populism on several grounds. All populist rhetoric positions virtuous ordinary citizens as the nation's true heroes; Trump's populist narrative, however, contains explicitly racialized antagonists, "combining the longstanding grievances of the white working class with a newer, darker angst about immigration and cultural change" (Burns, 2019, para. 5). In addition, the role of nostalgia

is important for distinguishing Trump's populist rhetoric from that of Senators Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren. Future rhetorical research should focus on other manifestations of the outsider persona, such as the progressive populist persona (adopted by Sanders and Warren) which expresses enmity towards elites (defined in economic and not purely cultural terms) but is future-oriented (as opposed to predominantly nostalgic) and advocates for grassroots mobilization against the political establishment and community-based solutions rather than presenting the outsider as a messianic figure capable of single-handedly fixing the nation's problems.

In addition, although "populism" has been reduced to "the go-to term for scholars and journalists alike to describe the emergent authoritarianisms of our time," populist politics can be inclusive or exclusionary to varying degrees (Frank, 2018, para. 3). Reagan and Obama advanced populist-style critiques of broken Washington D.C. politics, but presented a fundamentally inclusive worldview, maintaining faith that the American Dream can be made available to all. Both Reagan and Obama shared the goal of "growing the pie" and expanding opportunity while disagreeing about the proper role of government in accomplishing this (Jones & Rowland, 2015; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Rowland, 2019). In Reagan and Obama's narrative, American identity is "uniquely permeable" and defined by shared values rather than blood or soil (Chait, 2017, para. 40). By contrast, Trump's "hoard-the-pie, pull-up-the-drawbridge" populism reduces to politics a zero-sum game where a host of frightening Others threaten to take away the American Dream from "real" Americans (Friedman, 2019, para. 14). Sanders and Warren offer a worldview that is distinct altogether from that of Reagan, Obama, and Trump, advocating "redivide-the-pie," redistributionist populism as a solution to stagnating wages and growing inequality while rejecting Trump's xenophobic appeals and divisive rhetoric towards minorities (para. 11). Trump, on the other hand, offers a vision of energetic government used in service of a

circumscribed American public, promising to build walls, expel foreigners, and bring back outsourced jobs in the name of restoring a lost American community. Greater scholarly attention to the specific characteristics of these competing strands of populism will be necessary now more than ever as non-traditional political candidates and populist movements emerge all around the world.

Notes

1. It is important to note that Rowland (2019) also focuses on how Trump assumes an outsider persona. This analysis of how Trump constructs a populist outsider persona through rallies moves beyond the analysis in Rowland's essay. In this essay I employ a similar theoretical/methodological approach to Rowland, but incorporate insights derived from my rhetorical fieldwork at Trump rallies.

Chapter IV

Congregating at the Church of Trump: How Community is Constituted at Rallies

Donald Trump's campaign rallies are among the most high-profile and publicized political events in contemporary politics, unique in their ability to spark discussion and attract media attention. Yet, as widely debated as these events are, Trump's rallies also remain poorly understood and are frequently caricatured as circuses (Continetti, 2019), "mere spectacle[s]" (Glasser, 2018, para. 5), or as full of "mindless zombies" (Flood, 2016). Perhaps no text better encapsulates popular understandings—and misunderstandings—of Trump's campaign rallies than a 2019 comedy sketch from the popular television program *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*). The sketch accurately recreates the visual dynamics of a Trump rally: Trump, portrayed uncannily by Alec Baldwin, is shown looming over a podium surrounded by adoring fans—all of them white—wearing red hats, Trump gear, and holding "Women for Trump" signs. Trump is front and center in the sketch, with his supporters relegated to the background, bearing pleasant yet vacant facial expressions as Baldwin's Trump rattles off various falsehoods and malapropisms for comedic effect. The crowd is portrayed as purely reactive: either nodding in agreement, or chanting "witch hunt," "no collusion" and "no quid pro quo" in unison upon Trump's command (Saturday Night Live, 2019).

When given an opportunity to speak, Trump's fans are portrayed as backwards dunces. A woman named Christine is shown wearing a shirt bearing the caption "KEEM AMARICA GREAB AGRAIN" (Saturday Night Live, 2019). When Trump mentions the obvious spelling errors, Christine, with a look of perplexed frustration, bellows oafishly that the words cannot possibly be misspelled because they are copied verbatim from one of Trump's tweets, and therefore must be correct. Christine then performs a military salute and exits the stage. Later in

the sketch, another woman wearing a denim jacket and a "Women for Trump" shirt approaches Trump at the podium and says: "I love you and I worship you as the one true white lord." After pulling out a handgun and giving Trump permission to use it, she exits the stage by saying "the Earth is flat and Beyonce is white." In this sketch, several popular perceptions about Trump rallies are assembled in one place. Trump rallies are portrayed as empty spectacles, as devoid of meaningful political content, and attended only by bigots and unthinking drones.

I contend that this popular perception sells short the political significance of Trump rallies by dismissing them as a playground for the brainwashed and simple-minded. To be clear, my aim is not to defend Trump rallies as venues for sophisticated intellectual exchanges. These rallies are indeed full of falsehoods. Nor do I aim to defend the racist and sexist behavior of Trump and his supporters at these rallies, which is very real and not merely a liberal stereotype. Rather, in this essay, I take Trump rallies seriously as sites for identity formation. Bean's (2014) ethnographic study of evangelical Christian communities highlights the risks of describing certain voters as brainwashed, "hijacked," or "co-opted" by "top-down" forces (pp. 1-2). Analyses that attribute outsized influence to movement leaders may obscure more than they reveal by failing to capture how "rank-and-file" members "experience the political climate" (p. 2). Bean argues that "the coalition between evangelicals and the Republican Party is not just constructed from the top-down, by political elites who frame conservative issues in religious language" (p. 2). Rather, Bean's study demonstrates that the Christian Right has become a politically homogenous voting bloc because a politicized "evangelical identity" has become entangled with "partisanship at the level of religious practice" and in "the lived religion of rank-and-file evangelicals" (p. 226).

A similar dynamic is apparent with Trump supporters, a group that closely overlaps with religious conservatives but is distinct. Support for Trump does not stem solely from top-down forces such as Trump's rhetoric or *Fox News*. Contrary to popular understandings, a fieldwork-based rhetorical analysis of Trump rallies reveals that these events are communal undertakings where ordinary attendees emerge as impactful political agents rather than the two-dimensional bystanders depicted in the *SNL* sketch, nodding and smiling in the background. To comprehend the worldview of Trump supporters, rhetorical critics must delve into the tangible ways that Trump supporters enact their membership in a collective identity. In this essay, I demonstrate that rallies are crucial to forging the "deep, personal connection" between Trump and his supporters through a rhetorical process of community-building (Haberman, 2018, para. 8). This analysis of Trump's campaign rallies illustrates the collaborative process between the candidate and supporters that underlies any effort to co-construct identificatory bonds. Trump rallies are rich textual artifacts because identification was fostered through multiple rhetorical processes, all of which required varying levels of active participation from Trump and his supporters.

I develop this argument in three parts. First, I theorize rhetorical activities that when enacted by a collective, enhance group identity. Second, I draw upon rhetorical fieldwork to argue that Trump rallies are a powerful means of forging identification among Trump supporters because these three activities—political rituals, scapegoating, and fandom—are tangibly performed by attendees. Third, I conclude by outlining the implications derived from this analysis.

Constructing Community through Campaigns

In recent years, communication scholars have extensively analyzed the changing ways that political campaigns make use of the Internet and social media (Abroms & Lefebvre, 2009;

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Ott, 2017; Ott & Dickinson, 2019; Smith, 2015; Stromer-Galley, 2014). Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 campaigns, which utilized digital communication technologies in novel ways to mobilize supporters, "created a wave of interest in how communications technologies were reshaping elections" (Karpf, 2017, p. 198). Scholarly interest in the intersection between social media and presidential campaigns has continued into the Trump era. Ott (2017), analyzing Trump's twitter usage during the 2016 campaign, declared that "Trump's election marks the beginning . . . of the Age of Twitter," or "the Age of Social Media," a period that can be defined in contrast to "Age of Typography and the Age of Television" (p. 66). Similarly, Woods and Hahner (2019) investigated "the influence of memes as they appeared on President Trump's Twitter feed" and the "correspondence between memes and the publicity of the Alt-right" (p. 17).

This analysis supplements accounts of how digital communication technologies have altered political campaigning by emphasizing the continuing importance of non-digital mobilization methods, such as rallies, for building identification. Analyses of how emerging technologies are influencing political campaigns are invaluable, but digital mediums are ultimately only one of several ways that voters interact with campaigns. An important way that "Trump supporters experienced the [2016] campaign" was "rally attendance," harkening back to "the in-person communities of fate that provided the bedrock for previous eras of collective action" (Karpf, 2017, p. 205, 202). For over a century, rallies—large, in-person gatherings of politically like-minded persons featuring speeches, entertainment, and strategizing—have been a vital component of political campaigns. Cheathem (2018) noted that "one of the most striking characteristics of the 1840 campaign was the spectacle of public events" and "large enthusiastic rallies," that were inspired by "the religious fervor" of the "Protestant revivals that swept the

nation during the early 1800s" (p. 141). These rallies, which were lengthy and well-attended, "helped to build the crowd's emotional investment in the message, binding them to the . . . candidate and to the party" (p. 143). Trump's campaign rallies, continuing this tradition, have similarly fostered identification between Trump and his supporters by blending politics, partisanship, religion, entertainment, and fandom.

Importantly, rallies are crucial sites for identification-building because they are where membership in a community is tangibly "enacted." Enactment has been recognized as "a rhetorical strategy which . . . can have rhetorical force" (Campbell, 1988, p. 259) and "the process whereby a rhetor illustrates by embodying the point she or he is making" (Daughton, 1995, p. 22). The paradigmatic example of enactment as a rhetorical strategy is Barbara Jordan's 1976 keynote address to the Democratic National Convention, whose very presence at the podium as a woman of color provided concrete proof for her argument that anyone "can rise to power within the democratic system" and achieve the American Dream (Daughton, 1995, p. 23). Enactment is "a unique rhetorical form because it rests on performative features that can be . . . literally embodied physically" (p. 23). This analysis demonstrates that enactment may be employed by not only individual rhetors, but collectives. Trump rallies, through several rituals that involve the physical presence of thousands of persons, take the silent majority of downtrodden patriots alluded to in Trump's rhetoric out of the realm of abstraction and into the real world through the material enactment of community. I argue that rallies contribute to community-building through three interrelated means. Campaign rallies are vital means for constructing identification because they (1) are a key site where political rituals may be performed, (2) offer an opportunity to concretely confront and scapegoat outgroups, and (3) serve as a venue where supporters can celebrate the candidate as part of a larger "fandom."

Political Rituals

Scholars from a variety of fields have noted the constitutive functions of ritual, and its capacity to affirm group identity. Lukes (1975) defined ritual as "rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance" (p. 291), and noted that "ritual need not be inherently religious" (p. 290). Although the purpose and form of rituals varies greatly depending on historical and cultural context, they are still prevalent in modern societies and "continue to fulfill physical, psychological, mental, social, and spiritual needs of the society in which they are performed" (Heinze, 2000, p. 3).

Ritual has been described as transformative and perspective altering (Grimes, 2000, p. 7). For example, Burke (1959) noted that rituals can be symbolically charged and effectuate a "change in identity" (p. 211). A ritual, if effective, "energizes the participants and attaches them to each other" (Alexander, 2004, p. 527). Ritual allows reenactment of a group's foundational stories in a participatory fashion, by taking people out of the "here-and-now" and transporting them into "the land of myth," which in turn reinforces the group's "mythic system" (Rowland & Frank, 2002, pp. 304-305). Because of this, rituals promote "social cohesion," as "humans perform rituals not only to celebrate an already present or guaranteed unity, but also—or perhaps primarily—to regain such unity when it is lost or threatened" (Doty, 2000, p. 357). Rituals are sites of both identification and division: "communities' comparisons of themselves with others and their efforts to communicate among themselves contribute to the efficacy of rituals," rendering them a "privileged social arena in which the outlines of countless social relations are shaped" (de Coppet, 1992, p. 8). Moreover, because rituals are "designed in order to be repeated," they have "a special capacity to affect our memory" (Bergmann, 2012, p. 85).

"Political rituals" are especially important for the creation of publics. Political ritual can be defined as "repeated and culturally standardized activity related to a political sphere or (and) performed by political actors" that "expresses and communicates feelings, concerns, and ideas central for and shared by the community" (Stępińska, & Kołodziejczak, 2016, p. 1). What distinguishes political ritual from mere repetitive activity is that political rituals are tied to a community's most cherished values and the stories that enact those values; they give participants a sense of collective identity, helping them to make sense of the world around them. Political rituals have both "internal" and "external" functions, as these activities contribute to the coherence of a political group while also expressing the group's beliefs to outside audiences (Peterson & Reiter, 2016, p. 2). Most relevant for this analysis are the internal functions of political rituals, and the "social or communicative psychological effects" they have on participants and members of the in-group (Moore & Myerhoff, 1977, p. 15).

Political rituals are particularly powerful means of constituting community in a time defined by hyper-partisanship and cultural fragmentation. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed rapid changes in American life. In his landmark book, *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2001) persuasively documented the startling decline of "tens of thousands" of community groups "across America," which contributed to a growing sense of isolation and alienation (p. 16). According to Putnam, "social capital" of all kinds has plummeted since the 1950s, manifesting in reduced rates of participation in religious organizations, labor unions, parent-teacher associations, civic and fraternal organizations, and even bowling leagues (Putnam, 1995). Without these social networks, community norms, and a sense of trust, society becomes dysfunctional and unable to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1996). The result has been a

withdrawn and politically disengaged citizenry, with deleterious consequences for the health of democracy.

It is within this bleak context that the community-building capacities of political ritual should be understood. Contemporary American society has "shed old rituals without coming up with new ones," weakening the "social architecture" and contributing to alienation (Brooks, 2019, para. 17). As participation in religious and civic rituals declines, explicitly partisan political rituals are an alternative means for citizens to enact membership in a community. Political rituals, which bring otherwise disparate individuals into communion, are a form of constitutive rhetoric that asserts "the existence of an ideological subject" and combats alienation (Charland, 1987, p. 137).

Rituals are rhetorically powerful because affect is a social phenomenon rather than the sole province of individuals (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. 30). Rituals provide participants an affectively charged experience, as "emotion is the pivot upon which political ritual turns" (Berezin, 2002, p. 43). Political rituals, by virtue of their public and performative nature, "are *communities of feeling* that serve as arenas of emotion . . . where citizens enact and vicariously experience collective national selfhood" (p. 44). Through rituals, participants produce "a feeling of solidarity," as they appreciate that: "we are all here together, we must share something" (p. 45). Political rituals can therefore create a sense of community at a time when civic bonds are fraying: "feeling political together creates a bond, a union that feels good; that good feeling feeds the desire to be political together; that desire binds those who feel it to the collective and its vision" (Blackett, 2017, p. 23). These fleeting moments of identification are no small matter in an era of declining social capital and increasingly privatized citizenship (Somers, 2008).

Scapegoating

Engels (2009) noted that "it is sometimes difficult to see where identification ends and division begins" (p. 38), precisely because scapegoating an Other can produce both division and identification within a community. In Burke's dramatistic theories, division is closely linked to guilt and victimage. According to Burke, the very structure of linguistics combined with the impossibility of adhering to all a society's commandments makes guilt an inevitable feature of the human condition (Burke, 1970; Mackey-Kallis & Hahn, 1994). With this guilt comes an impetus towards purification. One of the chief means by which societies purge guilt is "scapegoating," wherein problem-ridden communities absolve themselves by externalizing blame onto an outside enemy. Scapegoating involves "a campaign of vilification" where "the scapegoat victim is purged from society and the fragmented social order (which yesterday seemed unable to unite for anything positive) is healed" (Braden, 2000, p. 5).

Scapegoating is a powerful means of binding individuals into a community through rhetoric by allowing for "common participation in victimage" (Mackey-Kallis & Hahn, 1994, p. 4). This cathartic process can displace blame/guilt on an Other, thereby cleansing the community and creating a strong sense of identification, as "society is united through the act of casting from their midst a common enemy" (Braden, 2000, p. 5). One particularly cogent analysis of scapegoating was conducted by Engels (2010), who applied Burke's guilt/victimage framework to President Nixon's rhetorical construction of a "silent majority" defined in opposition to anti-war activists, student protestors, and other progressive groups that were allegedly destabilizing the country. According to Engels, Nixon's presidential campaigns illustrate that resentment is a "potent rhetorical force for winning elections" (p. 306), because "naming an enemy who is framed as aggressor and victimizer" makes it possible "to transform" a group of otherwise

privileged individuals "into the victim" (p. 304). Scapegoating can have perverse effects: if blame for society's ills is misidentified for the sake of convenience, the underlying causes of guilt will go unaddressed, creating a need for ever more scapegoats. These divisive tactics are particularly dangerous when utilized in an atmosphere of racial, ethnic, or religious tension.

Fandom

Campaign rallies can serve as sites for community-building through the celebration of political figures as objects of fandom. The term "fan," which inevitably evokes the closely related and more derogatory term "fanatic," "came into widespread use in the early twentieth century, when mass consumerism, based on new systems of marketing and communications, was transforming the industrial West" (Cavicchi, 2007, p. 247). Fans are defined by their "emotional/affective tie to their object of fandom," their "specialization of knowledge regarding their object of fandom," their participation "in a community of fans," and their production of materials such as "literature, crafts, clothes, and music about their object of fandom" (Hinck, 2019, pp. 9-10). DeLuca (2018) defined "fandoms" as "passionate publics" or "subcultures, groups, and/or communities of fans, revolving around a particular and unifying interest, whether a sports team, television show, book series, or film" (p. 77). Fandoms commonly center around sports or popular culture texts but can also develop around politicians, as "the texts, artifacts, and media that make up the center of public culture and discourses of citizenship are increasingly blurring the boundary between entertainment and politics" (Hinck, 2019, p. 8).

Through political fandom, candidates are transformed into objects of passionate adoration and representatives of a political movement. Campaign rallies can therefore serve both as sites for identifying villainous scapegoats and as sites for hero worship. This is not an entirely new development. Cheathem's (2018) study of presidential campaigning in the nineteenth century

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showed that "what sounded and looked like entertainment, things such as music, public events, and cartoons, held important political meaning in the first few decades of the United States' existence" (pp. 2-3). Through "material culture," or "objects invested with political meaning," nineteenth century Americans were able to "tangibly touch and own pieces of the political process" (p. 12). These "material culture objects," such as buttons, ribbons, or other items symbolically linked to a candidate such as the hickory sprigs worn by supporters of Andrew Jackson, were used to "identify political loyalty" and "deliver intentional partisan campaign messages" (pp. 57-58). Jamieson (1996) noted that the 1840 presidential campaign "functioned as a form of national jamboree replete with orchestrated parades, banners, torches, transparencies, and flags," and that supporters of William Henry Harrison expressed their admiration through "omnipresent log cabins and hard cider" and by wearing "coonskin caps" (p. 9). The rise of social media has further facilitated the emergence of political fandoms by allowing supporters to interact and communicate with both fellow partisans and candidates themselves in innovative ways (Erikson, 2008).

Since campaign rallies can sometimes function as the political equivalent of comic book/science fiction conventions that fans attend to flaunt their memorabilia and commune with the likeminded, they can be powerful tools for fostering identification: "identification, both with the object of fandom (e.g., a celebrity) and the community of fans, is central to the experience of fandom" (Soukup, 2006, p. 322). In his analysis of Star Trek fans, Jindra (1994) argued that fan communities "are often a response to the breakdown of traditional structural communities" (p. 38). Fandom can "provide safe spaces for shared identification" organized around "shared rituals" and "a sense of belonging and an affinity for a group and subject matter" (DeLuca, 2018, p. 78). In this way, fandoms serve as "a communal glue" that links otherwise disparate

individuals together (Proctor, 2013, p. 199). Large gatherings of fans at conventions or rallies can therefore operate as a secular version of religious revivals (Anijar, 2000, p. 9).

Importantly, "fandom is not simply an intense adoration for the candidate or a passive form of spectatorship" (Erikson, 2008, p. 14). Fandom is a "participatory experience" that enables fans to "actively create publicly mediated texts" and "construct meanings associated with the celebrity" or other fan-object (Soukup, 2006, p. 323). Given the participatory nature of fandom, "fan studies researchers have long used fieldwork and autoethnography to investigate fandom" and learn about a "fan community's history, practices, and values" (Hinck, 2019, p. 42).

In the remainder of the essay, I argue that one key to understanding the Trump phenomenon is to explain how rallies co-constructed a sense of strong identity as a "Trumper," an identity and relationship that made Trump immune from criticism for core supporters. Three interrelated techniques for identification-building – political ritual, scapegoating, and fandom – were present at Donald Trump's campaign rallies. In the analysis I follows, I pay careful attention for moments where Trump and his followers allude to a sense of shared identity or define themselves in opposition to various scapegoats. In doing so, I apply Burkean principles to the rhetorical performances of Trump and his supporters, reading the proceedings of the rallies through the lens of theoretical concepts such as identification and division. The approach developed here extends rhetorical theories related to identification, while outlining the novel ways that Trump rallies foster community.

Trump Rallies as Sites for the Enactment of Community

Donald Trump's rallies are best understood as the material enactment of Trumpism as a quasi-religious community, defined by a stable set of heroes and villains and organized around recurring rituals. In what follows, I draw upon my rhetorical fieldwork at multiple Trump

campaign rallies to outline how political rituals, scapegoating, and fandom activities contributed to community-building between Trump supporters. My rhetorical fieldwork entailed attending four Trump rallies—in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Green Bay, Wisconsin, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Dallas, Texas—from start to finish. This involved paying close attention not only to Trump's speech, but to the activities that unfolded all day at these campaign events. Each rally proceeded in largely the same way. I waited from about 9 AM to 4 PM outside the rally venue to be admitted, observing and conversing with Trump supporters. I then passed through a security checkpoint and found a seat in the rally. After another waiting period, the rally would kick off with speeches from local political figures, and, on several occasions, speeches from Trump's children or Vice President Mike Pence. Finally, at around 7:30 PM, Trump himself would speak. Throughout my fieldwork, I created fieldnotes and photographic/video material to document my experiences and use as the basis for a rhetorical analysis of these events. Close attention to the multifaceted co-construction of consubstantiality at rallies illuminates the underlying reason behind the stubborn loyalty of Trump's core supporters and demonstrates that rally attendees are not merely brainwashed passive observers, but rather active participants in the construction of identification.

Trumpism, Ritualized

Through participation in rituals, Trump supporters co-constructed identification from the bottom-up and enacted their membership in a marginalized but defiant community. Although Trump's willingness to flout political scripts is central to his outsider appeal, his rallies have proven to be highly formulaic (Rogers, 2018). Trump's campaign rallies have followed a stable script organized around Trump's speech, but also recurring ritualistic activities performed by core supporters. These rituals may have seemed trivial or strange to outsiders but were highly

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meaningful to participants because they transformed these events into participatory affairs where attendees could feel part of a larger community.

The pre-rally line. If a Trump rally follows a script as if it were a theatrical play, the opening act is the gathering of supporters outside of the venue hours before the festivities officially commence. Observations of Trump rallies commonly emphasize the ritualistic nature of pre-rally lines. Sam Gringlas (2016), reporting on a Trump rally in Muscatine, Iowa, wrote: "the first thing you notice is the line" (para. 1). Although these lines sometimes contain thousands of people and "wrap around blocks," their size is not what makes them rhetorically significant (Tur, 2017, p. 51; Rogers, 2018). The congregation of Trump supporters old and young, some of whom have traveled great distances to be there, marks the initiation of the communal bonding experience. The most hardcore Trump loyalists arrive the night before the rally to camp out and secure an optimal spot in the line (Rogers, 2018). Trump supporters amuse themselves while waiting in line, by playing picnic games such as cornhole, listening to music, or taking advantage of the ample opportunities to buy merchandise. Ed Pilkington (2018) of *the Guardian* described the pre-rally line as "ablaze with red Make America Great Again hats and national flags draped over shoulders amid a festive mood not unlike a carnival" (para. 12).

Ott and Dickinson (2019) argued that Trump "performs an emergent populist style of 'white rage'" that has "demonstrated remarkable sway among Trump's followers" (pp. 93-94). Although the authors correctly identify rage as an important element of Trumpism, anger and rage are far from the only emotions that link Trump supporters to one another. During my fieldwork, I encountered a broad range of emotions. Perhaps most frequently, I witnessed Trump supporters enjoying themselves. At each rally, hundreds of Trump supporters passed the time by having what amounted to a massive picnic or tailgate party. Families and friends conversed

while sitting in folding lawn chairs and sharing food. A supporter in Grand Rapids compared the pre-rally wait in line to "a day at the beach" while another supporter in Minneapolis claimed the rally was "more fun than a guy can stand." In Green Bay and Dallas, the Trump campaign provided live music, performed by local bands specializing in country and classic rock covers, leading to mass sing-a-longs and dancing. Opportunistic food vendors that set up shop nearby the crowds further cemented the tailgate-like atmosphere of Trump's rallies; supporters ate stock carnival foods such as pizza, French fries, chicken wings, hamburgers, and, in Dallas, Mexican dishes served by a taco truck. Critics often disparagingly compare Trump rallies to circuses, but it is worth remembering why circuses were once a key source of entertainment for Americans: circuses provide an opportunity to gather the family, eat tasty food, and witness rare and entertaining spectacles.

Once attendees reached the inside of the venue, the rally looked less like a picnic or tailgate party and more like a rock concert: supporters energetically danced to the song "YMCA" and, as certain songs played loudly through the arena's sound system, used the flashlight function of their cell phones to simulate the experience of waving a lighter at a concert. Trump rallies are true community events that supporters flock to not only to have feelings of rage validated, but to *have fun*.

Yet, the pre-rally line was not always idyllic. At times, the waiting experience was taxing on Trump supporters. At a 2018 rally in Topeka, supporters waited "in line in the cold and rain for two hours" (Schumacher, 2018, para. 3; Stelter, 2018). At the rally I attended in Green Bay, supporters spent all day in bitterly cold weather waiting in line. At another rally I attended in Dallas, medical professionals struggled to navigate their way through the crowded lines of Trump supporters to reach a person who had apparently collapsed from the heat and needed

medical attention. The pre-rally proceedings and their hardships are not incidental to the rhetorical function of these events. The waiting period is "part and parcel of the performance" and creates "a norm of devotion in the crowd and a sense of shared identity among crowd members" (Reicher & Haslam, 2017, p. 29). At several of the rallies I attended, supporters thanked me for traveling such a great distance to attend the rally. Trump himself often affirmed the devotion of his supporters during his rally speeches. In Green Bay, Trump praised his supporters for their weathering the elements to see him speak:

> They said there's a big, big storm, it's going to be hitting Green Bay, we may have to cancel . . . I said: like hell we're going to cancel . . . People are standing out 24 hours ago, 32 hours ago, outside. Who stood out there for 24 hours? Thank you, we love you . . . And you're rewarded with the best seats in the house, right, that's the way it's supposed to work, right? ("Live in Green Bay," 2019)

Such remarks reassure supporters that their faithfulness and perseverance does not go unnoticed by their hero. They are akin to a blessing from a high priest for completing a religious ritual. The discomfort and inconvenience of waiting in line for extended periods and then going through a burdensome security screening procedure adds to, rather than detracts from, the bonding experience: "the shared sense of self-sacrifice reinforces the experience's value" (Guilford, 2016, para. 19).

Another unpleasant aspect of Trump's rallies is the ritual of passage through security checkpoints, as "Trump's security and clearance measures are consistently more rigorous than those of any other candidate, including former first lady Hillary Clinton" (Guilford, 2016, para. 9). Prior to entering the venue, attendees were required to pass through metal detectors and other searches, creating an invasive experience akin to going through airport security (Gringlas, 2016;

Guilford, 2016). Gwynn Guilford's (2016) ethnography described how the stringent security process encouraged the pro-Trump faithful to fear for their safety and vigilantly keep watch for potential disturbers of the peace. The security checkpoints divided rally-goers from the opposition while uniting them with their allies, as the "feeling of being in danger and under threat intensifies the shared identity that forms among supporters" (Guilford, 2016, para. 23). The prolonged waits and arduous passage through security checkpoints constituted a ritual of initiation, which "expresses" or "dramatizes" a person's transformational "movement through the social structure" (Schwartz & Merten, 1968, p. 1118). Attendees entered the sprawling lines for admission as an undifferentiated mass but emerged on the other side as genuine Trump loyalists.

On the surface, waiting in line at a Trump rally might appear to be unremarkable behavior, not unlike waiting in line at the post office. Yet it is in these lines, hours before Trump takes the stage that the building of consubstantiality begins. Unlike more mundane waiting experiences, standing in line for a Trump rally is a political act that brings potent values such as patriotism into play. Attending a Trump rally requires attendees to publicly announce themselves as Trump supporters, which, given the community's narrative of marginalization, can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, during my fieldwork I saw supporters relishing the attention associated with attending a Trump rally. Supporters jockeyed to get in front of television cameras, and in Dallas, they waved and cheered at a helicopter flying over the rally and presumably filming the massive crowd. However, Trump supporters often described themselves as societal outcasts. In Grand Rapids, a woman bemoaned that you "can't be supportive of your president without being harassed." In Dallas, supporters were shown a video where Lara Trump remarked that "it takes a lot of guts to get out there and be a Trump supporter these days." Their

identities as Trumpers were cemented in part through negation of elites and dangerous Others. While waiting in line, the pro-Trump faithful greeted the numerous protestors who gather near rallies with chants such as "U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" (Rogers, 2018, para. 16). Such experiences lend credence to the "us versus them" narratives that Trump will regale attendees with later in the rally.

Religious and patriotic rituals. After waiting in line all morning and afternoon, Trump supporters were usually admitted into the rally arena around 4 PM. Another waiting period followed, which also constituted identity. Each rally I attended officially began after the execution of three rituals: a group prayer, the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, and the performance of the national anthem. The performance of these religious and patriotic rituals prior to the delivery of political speeches mirrors standard procedures in amateur and professional athletics, where the national anthem and other rituals are performed prior to the game beginning. These three rituals are familiar to virtually all Americans, but in this context, they took on a distinctly partisan and Trumpian tone.

The group prayers that marked the official start of the rally—often presided over by local clergy—blended traditional Christian themes with partisanship, praise of Trump, and forays into thorny issues such as abortion. Many observers may find the alliance between Donald Trump—a profane, serial womanizer who is demonstrably ignorant regarding scripture and religious culture—and the evangelical right to be laughable and hypocritical, but at the rallies I attended, Trump was portrayed by supporters and speakers as nothing less than fierce ally of religious conservatives and an instrument of God's will (Fea, 2018). In Dallas, Jack Graham, a Baptist pastor and member of Trump's Religious Advisory Council, engaged in Trump-style hyperbole while leading the crowd in prayer by declaring that "no administration has seen such

humanitarian work done" ("Rally in Dallas," 2019). Elsewhere in the prayer, Graham asked the crowd to "pray against the all the darkness that comes against us . . . for the darkness of socialism, and the darkness of liberalism, and the darkness of secularism that would destroy our country." The explicitly partisan "gospel of Trump" espoused at rallies may depart from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but these themes rung true for citizens who view support for Trump as an "expressive outlet for the perceived religious backsliding of the United States" (Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018, p. 165).

At the rallies I attended, Trump supporters took these prayers seriously. The din of the crowd would fade, supporters would remove their hats, and bow their heads and close their eyes. Supporters cheered at the mention of Trump by the preacher and engaged in call and response with spontaneous cries of "amen." The ritualistic prayer that occurred at each rally briefly transformed the events from a massive communal picnic or tailgate into megachurch sermons or religious revivals, demonstrating that "the appeal and purpose of rallies go well beyond securing future votes: they are meant to provide both the audience and Trump with a kind of communion" (Dwyer, 2019, para. 11).

At each Trump rally I attended, the conclusion of the group prayer was followed by two patriotic rituals: The Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem. During these rituals, the audience's attention and bodies would gravitate as though by magnetism toward a massive American flag display—perhaps 50 feet tall, and as wide as a section of stadium seating— provided by the campaign. The Pledge of Allegiance is one of the "key rituals in American life" and "a very visible, indeed, perhaps the most ubiquitous, instance of American civil religion" (Kao & Copulsky, 2007, p. 123, 125). Given its central role as one of the most prominent rituals in American society, the Pledge "reinforces patriotic myths, it organizes individuals into a

political community, and it communicates values that provide individuals with important aspects of their sense of reality" (Nahmod, 2005, p. 798). During my fieldwork, the experience of reciting the pledge of allegiance in unison with thousands of other people transported me back to my childhood where this ritual was a daily feature of my elementary school years. The Pledge, in its simplicity, evokes unity and shared identity. Similarly, the Star-Spangled Banner is another foundational national ritual that has become "a deeply engrained facet of U.S. culture" and is featured frequently in "concerts, sporting events, military functions, patriotic holidays, and school days" (Abril, 2007, p. 72).

The Pledge of Allegiance and Star-Spangled Banner are omnipresent rituals across American society that nonetheless assume new meanings at Trump rallies. At rallies, these rituals are infused with a conservative view of American identity in which protest is sacrilege. It is impossible to separate the solemn passion with which Trump supporters perform these patriotic rituals at rallies from the ongoing debate in American society over national anthem protests. Beginning in the 2016 and 2017 National Football League seasons, American athletes have protested racial inequality and anti-black police brutality by kneeling during the pre-game performance of the national anthem. The protests prompted a vocal backlash from Trump and other conservatives who questioned the protestors' patriotism and accused them of disrespecting the nation and the flag (Yglesias, 2017). This debate—over whether the national anthem protestors are un-American or simply performing the consummately American act of standing up to injustice to work toward a more perfect union—is important context for understanding why these rituals contribute to the construction of identification at Trump rallies.

Trump rallies are awash with patriotic imagery and symbols. During my fieldwork, supporters shared a commitment to displaying nothing less than the utmost respect to the

American flag at all times. Trump supporters frequently wore clothing critiquing the national anthem protests, bearing captions such as "Stand for the flag, kneel for the cross" and "Stand up for Betsy Ross." In Minneapolis, a Trump supporter near me in line talked at length about why he had quit watching the NFL during the 2017 season due to the protests. Trump supporters saw this controversy to be one of the dividing fault lines in society that separates "real" Americans from the nation's internal enemies. At a 2017 rally in Alabama, Trump utilized the controversy to rhetorically divide the nation between patriots and ungrateful protestors by stating: "But you know what's hurting the game more than that? When **people like yourselves** turn on television and you see **those people** taking the knee when they are playing our great national anthem" (qtd. in Jenkins, 2017 para. 7, emphasis added). The ritualistic performance of the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem—which are already symbolically charged rituals—therefore assumed added rhetorical significance at Trump rallies. Through enactment of these rituals, Trump supporters rhetorically constituted a virtuous community of patriots and implicitly critiqued those who allegedly disrespect the flag and the nation through inappropriate protests. The racial dimensions of these rituals cannot be ignored, as the incessant performance of patriotism at rallies—through rituals, clothing, chants of "U.S.A!" and other means—allowed the predominately white audience to define their proudly patriotic community in opposition to the "ungratefulness and lack of patriotism" supposedly displayed by black athletes and their liberal allies (Kusz, 2017/2018, p. 120).

Ritualistic chants. After the performance of the national anthem, additional ritualistic activities commenced. The infamous chants associated with Trump rallies – "lock her up," "CNN sucks," "build that wall," "drain the swamp," or "Trump! Trump! Trump!" – are a means for attendees to experience "the strange sea-change that turns 20,000 individuals into one being,"

all bellowing a slogan in unison (Guilford, 2016, para. 4). At the rallies I attended, supporters could hardly contain their desire to perform these chants. On several occasions, the crowd's pent-up energy burst forth at the slightest provocation by one of Trump's warm-up speakers, leading to energetic chants of "lock her up" and "build that wall" despite the unremarkable nature of the speeches from various local political figures. These chants are often caricatured as the crowd pliantly following Trump's lead, but they also serve as a "celebration of shared values," an emotional "release," and a means for the audience to transgress norms of political correctness in a safe setting (Bouie, 2019, paras. 2-3; Dwyer, 2019).

The "lock her up" chant has become such a ritualized mainstay of Trump rallies, as predictable as the 7th inning stretch at a baseball game, that it often erupts at the mere mention of Clinton's name (Stevenson, 2016). Long after Clinton's email controversy slid out of the headlines and it became clear that President Trump's Department of Justice would not prosecute her for any supposed wrongdoing, supporters found ways to keep the "lock her up" chant in circulation by using it in reference to other Trump adversaries such as Senator Dianne Feinstein (Cummings, 2018). At the rally I attended in Minneapolis, the chant was repurposed into "lock him up" after Joe Biden was mentioned. If Trump rallies are a religious gathering of sorts where adherents gather together to "create a certain energy" and connect themselves to a larger whole, then these chants operated as the hymns of Trumpism, creating consubstantiality at a time of societal breakdown (Wagner, 2018, para. 20). Although audiences followed Trump's lead by booing enemies as Trump named them or cheering his signature talking points, "the relationship is reciprocal" as Trump "[drew] energy from the crowd" and would often step back from the podium to allow the audience to chant until they were contented (Guilford, 2016, para. 4). Through these chants, supporters are offered a unique opportunity to experience the "psychic

cleansing that comes from 90 minutes of participating in the same chants and cheering the same applause lines as 20,000 other people" (Bender, 2019).

Scapegoating

A second means by which Trump rallies constituted rally-goers into a community is the channeling of audience rage and resentment toward scapegoats who are blamed for the nation's decline. Trump rallies provided audiences a host of villains, both abstract and concrete, to scorn. The list of enemies at which Trump directed his vitriol is long, and includes prominent Democrats such as Hillary Clinton and Nancy Pelosi, but also Trump's critics within the Republican Party, such as the Bush family, Mitt Romney, and John McCain. Trump's tirades also targeted foes such as "coastal elites" and "radical Islamic terrorists." The capacity of Trump's rhetoric to produce negative identification directed against external enemies has been amply documented by scholars (Johnson, 2017; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018).

The liberal media is a particularly important rhetorical punching bag that Trump used to define the contours of his anti-establishment movement. At a 2015 rally in Hilton Head, Trump accused the media of wanting "to marginalize us" through collusion with his opponents and constant bad publicity (Federal News Service, 2016, para. 22). As President, Trump escalated his attacks on perceived media unfairness by denouncing the media as "the enemy of the people" (Stewart, 2018). At rallies, the process of division and identification was supported by more than Trump's words. The very physical layout of rallies tangibly demonstrated the divisions alluded to in Trump's speeches and afforded a role for audience participation in the scapegoating process. Through careful spatial organization and staging, Trump divided the "real Americans" (his supporters) from "the fake news media." An unforgettable aspect of these rallies, described in NBC reporter Katy Tur's (2017) memoir *Unbelievable*, are the "press pens":

Yes, we are in a pen: a makeshift enclosure made of bicycle racks and jammed full of

desks, reporters, and camera equipment. We're in the middle of the [aircraft] carrier,

slammed against the right side wall. As usual, almost all of Trump's supporters are white

and a lot of them are looking at us, not exactly kindly. The campaign and Secret Service

force us to stay inside the pen while Trump is onstage. They even discourage bathroom

breaks. None of them have a good explanation for why we're kept separate from the

supporters. *Are we the threat or are they?* (p. 64)

Tur speculated that "Trump likes us penned in, because it makes it easier to point and yell at us

all at once" (p. 140).

Victimage operates by "transferring our guilt to an outside agent or agents who are made

to suffer in our place" (Mackey-Kallis & Hahn, 1994). Trump rallies so potently constituted a

besieged community precisely because attendees were provided a flesh-and-blood, physically-

present scapegoat to direct feelings of resentment at. The "liberal media elites" that Trump

constantly rails against, and that might otherwise seem abstract, were made manifest in their

holding pens. Attendees tangibly participated in the expulsion of media elites from the ranks of

their patriotic community. For Trump supporters who view the media as condescending or

hostile to their way of life, seeing actual reporters herded into cages like prisoners reversed the

perceived power differential between the two groups.

Crucially, scapegoating was a collaborative effort between Trump and his followers. The

media, once neatly rounded into press pens, became easy targets for rhetorical division. While

inveighing against media unfairness at rallies, Trump transformed individual reporters into

synecdoches for his antagonists at the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *CNN*, and *MSNBC*

generally. Tur's (2017) memoir abounds with incidents where Trump singled out individual

reporters, including herself, as objects of derision (p. 81). Guilford (2016) also recounted how Trump would scowl "at the media cattle pen in the back of the room . . . pantomiming his disdain with an elaborate sneer before goading his supporters to turn and glare too" (para. 67). With an enemy identified, the audience relished an opportunity to jeer at a scapegoat. Stelter (2018) of *CNN* detailed the ostracization this creates:

> When you're in that pen, you really do feel like a zoo animal. Rallygoers gawk at you, take pictures of you, and sometimes sneer while they walk by, saying things like, "You're fake news" and "enemy of the people." (para. 8)

During my fieldwork, I often observed Trump supporters gleefully participating in such ritualistic scapegoating. Anti-CNN clothing and signs were mainstays of these events, as was the "CNN sucks" chant. The mere mention of the media by Trump and other speakers would cause supporters to turn their attention and bodies toward the media press pen and issue a thunderous chorus of boos and shouts of "fake news" aimed directly at media personnel, in an unnerving and authoritarian display of anti-media animus. In the Bible, the scapegoating ritual entailed forcibly exiling a live animal from the community, to symbolically "bear the sins of Israel into the wilderness" and thus redeem the community (Maclean, 2007, p. 313). At Trump rallies, supporters enacted a twenty-first century variation of this ancient rite, wherein collective guilt was alleviated through displacement onto the "enemy of the people," the press.

Ridiculing reporters does more than provide Trump and his supporters a good laugh. The ritualized resentment expressed at the media is "constitutive of civic identity" (Engels, 2010, p. 306). Through the confluence of several factors – the carefully-staged physical environment of the rallies, Trump's anti-media rhetoric, and his supporters' vengeful performances – Trump rallies divided virtuous rally-goers from the "fake news media," and therefore solidified a

beleaguered community. As what Burke (1957) would term a "medicine," the scapegoating ritual may temporarily numb the pain Trump supporters felt as a result of their perceived exclusion from society. However, this medicine prolongs, rather than cleanses, feelings of alienation and guilt, by (1) misidentifying the true causes of Trump supporters' suffering and (2) keeping Trump supporters perpetually outraged at their media victimizers. Trump "rallies may be cathartic, as he screams and yells at conjured enemies," but the emotional release is short-lived, as his message amounts to "an exercise in pointing the finger at someone else" (Vance, 2016, para. 30). Ultimately, the scapegoating ritual "does nothing to cure one's pain, which is a product of more structural causes" (Engels, 2010, p. 312).

Fandom

Supporters are not necessarily drawn to rallies by a shared commitment to a fixed set of ideological positions. Rather, supporters attend rallies to celebrate Trump, their hero and fan-object, and in the process constitute a fandom community. Stelter (2018) gestured towards this when he described a pre-rally gathering of Trump supporters as having "the look and feel of a political concert" (para. 2). The "Front Row Joes"—the loyalest of the loyal Trump supporters that have attended 30-50 Trump rallies each and caravan in mini-vans from rally to rally like Grateful Dead fans, waiting in line for days in advance of Trump's speech—are inscrutable if one approaches Trumpism as an ideological, rather than cultural phenomenon (Bender, 2019).

Since at least the nineteenth century, political rallies have blended partisanship and entertainment, with supporters characterizing their preferred candidate as not just the right person for the job but also a heroic symbol and representative of a group of people, a culture, or a certain way of life. Barack Obama, with his deft use of social media to promote his historic campaign and considerable charisma, arguably "cemented the merging of politics and culture,"

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but "Donald Trump has exploded it" (Herndon, 2019). Since Trump was a pop-cultural figure decades before he emerged as a serious political candidate, his rallies are part of a "cultural phenomenon that sometimes looks more like a concert or a megachurch worship experience rather than a traditional political rally" (Herndon, 2019).

The pre-rally lines illustrate the capacity of these events to constitute a fandom. To find similar examples of hordes of people braving the elements and gathering in anticipation of some spectacle, one normally needs to look outside of the political context towards the realm of popular culture or sports. On a practical level, *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* fans line up in costume for the midnight release of a new novel or film so that they can be among the first to experience it, but these events are also an important venue for communing with likeminded individuals and signaling one's authenticity as a fan by wearing costumes or memorabilia (Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). Similarly, Trump supporters line up hours in advance in red "Make America Great Again" hats to performatively demonstrate their commitment to the cause, like NFL fans might paint their faces and brave harsh conditions to position themselves as "true" fans. At Trump rallies, thousands of "like-minded people" commune in a manner "not unlike an Ohio State Buckeye game, where you bring together all of these people from different walks of life but all with a shared purpose and a shared interest" (Bender, 2019).

During my fieldwork, I observed Trump supporters engaging in another omnipresent activity associated with fandom: the exchange of "material culture," or objects invested with political symbolism (Cheathem, 2018). Fandom is rooted in "concrete practices and artifacts" such as "costumes and collectibles" and "shrines and pilgrimages," and the Trump fandom is no exception (Rehak, 2014). At the rallies I attended, I was struck by the sheer volume of Trump-related merchandise, collectibles, and clothing that was available for purchase or brought to the

rally by supporters: endless variations on the classic red hat, flags, bobble-head dolls, pins, buttons, scarves, shirts, and much more, almost all bearing Trump's visage or his signature phrase "Make America Great Again." Local Trump fans at each rally put their own regional spin on the fandom: in Minneapolis, supporters wore "MAGAsota" gear, while the rally in Dallas was flooded with "Trump 2020" cowboy hats. Supporters in Minneapolis even passed out fake dollar bills bearing Trump's image, while a vendor in Dallas sold flags with a sensationalized image of a superhuman-looking Trump leaning onto a machine gun while riding on a tank, as fireworks explode across an American flag backdrop. Trump memorabilia, like Trump himself, seems to operate according to the principle of "the gaudier the better."

The ubiquity of such merchandise served obvious commercial imperatives but also afforded an outlet for friendly competition among supporters, over who could claim to be the most passionate and most diehard Trump fan. The outfits and memorabilia worn and displayed by rally attendees seemed to be primarily targeted at an internal audience of fellow Trump supporters, and it was common to witness supporters complimenting each other's clothing and gear. In Green Bay, a supporter dressed in the garb of a revolutionary war-era soldier and walked up and down the line of supporters making remarks such as "the liberals are coming," while other supporters wore "cheese head" hats (usually associated with the Green Bay Packers fandom) bearing pro-Trump phrases. In Dallas, a supporter wore a suit with a red brick pattern and claimed to represent Donald Trump's border wall. In Minneapolis, one woman wore two remarkable articles of clothing. Despite the frigid and rainy weather outside, she wore a tank top featuring an Andy Warhol-style pattern of Trump making a sneering expression. In lieu of pants, she wore a costume meant to create the illusion that she was piggyback riding on top of Trump, featuring a fake pair of legs resting over Trump's shoulders. At several rallies, supporters wore

shirts and socks bearing Trump's image, with yellow fuzzy hair-like material dangling from

Trump's signature combover for fellow Trump fans to jokingly stroke and yank upon. Supporters

who wore certain fan favorite shirts—such as one bearing the 2016 electoral college map and the

caption "Impeach This" and another featuring images of Trump, Obama, and Bill Clinton with

the captions "More Jobs, No Jobs, Blow Jobs"—were often approached by other supporters for

photographs. The rallies I attended were as much fan conventions as political events, defined by

enthusiasts gathering to celebrate their fan-object and revel in each other's company.

Rallies as Community Events

Trump rallies, which draw thousands of Americans from across the nation to celebrate a

shared hero, provide supporters a sense of communal identity. Trump "constitutes his audience

around" feelings of "marginality to the political system" and "powerlessness" (Johnson, 2017, p.

239, 234). However, a key aim of rallies is to boost the audience's perception of political self-

efficacy to ensure that they cast ballots for Trump rather than disengage from the electoral

process. Although Trump supporters may feel stigmatized and marginalized by various

threatening forces (both real and imagined) in their everyday lives, at rallies, this community

affirmed its strength and resilience.

At each rally I attended, supporters marveled and obsessed over the size of the turnout.

From the moment I arrived at each rally and throughout the day, Trump supporters constantly

walked up and down the line, taking photographs or filming the crowd and expressing awe at

how many people were in attendance and making remarks such as "you won't see this on CNN"

while doing so. In the meantime, pro-Trump social media accounts would post photos and videos

of these hundreds and thousands of supporters waiting in line to be admitted, occasionally

leading Trump to acknowledge the massive lines in a post from his official Twitter account (see:

Trump, 2019). The obsession with crowd size was fueled by the speakers, especially Trump himself, who frequently boasted about turnout, bemoaned how many supporters were unable to enter the venue due to capacity constraints, disparaged the crowd sizes of his rivals' events, and framed the crowd's size as evidence of his movement's strength and momentum. The physical presence of large numbers of Trump supporters served as tangible evidence of this community's influence and coherence, combating feelings of alienation and providing material support for Trump's claim to speak on behalf of "the people." As one supporter in Minneapolis put it, the Democrats and their impeachment investigations may represent everything "bad in our country," but "everyone here is the good in our country."

While exiting the rally after the conclusion of Trump's speech, I witnessed supporters bidding each other farewell by exchanging hugs in a surprisingly sentimental fashion. At a Trump rally, "you're there for him, but you're also there for each other" (Herndon, 2019). A consideration of Trump rallies *in toto* reveals that much of the work of community-building is undertaken with the involvement of ordinary Trump supporters, despite the tendency of many rhetorical analyses of identification in political campaigns to forefront the candidate alone. The hour or two spent listening to Trump's speech is small in comparison to the long hours some Trump supporters spend waiting in line and mingling with their fellow enthusiasts. These moments of communion, and not particular policy proposals, form the core of Trumpism and give supporters a reason to come back for more. It is in this context that the stubborn loyalty of Trump supporters should be understood. For rally goers, rejecting Trump after a new scandal or controversy would not just violate their perceived political interests, but would amount to denial of a community that gives meaning and coherence to their lives. In an epoch defined by growing isolation where alienation is growing and a sense of community declining, the motives of Trump

loyalists are not opaque, unintelligible, or otherwise impossible to deduce. From the perspective of the faithful, rallies offer "the brief but ecstatic experience of becoming the single-mouthed crowd-creature," in a state of near-seamless consubstantiality with your surroundings (Guilford, 2016, para. 102). That is not something to be sacrificed lightly.

The role of enactment in building identification is crucial. Trump rallies are powerful events because they are organized around concrete activities—political rituals, scapegoating, and the circulation of material culture objects in the vein of a fandom—that constitute a coherent community by providing heroes to celebrate and villains to scorn. Importantly, the consubstantial bond constructed between Trump and his audience was given a strong material dimension through several recurring rituals that supporters could tangibly participate in. At rallies, the division between media elites and ordinary citizens was physically enacted, through the shrewd tactic of herding reporters into pens. The long waits in pre-rally lines further made attendees feel part of a dedicated community of faithful Trump supporters, creating a sense that initiation into this community was a reward for their endurance. These vignettes confirm the capacity of political ritual to transform discrete individuals into a larger collective, especially when these activities are tied to affectively charged, embodied experiences. This identification is sturdy enough to withstand Trump's endless stream of controversies precisely because it is tied to strong emotions forged through rituals. Although the constitutive functions of Trump rallies offer a respite from feelings of isolation that are now endemic in American society, they have other deleterious consequences for civic discourse in the United States. In the next section, I conclude by explaining the implications that this analysis has for the study of Trump-era politics and rhetorical analyses of political campaigns.

Implications and Conclusion

Donald Trump's campaign rallies are part picnic, part tailgate, part rock concert, part wrestling match, part fan convention, and part religious revival. Although all the activities have roots elsewhere in American culture, the coalescence of all these community-building activities in one place is unlike any other phenomenon in contemporary American politics. The fieldwork-driven analysis of Trump's campaign rallies that I have conducted here reveals three key findings. First, this analysis demonstrates the rhetorical agency of audiences and the need for analyses of campaign rhetoric to attend to not only the rhetoric of candidates, but their supporters. Second, this analysis illustrates the need for scholars to analyze conventional, offline dimensions of political campaigning in addition to emerging digital techniques. Third, this analysis highlights a need for rhetorical scholars to analyze identification in both its positive and negative forms while revealing several risks to U.S. democratic culture posed by Trump's rallies.

Implications for the Study of Audience Agency

The analysis of Trump rallies has significant implications for future studies of political candidates and their audiences. On *Saturday Night Live* and elsewhere in American culture, attendees of Trump rallies are portrayed as unthinking drones. In media coverage, Trump rallies have been defined primarily in terms of their chaos and Trump's falsehoods (Allott & Allott, 2018). Regrettably, these assumptions are implicitly present in some rhetorical scholarship about Trump. In attempting to unwind the puzzle posed by Trump's remarkably durable identificatory bond with his supporters, rhetorical scholars have characterized these supporters as fundamentally passive. Rhetorical scholars have labeled Trump's followers as "mindless" (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. ix) or have tended to focus on "Trump's persuasive capacities" (Johnson, 2017, p. 230), attributing the strong relationship between Trump and his supporters to Trump's

own rhetorical techniques. This is part of a broader trend in rhetorical scholarship analyzing political campaigns and identification. Scholars have often adopted a top-down approach that emphasizes the concerted rhetorical strategies of the candidate to build consubstantiality with a targeted demographic (Taylor, 2016; Vigil, 2015). In the Trump era, critics have continued this approach by taxonomizing themes in Trump's rhetoric and explaining their rhetorical impact (Appel, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Stuckey, 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). In this essay, I have proposed an alternative frame, informed by rhetorical fieldwork, that understands Trump supporters as rhetorical agents themselves.

The words of the candidate matter and demand close analysis. However, "successful constructions of social identity require more than skillful rhetoric" by movement leaders (Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005, p. 561). Building identification requires that group identity be "structured into the practices of the social movement" itself (p. 561). Rhetorical analyses of candidates are incomplete without consideration of the everyday, granular ways that non-elite actors constitute political communities. At rallies, Trump supporters party together, sing together, dance together, chant together, and even pray together. These experiences produce meaningful feelings of camaraderie between individuals who would otherwise be strangers to each other. The approach utilized here emphasizes the agency of supporters in forging rhetorical bonds rather than treating audiences as mere targets for persuasion. Rhetorical fieldwork methodologies can serve as a valuable corrective to the tendency of scholars to focus upon "grand historical moments as seen through the speeches of world leaders" (Endres, Hess, Senda-Cook, & Middleton, 2016, p. 513) by emphasizing "the symbolic means through which people produce meaning, generate social energy, and coordinate action in everyday life" (Rai &

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Druschke, 2018, p. 1). Furthermore, political rituals are a powerful and often overlooked way that campaigns can create consubstantiality without direct participation of the candidate.

Since identification is indeed a fulcrum upon which presidential campaigns rise or fall, scholars must continue to closely observe the diffuse means through which strangers become a political community with strong consubstantial bonds. Rhetorical scholars should employ fieldwork methodologies to "broaden the analytic focus to include not only leaders but also followers" when analyzing political campaigns (Reicher et al., 2005, p. 551). Such an approach will not only help correct the perception that Trump supporters are fundamentally passive— rather than the enthusiastic co-architects of Trump's America—but will provide a more holistic picture of contemporary U.S. politics. This essay is one needed step toward that goal.

Implications for the Study of Campaign Rhetoric

Donald Trump's rallies have changed the way that presidential hopefuls campaign (Bender, 2019). Despite Hillary Clinton's "clear advantages in areas like field staffing, communications, and data" (Karpf, 2017, p. 198), she was defeated by Trump, whose "entire campaign" hinged upon rallies (Bender, 2019). Viable candidates must not only develop sophisticated digital operations, but must now answer questions from the media and voters regarding whether they can generate enthusiasm sufficient to match that of Trump's base:

> Once widely regarded as an interesting but ultimately inconsequential novelty of political campaigns, crowd size is now a potentially meaningful metric of electability — one that can translate into volunteers, donors and, as Trump demonstrated in 2016, actual momentum. Ever since, Trump has consistently drawn large audiences to his rallies, many of them held in less populated parts of the country and attracting supporters who often drive hours, across multiple states, to attend. (Parker & Linskey, 2019, para. 5)

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Joe Biden, for example, received media scrutiny for failing to generate large crowds in the early stages of his 2020 primary campaign despite maintaining a strong position in polls (Nuzzi, 2019).

These concerns are in part unfair: Trump lost the popular vote to Clinton by millions of votes and has maintained poor overall approval ratings despite consistently generating large turnout at his rallies. Yet, the renewed public attention to rallies points to a need for communication scholars to supplement studies of how emerging techniques of digital communication are altering campaigns with analyses that account for the reemergence of in-person rallies as potentially significant campaigning tools. Campaign rallies and the rituals associated with them, because of their capacity to engage the physical senses and memory in a visceral way, are powerful means for fostering identification (Berezin, 2002; Bergmann, 2012). It is not the size of Trump rallies that makes them rhetorically significant, although their size does amplify their impact. Rather, Trump rallies are impactful in the ways that they engage audiences affectively. Digital campaign methods may allow candidates to micro-target voters in new and innovative ways, but the emotional experiences associated with in-person campaign events are valuable for candidates seeking to create a core base of loyal and highly motivated supporters.

There is "political value" in the "energy" generated at Trump rallies; Trump's opponents "will have to motivate their base in a way that matches or exceeds that level of energy" (Herndon, 2019). Candidates are beginning to understand the power of ritual and are actively searching for tangible ways to generate excitement around their campaigns. Senator Elizabeth Warren's campaign rallies, for example, are defined by the post-rally ritual of supporters lining up by the thousands for an opportunity to take a "selfie" photograph with the candidate. At her

rallies, Warren will pose for photographs for up to four hours at a time, until every single person in line has had a chance to meet her (Jennings, 2019). The selfie-line ritual, because it enables direct personal interaction between the candidate and supporters and signifies the strength, depth, and devotion of their movement, is arguably "just as important as anything else that happens in the rally" (Barbaro, Toeniskoetter, & Cowett, 2019). Regardless of the ultimate fates of the Biden, Warren, and Trump campaigns, communication scholars must devote serious attention to rituals such as these moving forward, in the interest of providing a fuller picture of how campaigns operate both online and offline.

Implications for the Study of Identification and the State of U.S. Political Discourse

This analysis of Trump rallies *in toto* reveals that Trumpism resonates not only because it appeals to adherents on the level of both culture and class, but because it builds identification in both positive and negative terms. Above all, Trumpism makes its disciples *feel good*. Across history, even the vilest of political organizations—such as the National Socialists in Germany and the Ku Klux Klan in the United States—have maintained followers not through pure hatred alone but by building feelings of community (Blee, 1993; Hagen & Ostergren, 2006). Indeed, "a systematic analysis of ISIS propaganda shows that . . . most of the images in ISIS propaganda show scenes of group cohesion, of group triumph, and of members fixing sewage systems and providing health care and education" (Reicher & Haslam, 2017, p. 28). Trump rallies are similarly sites for building "identification *with*" a community in addition to "identification *against*" scapegoats. This analysis reconciles the conflicting accounts of Trump rallies as dangerous and threatening, but also joyous and affirming, through the application of Burkean theories of identification and division.

The findings of this essay also challenge assertions that Trump "lacks anything resembling a positive message" (Burns, Martin, & Haberman, 2019, para. 20). The rush by many commentators to treat Trump's base as "mindless mobs led by primitive urges and stirred up by a narcissistic demagogue" obscures the real feelings of belongingness that rallies bring to attendees (Reicher & Haslam, 2017, p. 29). Rhetorical scholars repeat this error when they focus solely on Trump's divisiveness while neglecting the rituals that bind his followers together in a community. Mills (2014) noted that "in Charland's original essay, the negative dimensions of constitutive rhetoric are a recessive strain in the argument" (p. 108). Discussions of Trump, both inside and outside of academia, have reversed this dynamic by emphasizing the construction of negative identification against immigrants and liberal elites while overlooking feelings of solidarity between Trump supporters. This tendency to emphasize negative identification is problematic for generating accurate and holistic accounts of Trumpism, as the definition of "the ingroup is *as* crucial, if not *more* crucial, than definitions of the outgroup" in fostering collective identity (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008, p. 1327). The analysis I have conducted here strikes the correct balance by illustrating the indispensability of both positive and negative identification for successful political campaigns.

This in turn points to another sobering insight about the state of political discourse in the United States: Trumpism could not have arisen without the precipitous collapse of national comity and the associated decline of feelings of identification that reach across partisan lines. Regional declines in economic opportunity have been accompanied by a broad-based national decline in civic organizations of all kinds: "the struggling parts of Middle America have seen not only their factories and coal mines shut down, they've also seen churches and sports leagues wither and die" (Carney, 2019, para. 13). Dwindling rates of weekly church-going and church

membership have left Americans searching for ways to satisfy their religious impulses by other means (Putnam, 1995). Compounding this crisis of community is the decline of America's civil religion and the accompanying "absence of secular ritual" in American society (Rowland & Frank, 2002, p. 304). With the Fourth of July and other displays of national unity reduced to nothing more than hollow consumerism, there are virtually no "ritual occasions in which the basic American mythology is celebrated" (p. 305). In contemporary society, "the centrality of such ritual processes has been displaced" as political conflicts now involve "parties who do not necessarily share beliefs, frequently do not accept the validity of one another's intention, and often disagree even about the descriptions that people offer for acts" (Alexander, 2004, p. 528). Americans have understandably "dismantled many of our myths," as the ongoing diversification of the country has forced a reevaluation of pivotal figures in the national mythos such as the Founding Fathers, "but [we] have not yet formed new [myths] to replace them" (Sullivan, 2017, para. 19).

In the vacuum left by declining bonds of affiliation across the country, Trumpism emerged, providing rituals that serve as a crude substitute, or in Burke's terms "medicine," for the loss of community. Humans are storytelling creatures who are psychologically driven to find an underlying purpose to their lives through social connections: "our brains are wired such that we *cannot help* but search for meanings in the randomness of life" (Johnson, 2016, p. 3; Fisher, 1985). As Americans turn away from organized religion and the national mythology as methods of making sense of their day-to-day existence, they are increasingly finding meaning through partisan affiliation (Huddy & Bankert, 2017). With partisanship now the key terministic screen through which many individuals interpret the world, "the cult of the presidency" risks being

taken to its logical extreme, as one's favored candidate assumes sacred status and one's disfavored candidate becomes a stand-in for the profane.

Political ideologies that rely upon "fundamentally religious patterns of thought" are dangerous (Burke, 1957, p. 188). The perils of a society where partisan identities bind stronger than national identities are plainly clear in remarks made by Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick at the Trump rally in Dallas I attended. While warming up the crowd for Trump, Patrick pontificated that "the progressive left, they are not our opponents. They are our enemy" (qtd. in Hooks, 2019, para. 10). My heart sunk as Patrick's vitriol was received warmly by the audience. Inflammatory remarks such as these make it all but impossible to imagine a more perfect union where citizens can disagree while nonetheless relating to each other in a respectful and non-violent way. If partisan politics becomes an outlet for religious impulses, it becomes "harder to imagine not only how to make democratic community together but even how to picture why we would want to" (Nelson, 2008, p. 183). The "Fifth Avenue shooting" problem, of how to persuade Trump supporters of the mismatch between their interests and those of Trump's and thus weaken this durable bond, will not be resolved until Trump's opponents devise alternative, powerful means of making Americans feel part of a team.

"The president in no way, form or fashion has ever promoted or encouraged violence."

- White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders

Chapter V

"Get 'Em Out": The Constitutive Violence of Trump Rallies

Oceans of ink have been spilled describing the manifold ways that Donald Trump violated political norms en route to becoming President of the United States. Perhaps the most disturbing violation was Trump's eschewal of the norm against "explicitly condoning and encouraging violence" (Lind, 2016, para. 10). Although violence was almost non-existent at the events of other 2016 presidential hopefuls, violent incidents occurred often at Trump rallies throughout the election cycle. Despite occasional condemnations (see: Jackson, 2016), Trump repeatedly encouraged the use of force against protestors. In 2015, when reporters asked Trump about an incident where a Hispanic man was brutally beaten by "two Boston men, one of whom told the police that he was inspired by [Trump's] anti-immigrant message," he remarked, "people who are following me are very passionate. They love this country and they want this country to be great again" (qtd. in Rappeport, 2015, paras. 1-5). Later in the campaign, at a rally in Iowa in February of 2016, Trump remarked that somebody should "knock the crap out of" a protestor and promised to "pay for the legal fees" of whoever did it (qtd. in Jacobs, 2016, para. 4). The Trump campaign's attempts to distance the candidate from violence were undermined by the candidate's tendency to excuse and egg on the violence of his supporters. As President, Trump maintained his uneasy relationship with violence by posting a doctored video to his Twitter account in which he was portrayed wrestling and beating a person with the CNN logo superimposed over their head (Grynbaum, 2017).

Although the Trump campaign's stance on violence was marked by decided ambiguity, there is strong evidence suggesting a link between Trump rallies and violence. Morrison et al.'s (2018) analysis of publicly available incident report data found that "cities experienced 2.3 additional assaults on days when hosting [Trump] campaign rallies" (pp. 492-493). The authors noted that "Trump's rallies were associated with increased assault incidence," but found no similar association between violence and the campaign events of Hillary Clinton (p. 492). Morrison and colleagues concluded by postulating "that the violent language employed by candidate Trump affected the mood and behavior of other rally attendees, as well as those exposed to the rally through news reports and digital social media, contributing to increased violence" (p. 493). Edwards and Rushin's (2018) statistical analysis provided further evidence that "Trump's inflammatory rhetoric" and the subsequent validation of this rhetoric through his successful "election as President of the United States" may have had violent consequences, finding that "the recent spike in hate crimes was concentrated close in time to the election of President Trump in the fourth quarter of 2016" and that "counties that voted for President Trump by the widest margins in the presidential election also experienced the largest increases in reported hate crimes" (p. 3).

These statistics confirm what anecdotal evidence suggests: that the threat of violence is an integral feature of Trump rallies, which have been described as "synonymous" with violence (Nelson, 2016, para. 1). Ben Mathis-Lilley of *Slate* (2016) compiled a list of 20 violent incidents that occurred at Trump rallies between October of 2015 and June of 2016, many of which involved bloody clashes between Trump supporters and protestors (see also: Swaine & Adolphe, 2019). The threat of violence forced Trump to cancel a campaign event in Chicago in anticipation of dangerous confrontations between his supporters and the hundreds of protestors

who planned to attend (Lind, 2016). The judiciary has also recognized a link between Trump rallies and violence. Although the decision was ultimately reversed by the Sixth Circuit court of appeals, a district court found in *Nwanguma v. Trump* that "Trump's statement, 'Get 'em out of here,' was likely to incite violence when a crowd of Trump supporters subsequently began physically attacking a group of Trump protestors" at a rally in Louisville (Hamby, 2018, p. 300). The violent clashes did not abate after Trump's victory and continued into the early days of Trump's 2020 re-election campaign. A rally in El Paso during February of 2019, for instance, was interrupted by a Trump supporter attacking a cameraman for the *BBC* (Sopel, 2019). Later that year at a rally in Cincinnati, a man was arrested and charged with assault for punching an anti-Trump protestor in the face (Elfrink, 2019). Audiences have come to expect such incidents. Guilford's (2016) interactions with Trump supporters at campaign rallies revealed that many rally-goers had a tacit understanding that attending a Trump rally entailed putting one's self at risk of violence (para. 12). Violence was therefore not an aberration at Trump rallies, but rather, a ritualistic, expected part of the festivities. Statistical analyses and an abundance of anecdotal evidence illustrate that a relationship of some kind exists between Trump rallies and violence. Rhetorical criticism can elucidate the nature of this relationship.

Accepting the premise that violence was a recurring feature of Trump rallies raises the question of: "why?" Were these violent outbursts the inevitable and predictable result of the tinderbox created by the volatile mixture of demagoguery, pro-Trump loyalists and anti-Trump protestors at rallies? Or, were these violent incidents completely random, without any underlying symbolic significance? Early analysts of crowd psychology argued that "violence . . . lies in the very nature of the crowd" as crowd action dissolves individual responsibility and lowers self-control (Reicher, 2001, p. 187). Yet, crowds may also affirm and consolidate "a social order" (p.

202). Rhetorical theory can clarify why violent confrontations became such a recurring event at Trump rallies and establish whether these episodes are mere senseless acts or whether they serve an identity-building function. The argument that I develop – that violent incidents at Trump rallies acted as "constitutive rhetoric" by solidifying the group identity of Trump supporters – in turn points to new ways of understanding the relationship between violence and rhetoric generally (Charland, 1987). Rhetoric, conceived of as reasoned deliberation, has often been theorized as an antidote to violence, as in the adage "the pen is mightier than the sword." This understanding of rhetoric, as the path to "a politics purged of violence," is "deeply ingrained in rhetorical studies" (Engels, 2013, p. 180). Although rhetoric has historically been characterized as "the great other to violence," the relationship is more complicated than a binary opposition (Crosswhite, 2014, p. 134). Scholars have noted the way that rhetoric can encourage or legitimize violence (Engels, 2015). The "relationship between speech and violence" has been frequently analyzed by rhetorical scholars (Stahl, 2016, p. 377), but the capacity of violence to operate as a "rhetorical device" for building identification remains underexamined (Olson, 2013, p. 474).

Violence is an inescapable dimension of the Trump phenomenon and has accordingly received some attention from rhetorical critics. Scholars have amply documented cases where Trump's rhetoric was violent, in the sense that it contained graphic depictions of physical harm. Mendes (2016), while advancing the argument that Trump is a pioneer of "digital demagoguery," noted that "Trump employs violent imagery, graphically describing the beheadings perpetrated by ISIL, and has advocated for the use of waterboarding and other forms of torture" (p. 66). Johnson (2017) similarly explained that Trump frequently constructs "scenarios of violence and humiliation as proof of White masculinity's marginalization," therefore allowing his followers to

imagine themselves as oppressed by the dominant liberal culture (p. 231). Scholars have also described Trump's rhetoric itself as a form of violence, in the sense that it excludes or denigrates certain people. Saramo (2017) explained that Trump waged "rhetorical violence" against immigrants and women to bolster his political fortunes and drive a "wedge in U.S. society" (pp. 8-9).

Although scholars have established that Trump's rhetoric itself is violent, what is less clear are the rhetorical functions of the violent acts that have become indelible features of Trump rallies. Instead of focusing solely upon Trump's rhetoric as violence, I analyze Trump-related violence as rhetoric, filling a gap in rhetorical scholarship about the Trump phenomenon. I read the violent incidents at Trump rallies as rhetorical texts to argue that the recurring violent confrontations between Trump supporters and protestors at rallies are not merely random, senseless, or the inevitable result of putting political enemies in close physical proximity to one another. Rather, this violence operates rhetorically to construct identification, by solidifying an in-group and an out-group, and lending credence to Trump's authoritarian narratives of a crime-ridden nation in need of a "strongman" to restore law and order. This analysis of violence—which is informed by my firsthand experiences at Trump rallies—helps de-mystify the stubborn loyalty of Trump's core supporters to him, by uncovering how Trump rallies bind attendees into a collective. By demonstrating the powerful community-building functions of violent acts, I further unravel the puzzle of how "Trump defied pretty much every rule not just of electoral politics, but of contemporary civil discourse" while maintaining the fervent support of his base (Guilford, 2016, para. 2).

Aside from improving our understanding of Trumpism, this essay advances the study of violence from a rhetorical perspective by shedding new light on the ways that violence can be

used to communicate, persuade, and shape social relations. These findings help explain why demagogues from across history have turned to violence as a tool for building political constituencies. An investigation into the rhetorical properties of violence is urgent at a time when the combination of "polarized politics" and declining trust in political institutions has heightened the risk that Americans will turn to violence to settle intractable political disputes (Freeman, 2018, para. 18).

There has been a national debate about President Trump's responsibility for the uptick in racially motivated violence that occurred after his election (Levine, 2018). In opposition to those who deny any connection between Trump's words and the violent deeds committed in his name, I argue that the words of presidents (and presidential candidates) matter and shape the contours of acceptable political discourse (Skowronek, 1993). Restoring the norm against political candidates embracing violence requires an exploration into why so many voters found themselves willing to support a candidate who discards this norm. I develop this argument in three parts. First, I theorize ways that violence may function as rhetoric. Second, I analyze a selection of violent incidents at Trump rallies and argue that these events constructed identification between Trump and his supporters. Third, I conclude by explaining the implications derived from this analysis.

Rhetorical Dimensions of Violence

Prior to theorizing the rhetorical functions of violence, it is first necessary to define what is meant by "violence," which is an expansive term that encompasses a variety of meanings. This essay concerns several forms of violence, including acts where "physical force" was applied by one individual or group against another (Ray, 2011, p. 8). Such "direct violence," in contrast with psychological, structural, or cultural violence, "is an *event*" (Galtung, 1990, p. 294), and

involves "an actor that commits the violence" (Galtung, 1969, p. 170). However, I also consider episodes where violence, or the threat of violence, operated as "a general 'atmospheric' condition" in situations involving a climate of latent tension, "regardless of whether hostilities are ever directly experienced" (Bratton, 2008, p. 624). Such a broad perspective, that includes both physical violence and atmospheric violence, allows critics to consider interactions where tensions stopped short of erupting into physical violence that nonetheless carried rhetorical weight.

Rhetorical scholars have established that the power of violence stems not only from its ability to destroy, but from its propensity to create rhetorical possibilities (Jorgensen-Earp, 2008). Rhetorical scholars note that violence "actually stimulates the production of rhetoric" (Rand, 2009, p. 466) and is "constitutive of discourse itself" (Browne, 1996, p. 55). In this sense, rhetoric can be "generated from, by, or through violence" (Foley, 2013, p. 191). When understood as a medium through which persuasive messages may be communicated, violence "delivers itself to human community in ways that may be both destructive and productive" (Browne, 2000, p. 328). Alongside its destructive consequences, violence may produce "a repertoire of images, arguments, and appeals," which are ripe to be put to use "for inventional purposes" (Browne, 1996, pp. 55-56). While responding to violence, rhetors may "use their interpretations of violence as an inventional resource to persuade audiences of both what the violence means and what, if anything, should be done in response to it" (Childers, 2016, p. 575). I argue that one rhetorical function of violence is to foster identification. Violence may be exploited by rhetors to facilitate formation of group identity by (1) serving as a mechanism for social bonding and delineating between an in-group and out-group, and (2) lending credence to

authoritarian "us versus them" narratives that place faith in a strongman as an instrument for restoring law and order.

Social Bonding

Collective violence is often destructive, but it also can "constitute" and regulate social relationships (Fiske & Rai, 2015, p. 17). Research across several disciplines confirms that violence can serve community-building functions by creating feelings of shared membership in a collective and drawing lines between friends and enemies. Certain violent offenses are committed not only to inflict pain or punish, but because they are "message crimes" that communicate "a message of hostility and exclusion" to "whole communities" (Ray, 2011, p. 158). In this way, violence can serve as a technique for "group production" of collective identity (p. 165). Violence, especially when inflicted upon "those who become symbolic substitutes for a community's inner and unacknowledged humiliation and conflict" is a powerful "medium of social bonding" (p. 194). Punishing and dominating a scapegoat can give "the in-group a sense of power and identity" and further cohere collective identity through reference to a demonized other (p. 163).

Several case studies confirm the link between violence and community formation. In his analysis of homophobic crimes, criminology professor Stephen Tomsen (2001) argued that such violence served a "dual purpose of constructing a masculine and heterosexual identity through a simultaneous involvement with violence and by establishing homosexuals as social outsiders" (p. 7). The capacity of violence to distinguish friend from foe is particularly salient in sociopolitical contexts defined by alienation or dislocation. While discussing xenophobic attitudes in Europe, German sociologist Wilhelm Heitmeyer (1994) argued that violence is a potent means for individuals to combat feelings of powerlessness or estrangement by creating "clarity in unclear

situations" and "solidarities" (p. 24). For example, while summarizing the historiography on football-related violence in post-war Britain, Bebber (2016) noted that violence committed by football spectators can be understood as "an expression of social cohesion and community loyalty" and an attempt to "reclaim community within fractured class relationships" (pp. 3-4).

Most striking is Blee's (2007) qualitative analysis of hate violence committed by racist groups in the United States, which demonstrated that violence "*makes* a group" (p. 263). According to Blee, violence is not merely the inevitable end product of individuals creating a group defined in racial terms but can in fact facilitate the formation of such a group in the first place by joining people together "through the practice of violence" (p. 264). Blee differentiates this identity-building violence from "strategic violence" aimed at achieving particular goals, arguing that certain "acts of violence" may appear outwardly meaningless while nonetheless strengthening "racial hierarchies and majority group solidarities . . . to shape connections of solidarity among perpetrators and between perpetrators and onlookers and to deepen boundaries between groups" (p. 264). Importantly, these identificatory effects of violence may be experienced by both participants and observers of violence (p. 267). This collection of studies confirms that violence can operate rhetorically to spur identification and division, illustrating that violence is "fundamental to forming boundaries and identities" (Ray, 2011, p. 195). Collective violence is a recurring feature across human history in part because "carrying out violence on behalf of the group increases members' identification with the violent group" (Littman & Paluck, 2015, p. 80).

Authoritarianism

Aside from cementing in-group/out-group boundaries, violence may operate rhetorically by serving as an inventional resource for opportunistic rhetors seeking to create a narrative of

societal chaos that demands re-imposition of law and order by a strongman. Demagogues across history have turned violent spectacles to their advantage by arguing that such incidents create exigence for authoritarian leadership to squelch unrest and restore stability. In doing so, the rhetor invokes the specter of anarchy as the "dangerous end of too much democracy," cultivating a desire for forceful action to suppress the threat (Childers, 2013, p. 157). Several historical episodes illustrate the power of violence as an inventional resource.

A paradigmatic example of this phenomenon is pre-World War II Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler's rise to power was marked by several high-profile violent incidents, including the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 and the Reichstag fire of 1933, but also significant were the more mundane street fights between rank-and-file members of the Nazi party and their enemies that became regular occurrences during this era. Historians have forwarded that "political violence" was "a staple of Nazi mobilization strategy" (Childers & Weiss, 1990, p. 481) and that "there can be little doubt that violence played an important role in the rise of the Nazi movement" (Bessel, 1986, p. 131). A key tactic utilized by Hitler in the 1920s was "disrupting the meetings of his foes . . . by use of force" (Abel, 1938/2012, p. 61). Storm troopers and other paramilitary forces also frequently used violence to defend Nazi rallies against disruptions by unwanted protestors (Merkl, 1975, p. 419). Violence persisted throughout "the turbulent period from 1930 to 1932," which featured clashes in the streets between "well-trained" and "armed units" representing the National Socialists, Social Democrats, and communists (p. 99, 107). Such violence offered ordinary Nazis a chance build comradery, "an outlet of inner tensions, a chance to march and fight for a cause" and "a good excuse for barbarous aggressions against victims 'who had it coming'" (Merkl, 1975, p. 314).

The regularity of such violence had the effect of bolstering Hitler, who capitalized upon the chaos by portraying his movement as the key to restoring order. Even as they decried Germany's decline into partisan warfare, Hitler and his followers stoked violence for political gain. The Nazis understood that violence could serve as a tool for recruiting followers and building identification, and accordingly used violent tactics "less as part of a strategy aimed directly at seizing power than as propaganda" (Bessel, 1986, p. 135). Nazi leaders often intentionally provoked confrontations with their political opponents and portrayed the ensuing skirmishes as "heroic acts of self-defense against a savage and unscrupulous enemy" (Childers & Weiss, 1990, p. 492). Widespread violence allowed Nazis to present themselves as "tough characters who – in contrast to the men leading other political parties – were not afraid to back up words with deeds" (Bessel, 1986, p. 131).

In part through such violence, the Nazis convinced "millions of people that they indeed were defending German civilisation against the 'Marxist' onslaught" and "that their violent struggle was essentially defensive in nature" (Bessel, 1986, p. 141). The Nazi movement's violent activities "both demonstrated a readiness to challenge the Left on the streets and held out the promise of a restoration of order" (p. 141). Abel's (1938/2012) study of more than six hundred autobiographies of Nazi party members revealed that Hitler's ideology was highly appealing "to those who deplored the internal disunity of the German people" (p. 142). To ordinary Germans frightened by the nation's descent into civil war-like conditions, Nazism presented a simple but alluring solution: "submission to a leader acting for the common good" who can "weld the nation into a unit, eliminate injustices and internal strife" (p. 147). Writing in the 1930s before the horrors of the Third Reich had been fully realized, Abel presciently observed that "a prolonged, severe crisis favors the rise of a leader. Pained, bewildered people . .

. readily acknowledge any strong, aggressive individual who proposes a definite course of action" (p. 151).

Experiences in Fascist Italy likewise reveal the potency of violence as an inventional resource for authoritarians. Benito Mussolini realized the strategic utility of violence as a tactic for building political support while obtaining dictatorial power several years prior to Hitler's ascent. In the events leading up to Mussolini's capture of Italy's Prime Minister post, hundreds of thousands of members of Italy's fascist movement mobilized into squads for the purposes of terrorizing their socialist opponents and accelerating the collapse of Italy's failing liberal state (Ebner, 2010). After the Italian King gave Mussolini the title of Prime Minister, Mussolini "occasionally decried" the political violence waged by these squads, "but they operated as the motor that drove his government along the road to dictatorship" (Ebner, 2010, p. 37). A key justification for Mussolini's eventual assumption of dictatorial powers was that "a Fascist organized state" could best "assure law and order" (Iodice, 2018, p. 7). These historical events establish that violence is not only dangerous in the sense that it kills and maims, but also poses the rhetorical danger of giving weight to claims that authoritarianism is needed to restore the social order.

Similar dynamics have emerged in the American context, albeit moderated and tempered by the relative strength of America's liberal-democratic institutions and the lack of heavily armed civilian militias. Gunn's (2007) analysis of Huey Long's demagoguery forwarded that a key component of demagogic rhetoric is that it "*hystericizes* audiences by claiming to bring order to chaos, thereby representing strength, resolve, and absolute autonomy" (p. 6). The societal upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s accordingly created a demand among many Americans for figures capable of restoring the imagined stability of previous eras. One such figure was George

Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama who sought the presidency multiple times as both a Democrat and as an independent candidate. Rohler (1999) noted that Wallace capitalized upon the presence of protestors at his rallies "by portraying them as the 'other'—as representatives of the very forces undermining the traditional values of his faithful supporters" (p. 321). These showdowns between Wallace and hecklers "became a highly stylized feature of every Wallace rally," allowing him to muster the faithful "to the cause and fight against the satanic foe" (p. 321). Wallace turned the presence of demonstrators at his campaign events into a rhetorical advantage, as it provided "the best evidence" for his claim that liberalism had produced anarchy and disorder (Hogan, 2016, p. 92). By transforming dissidents into tangible symbols that "personified all that was wrong with America," Wallace persuasively articulated the perils of "social experimentation" to his audiences and favorably contrasted his eagerness to confront and fight the protestors head-on with the corrupt "establishment that allegedly encouraged them" (p. 92).

Richard Nixon perfected and mainstreamed the vengeful style of politics developed by George Wallace and "put the issue of law and order front and center in his 1968 campaign for the presidency" (Farber, 2006, p. 238). Nixon intuitively "understood how to tap" the feelings of marginalization and resentment that Wallace had exploited, and "knew how to lure enough working people who felt left out of the cultural code . . . to put together a winning campaign" (Farber, 1994, p. 310). The turbulent atmosphere of the period lent credence to Nixon's call for law and order. Multiple high-profile violent spectacles, such as the riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the bloody clashes between protestors and the Chicago police at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, gave conservatives an opening to argue that "such violence only indicated the need for far greater law and order in a too tolerant

society that was fast losing its moral compass" (Farber, 2006, p. 236). In the aftermath of the tumultuous summer of 1968, "white voters fled the Democratic Party" and "aligned themselves with the 'law and order' candidacies" of Nixon and Wallace (Farber, 2016, para. 12). Nixon saw highly visible expressions of discontent by liberals as an inventional opportunity and "planted war protestors at his campaign events so that there would be images of him confronting crazies on the evening news" (Engels, 2010, p. 317; Lichtman, 2009, p. 289). Speaking at the University of Tennessee with Reverend Billy Graham in 1970, Nixon made interruptions by student demonstrators "the text for his sermon," by contrasting unruly demonstrators with his civil, god-fearing supporters (Perlstein, 2008, p. 502). The theme of re-imposing law and order to suppress "riots and student protests" became "dominant topics in [Nixon's] presidential rhetoric," fueling "the resentment Americans felt for lawbreakers and criminals" with the help of "carefully choreographed political performances of anarchy" (Engels, 2010, p. 316).

Although the rhetoric and deeds of Richard Nixon and Adolf Hitler are in no way equivalent, both figures grasped the persuasive power of violence. These historical episodes, from several distinct political and social contexts, demonstrate the potential for rhetors to exploit violent spectacles for persuasive effect. This corroborates the conclusion that violence can operate as rhetoric, by instilling a "fear of the unrestrained demos" which demagogues use to call for a return to law and order (Childers, 2013, p. 175). This strategy facilitates identification, by positing an anarchic enemy whose use of violence is illegitimate and a virtuous in-group on whose behalf violence may be legitimately waged to restore the social order.

Violence as Constitutive Rhetoric at Donald Trump's Campaign Rallies

In this section, I argue that the violent spectacles that became recurring fixtures at Trump rallies served community-building functions. Consistent with the theoretical principles described

previously, the frequent violent incidents at Trump rallies illustrate the rhetorical potential of violence. For rally-goers who participated in these violent confrontations or witnessed them firsthand, along with broader national audiences that subsequently viewed these clashes on television or social media, violence was a means through which Trump built identification with supporters and thus created a constituency for strongman politics. I first explain how violent clashes reinforced in-group and out-group dichotomies for Trump supporters. Second, I argue that, far from discouraging such violence, Trump goaded violence and then capitalized upon it by framing skirmishes between his supporters and protestors as tangible evidence of an alleged breakdown in law and order that demanded decisive leadership to restore stability. Third, I show that rhetorical violence activates authoritarian personality characteristics of certain audience members, further contributing to the goal of identification-building and Trump's strongman appeal.

Constructing In-Groups and Out-Groups at Trump Rallies

For several weeks in spring of 2016, discussions of violent protests at Donald Trump rallies "commandeered the campaign news cycle" (Hackman, 2016, para. 1). After several widely publicized incidents involving Trump supporters physically clashing with protestors, and the cancellation of a planned rally in Chicago due to the threat of violence, Trump received criticism not only from Democrats, but from fellow Republicans. Ohio Governor John Kasich criticized Trump for creating a "toxic environment" where supporters "come together in violence" (qtd. in Miller & Reilly, 2016, para. 2). Florida Senator Marco Rubio stated that Trump should "take responsibility for the fact that some of the rhetoric he has used could potentially be contributing to this environment that is growing increasingly disturbing," and noted the lack of violence at other candidates' rallies, including those of Democratic candidates

Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders (qtd. in Miller & Reilly, 2016, paras. 5-6). Senator Ted Cruz of Texas similarly stated that the Trump campaign "bears responsibility for creating an environment when the candidate urges supporters to engage in physical violence, to punch people in the face" (qtd. in Weigel, 2016, para. 10). Yet, despite extensive negative media publicity stemming from these violent incidents and the sharp critiques of his competitors, the Trump campaign suffered no discernable consequence. A Monmouth University poll of Florida Republicans conducted "as the events in Chicago unfolded" found that "eighty-eight percent of those who replied" said that Trump's handling of the violent confrontations in Chicago "made no difference" for their support of him, or "made them support Trump more" (Bump, 2016, paras. 4-5). Encouraging violence, rather than harming Trump's campaign, reinforced his campaign themes and assisted community-building efforts.

In March of 2016, a Trump rally in Louisville, Kentucky became a site for violent confrontation between the pro-Trump faithful and anti-Trump demonstrators, spawning years of litigation. The incident encapsulates the community-building potential for violence and followed a script similar to the other violent outbursts at Trump rallies throughout the spring and summer of 2016. The rally was described as: "a fiery campaign speech, interrupted by protests and heckles. Then scuffles and shouts in the crowd — and Trump repeatedly saying, 'Get them out'" (Selk, 2017, para. 2). This particular incident involved three protestors—Molly Shah, Henry Brousseau, and Kashiya Nwanguma—and two perpetrators: Matthew Heimbach, a Neo-Nazi and co-founder of the white supremacist Traditionalist Worker Party, and Alvin Bamberger, a 75-year old member of an association for veterans. All three protestors were attacked by audience members, including Heimbach and Bamberger, after Trump interrupted his speech to point out

the protestors and repeatedly shout "get them out" and other variations of this phrase (Selk, 2017).

The removal of Nwanguma, a 21-year old black woman and college student, was particularly violent. Her expulsion from the rally captured that nation's attention and went viral on social media, thanks to video footage showing an oceanic mass of white men spewing vitriol at her while shoving and hassling her, as Trump is audible offscreen bellowing "get them out" (Associated Press, 2016). While being ejected, Nwanguma claimed that audience members called her a "n*gger" and a "c*nt" (Lenz, 2016, para. 2). In the aftermath of this incident, Nwanguma, Shah, and Brousseau filed lawsuits against Heimbach, Bamberger, and the Trump campaign. The Neo-Nazi, Heimbach, plead guilty to disorderly conduct but argued that he had "acted pursuant to the directives and requests of Donald J Trump," and that liability should therefore be shifted to Trump or his campaign, citing Trump's command to "get 'em out of here" (Beckett, 2017, para. 12). The elderly Bamberger denied the assault charges, but in a court filing his lawyers stated that: "Bamberger would not have acted as he did without Trump and/or the Trump Campaign's specific urging and inspiration" (Pence, 2017, p. 4). Bamberger later released an apology letter for his actions, stating that he "was caught up in the frenzy" of the crowd and Trump's incitement (qtd. in Selk, 2017, para. 43). Both Heimbach and Bamberger's defenses included (potentially self-interested) charges that Trump was responsible for the incident. The Louisville rally incident therefore produced a rare area of agreement between Trump's supporters and his protestors: that Trump's words had spurred violence.

In an opinion that "ruled against efforts by Trump's attorneys to throw out" the Nwanguma lawsuit (Blake, 2017, para. 2), Judge David Hale (2017) wrote that Trump's comment to "get 'em out of here" was "an order, an instruction, a command" to use violence,

and thus not constitutionally protected (p. 5). Although Hale's ruling was eventually invalidated by a federal appeals court, the court's reasoning hardly dispelled the link between Trump rallies and violence. Even as they ruled that Trump's statements did not legally rise to the level of inciting a riot and were constitutionally protected by the First Amendment, a trio of judges acknowledged that "in the ears of some supporters, Trump's words may have had a tendency to elicit a physical response" and concluded by issuing a stern warning that "speech is powerful" (McKeague, Griffin, & White, 2018, p. 10).

The Louisville rally vividly illustrates the community-building functions of violence. Audience members reacted to the presence of potential disruptors by acting as a unit to expel them, in the process reinforcing divisions between the white pro-Trump in-group and "others" such as Nwanguma. Video footage of the Louisville incident shows Trump supporters chanting "U.S.A! U.S.A! U.S.A.!" in the faces of protestors as they are being removed, alongside violent pushing and shoving ("Senior citizen veteran," 2016). Tur (2017) described a similar scene at a rally in New Orleans, observing how "the crowd seemed to circle and seethe," reacting to protestors' "black lives matter" chants with a counter-chant of "all lives matter" (p. 175). These violent crowd dynamics amplified and enacted Trump's message of division.

In addition, the broader media reaction further solidified group identities. For instance, local news coverage of the Nwanguma lawsuit featured an interview with a Trump supporter, Jeff Klusmeier, who distinguished peaceful rally-goers from allegedly violent protestors, stating: "these people showed up, they incited violence in their own right, and they went to disrupt the rally, so it's kind of ridiculous that they're actually filing a lawsuit when they were the instigators" ("Lawsuit filed by Louisvillians," 2016). Trump's apparent incitement of violence was treated as a gaffe (Lee, 2016; Miller, 2016), but in the end it worked to "actually help

Trump" and unify Republicans by spurring a negative "reaction against the protestors," who have been a perennial scapegoat and target for conservative resentment since the 1960s ("Trump rally violence becomes trend," 2016). Although such violent episodes did not create the "us versus them" dynamics that animate the worldview of Trump supporters, violence clearly had the potential to heighten and sharpen group boundaries.

Upon assuming the presidency, one could be forgiven for expecting that Trump's approach to rallies would change, as presidents are required to govern not just their core political base, but the entire nation. This did not occur. Trump's presidential rallies continued in the same divisive manner as his campaign, featuring antagonistic and confrontational encounters between supporters and protestors. My fieldwork revealed that the threat of violent confrontation remains a key feature of Trump rallies.

The encounters between Trump supporters and protestors that I observed during fieldwork were framed by a public service announcement that seems to be a stock feature of Trump rallies (Guilford, 2016). The audio message, which was played over loudspeakers as Trump supporters waited in line for admittance, featured a female voice (belonging to Lara Trump, the President's daughter-in-law, I believe) instructing attendees about how to react to potential protests. The announcer of this message characterized Trump as a strong supporter of the First Amendment and the right to protest but claimed that protestors "take advantage" of Trump's respect for the First Amendment by using disruptive tactics to promote their agenda. The message explained that the campaign had set aside an area reserved for demonstrators but warned that "some individuals may still seek to disrupt our patriotic event" despite this accommodation and then enlisted ordinary supporters in the project of maintaining of security by stating that "President Trump needs your help in maintaining a peaceful atmosphere." The

message instructed attendees not to "touch or harm" protestors, but to instead alert law enforcement officers to the presence of protestors by chanting "Trump! Trump! Trump!" In this way, the message encouraged Trump supporters to react to protestors by asserting their political identity through chants of "Trump!" and primed the crowd to treat protestors as interlopers and threats in need of removal. At the rally I attended in Dallas, a Trump supporter reacted to the instruction to not touch or harm protestors by sarcastically remarking "I'll do my best," provoking a round of laughter from nearby supporters.

During fieldwork at a Trump rally hosted in Grand Rapids, I saw firsthand how the threat of violence can build group identity. During the hours-long wait in line to be admitted into the Van Andel Arena, rally-goers were repeatedly heckled by passersby. These hecklers did not appear to be part of the organized counter-protest that was occurring in another part of the city, but rather seemed to be ordinary people going about their daily routines who took offense at the massive gathering of Trump supporters and associated disruption of traffic. Throughout the course of the day, the pro-Trump faithful and I were met with insults along the lines of "Trump sucks," "Trump loves Russia," and assertions that Trump supporters were members of the Ku Klux Klan, among others. During my wait in line, I interacted with Trump supporters of various dispositions. Several groups nearby me in the line treated the pre-rally line as a sort of picnic, passing the time by sharing food and telling stories from the comfort of lawn chairs. Two middle-aged white men standing behind me in the line, however, were of a less sunny disposition. Although they were amiable to me and other Trump supporters, they reacted with fury to insults and signaled a willingness to confront hecklers.

At about 12:40 PM, several hours into the wait, a black man stood across the street from the line of Trump supporters and shouted, "Trump sucks" and "Russia" repeatedly. I was

surprised that the heckler would choose to focus on the Russia scandal, as this event was the first

campaign rally held by Trump after the completion of the Mueller investigation, which

throughout the day was explained by Trump and his supporters to be an unequivocal vindication

of the president. Many Trump supporters reacted by chanting "U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" while a

woman sitting in front of me in line taunted "Trump is your president." One of the men standing

behind me behaved much more belligerently. Yelling at the top of his lungs with an aggressive

tone, he bellowed insults such as "beta boy," "little girl," and "Nancy" at the heckler. At the

time, I feared that these attacks on the heckler's masculinity could escalate the precarious

situation. What ensued was a tense standoff and further exchange of insults between the Trump

supporter next to me and the heckler across the street, and at one point the man next to me began

to walk across the street to confront the heckler until his friend reminded him of the heavy police

presence nearby. Several minutes later, the risks of a violent outbreak appeared to be once again

heightened as the second man, who had previously restrained his friend, left his spot in the line

and walked across the street to confront the heckler. A short, contemptuous conservation

between the two men ensued and ended when the heckler boarded a nearby bus and departed the

scene. No physical violence occurred, but I was struck by how quickly the Trump supporters

mobilized into a group in response to the presence of the dissenter through organized counter-

chants and expressing desire for confrontation.

I left the Grand Rapids rally finding it difficult to characterize the atmosphere. One

Trump supporter compared it to "a day at the beach." Yet, the threat of violence always seemed

to be lurking beneath the surface. Angry and profane shouting matches with hecklers were

recurrent, contributing to a feeling of latent tension throughout the event. One of the men next to

me mentioned that his wife had discouraged him from attending the event, for fear that his safety

would be compromised by some sort of violent clash. Trump supporters were dressed in ways that signaled a willingness to use force. Members of "Bikers for Trump" were present, wearing black leather. Seeing these individuals reminded me of a minor controversy Trump created about two weeks prior to the rally, by implying that Bikers for Trump and other groups might be willing to use violence on his behalf. In an interview with *Breitbart*, Trump stated:

> I have the support of the police, the support of the military, the support of the Bikers for Trump – I have the tough people, but they don't play it tough until they go to a certain point, and then it would be very bad, very bad. (qtd. in Blake, 2019, para. 5)

Many analysts interpreted this comment as offering tacit support for Trump's supporters to use violence in the event of his electoral defeat. Some of the rally-goers I saw while waiting in line seemed to embrace such an association between supporting Trump and openness to violence. Aside from the ubiquitous military paraphernalia and camouflage, National Rifle Association clothing featuring guns was prevalent. One supporter wore a black shirt bearing an illustration of a gun and the statement "I am comfortable with violence." Another young supporter wore a "BOMB THE SHIT OUT OF ISIS" pin. During the Trump speech itself, security personnel forcibly escorted a protestor from the venue, who departed by flashing two middle fingers to the crowd. The Grand Rapids police described the event as "peaceful," noting that only two arrests were made for "disorderly behavior" (Tunison, 2019, paras. 1-2). Yet, if the event was peaceful, it was a tenuous cold peace that was maintained by minimizing opportunities for Trump supporters and protestors to directly interact with each other. The uneasy atmosphere seemed to make Trump supporters respond to protestors by reacting in near unison with chants and other shows of solidarity.

Although the general public may have reacted to scenes of violence at Trump rallies with disapproval or dismay, these incidents were received differently by supporters. By clearly demarcating between an in-group and out-group, the threat of violence enhanced feelings of community among Trump supporters. From this perspective, those who clashed with protestors at rallies were not necessarily aggressors but were instead acting in self-defense against treacherous infiltrators. The atmosphere of violence at rallies encouraged supporters to seek safety in numbers by affirming collective identity and rallying to each other's defense, in opposition to the threat of disruptive protestors.

Rally Violence as an Inventional Resource for Strongman Politics

Violent spectacles also opened rhetorical opportunities for Trump, by creating a perceived exigence for a strongman to quell instability. The Louisville incident illustrated that although Trump's tirades against protestors did not necessarily rise to the level of incitement in a legal sense, his rhetoric added fuel to the fire. Regardless of the precise causal relationship between Trump's words and his supporters' violent deeds, Trump strategically capitalized on the disorder to bolster his narrative of societal chaos and decline. In doing so, Trump demonstrated the "interpretive possibilities" unlocked by violence (Browne, 1996, p. 56).

The 2016 rally in Louisville is illustrative. In the speech itself, Trump emphasized the "law and order" themes that dominated his primary and general election campaign discourse. He decried illegal immigration, crime, and the incompetent politicians who are incapable of addressing these perceived crises. Throughout the speech, Trump reserved special praise for authority figures in law enforcement and the military. He expressed his admiration for Generals Patton and MacArthur and promised to increase military spending to ensure that "nobody is going to be messin' with us" ("Louisville International Convention Center, 2016"). He boasted

about receiving an endorsement from "Sheriff Joe" Arpaio of Arizona, a controversial figure accused of police misconduct and racial profiling in the process of implementing a harsh crackdown on undocumented immigration. Trump then bragged that he is "toughest on the border . . . Trump is best on ISIS, Trump is best on military, Trump is best on security." Trump criticized the weakness of European countries on the issue of immigration, blaming their inattentiveness for terrorist attacks in Paris in November of 2015. Across a variety of policy areas, Trump painted a picture of chaos, uncertainty, and the need for a leader ruthless enough to impose order.

As described earlier, Trump's address in Louisville was frequently interrupted by violent confrontations between protestors and the audience. Trump reacted to these disruptions in a consistent pattern. He would abruptly stop speaking, sometimes while in the middle of telling a story or developing an argument. Trump would then make a scowling expression of disbelief or disgust, and shout: "get them out." Roughly 30 minutes into the speech, Trump reacted with scorn as the violent incident involving Nwanguma and Bamberger unfolded on the convention center floor. As Nwanguma was being shoved towards the exits by angry audience members, Trump mused: "you know, in the old days, which isn't so long ago, when we were less politically correct, that kind of stuff wouldn't have happened. Today we have to be so nice, so nice" ("Louisville International Convention Center," 2016). He then used the incident to segue into a broader critique of political correctness, slamming his primary opponents for being unwilling to wholeheartedly endorse the practice of waterboarding. Elsewhere in the address, Trump chanted "U.S.A.! U.S.A.! U.S.A!" in tandem with the crowd as a protestor was being ejected, and led the audience in applauding the police, who he expressed "love" for. Trump utilized the violence unfolding before him as a rhetorical resource, transforming Nwanguma and

other protestors into a symbolic stand-in for the chaos threatening the nation, and presented himself as strong leader undeterred by norms of political correctness, who was willing to aggressively deploy the police and military to tame these imagined crises.

This rhetorical move, of wistfully reminiscing upon less politically correct times when protestors could be forcefully suppressed with impunity, was a staple of Trump's rally addresses throughout the campaign. First, Trump's speech would be interrupted by a protestor. Second, Trump and his audience's attention would be captivated by (occasionally violent) jostling among the crowd as the protestors were removed. Third, Trump would use the spectacle as an opportunity to advocate violent suppression of protests to applause, laughter, and cheers from the audience. Importantly, Trump would use a joking tone and ambiguous language to maintain deniability that he had explicitly encouraged violence. At a rally in Nevada, Trump taunted: "we're not allowed to punch back anymore. I love the old days. You know what they used to do to guys like that when they were in a place like this? They'd be carried out on a stretcher, folks" (qtd. in Deaton, 2016, para. 3). Trump continued by marveling that the police had managed to handle the protestor gently, stating that "I'd like to punch him in the face" (para. 3). Although the police were obligated to avoid unnecessarily violent responses to protestors, Trump stated that he would not use a similar degree of restraint in such situations.

Variations on this theme abounded in Trump's rally rhetoric during the spring of 2016. In Oklahoma, Trump remarked that "in the good old days, they'd rip him out of that seat so fast. But today, everybody's politically correct. Our country's going to hell with being politically correct" (qtd. in Lopez, 2016, para. 6). In Michigan, Trump told supporters not to hurt protestors, but "if you do, I'll defend you in court. Don't worry about it" (para. 9). In North Carolina, Trump bemoaned that "in the good old days, this doesn't happen because they used to treat them very,

very rough . . . But today . . . they get away with murder, because we've become weak" (para. 10). In St. Louis, Missouri, just a few miles away from where massive anti-racism protests in Ferguson occurred about two years earlier, Trump asserted that "there are no consequences to protesting anymore. There used to be consequences. There are none anymore" (para. 11).

In 2016, as in 1968, the image of a violent, crime-ridden Chicago played a prominent role in conservative law and order narratives. Chicago took center stage of the presidential race in March of 2016, when the Trump campaign abruptly cancelled a rally scheduled in the city, minutes before Trump was set to speak, citing the threat of violence. Despite security personnel's best attempts to weed out protestors, "large groups of protesters . . . waited in line for seats" and "engaged in tense disputes with Trump supporters," escalating into several violent skirmishes on the floor of the convention center and on the city streets (Davey & Bosman, 2016, para. 5). The clashes, which filled Americans' television screens with images of rebellious young protestors, became fodder for Trump's strongman routine in subsequent rallies (Cheney, 2016). The Chicago brawl moved Trump's "idea of fighting to take the country back" from the realm of the "figurative to literal," and transformed Trump into "the victim of disgruntled blacks and Latinos—a development that [made] him even more relatable to his base," who sometimes imagine themselves as marginalized by cultural and demographic trends (Cobb, 2016, para. 6). For Trump supporters, the disruptive protests justified Trump's arguments about the decline of law and order and the need for a strongman. The Chicago spectacle, and Trump's reaction to it, was a prime example of the Trump campaign's uneasy relationship with violence.

The same pattern continued in Trump's presidential rhetoric. Trump only mildly toned down his flirtation with violence after assuming the presidency. In 2017 while meeting with Long Island police officers, Trump joked that officers should not "be too nice" when dealing

with criminals (Rosenthal, 2017, para. 4). While holding a rally in Montana in 2018, Trump offered praise for Representative Greg Gianforte, who had recently pled guilty to assaulting a reporter. To loud cheers, Trump beamed: "any guy who can do a body slam is my kind of guy" (Griffiths, 2018). In December of 2019 at a rally in Hershey, Pennsylvania, Trump "lamented that security wasn't rougher" with a protestor, remarking that "that particular guy wanted to be so politically correct. Ahhh! Ahhh! We don't want to be politically correct" as arena security personnel ejected a protestor (qtd. in Rupar, 2019, para. 15). Through these comments, Trump simultaneously distinguished himself from rabble-rousing protestors and portrayed himself as a strongman unafraid to use violence to restore law and order.

At the rally I attended in Minneapolis, the authoritarian undercurrents of Trumpism were crystallized for all to see. The Minneapolis rally was the most heavily protested rally I attended, featuring thousands of protestors and a massive security detail including the secret service, private security forces, and local police. Also in attendance were members of the right-wing militia group the Oath Keepers, who claimed to be providing "protection for Trump supporters from what they consider far-left violent extremists" (Garcia, 2019, para. 2). In the words of the Trump supporters I observed that day, rallying in Minneapolis—a diverse, Democratic stronghold city that also hosts a nearby college campus—required Trump to venture out of "MAGA country" and into "the belly of the beast." While protestors gathered by the thousands outside of Minneapolis' Target Center, Trump supporters were herded into a skywalk tunnel connecting a parking garage to the arena. Throughout the day, Minneapolis police officers patrolled the hallways to ensure an orderly division between supporters and protestors.

Two ongoing feuds created a particularly combustible atmosphere at the Minneapolis rally. First, in the days leading up to the rally, Trump took aim at the Democratic Mayor of

Minneapolis for charging the Trump campaign with a $500,000 security bill due to high policing costs associated with the rally (Smith & Clark, 2019). In a series of posts on Twitter, Trump accused Mayor Jacob Frey of violating his First Amendment rights and being anti-law enforcement. At the same time, the Minneapolis Police Department was undergoing a heated and public debate over a new dress code mandating that off-duty officers refrain from wearing official uniforms at political rallies (Smith & Clark, 2019). Trump and his supporters interpreted this policy as an attempt to suppress pro-Trump views among the police (Daugherty, 2019). In the eyes of Trump supporters, these disputes pitted the city's liberal government and protestors against Trump supporters and the police.

Praise for law enforcement is a common feature of Trump rallies. "Thin blue line" baseball caps, featuring a black and white American flag with a lone blue stripe through the middle, are staples of these events. The black, white, and blue version of the American flag that appears on these hats has become an emblem of the "Blue Lives Matter" cause, which emerged as a reaction to the "Black Lives Matter" movement and posits that protestors of racial inequality have fueled a "war on cops," which in turn bestows "the status of a victim class on police" and dovetails with Trump's 2016 campaign theme that the social order is collapsing (Smith, 2017, para. 36). At the Minneapolis event, adoration of the police was constant and ubiquitous. Throughout the day, as officers of the Minneapolis police department patrolled the skywalk halls that hundreds of Trump supporters were packed into, supporters greeted law enforcement officials with standing ovations and applause. Several police officers gave the Trump supporters high fives and some even stopped to take "selfie" photographs with Trump supporters clad in campaign gear.

Trump supporters took pride in these expressions of warmth toward the police, remarking: "you think this happens at a Bernie rally?" and "at a Democrat rally, they'd be booed." At the rally, the police served as a literal buffer between Trump's allies and opponents, enacting visually the division between police-respecting Trump supporters and disorderly liberal protestors often constructed in Trump's rhetoric. This dynamic culminated in a standing ovation for local police officers who were brought on stage during Trump's speech while wearing "Cops for Trump" shirts, as nearly the entire crowd stood on their feet and gave extended applause at Trump's behest.

The Minneapolis rally was also the most heavily disrupted Trump rally I attended. On at least six occasions, there was a dramatic scene as a protestor was ejected by security personnel. The ejections followed a familiar pattern. The surrounding crowd would identify a protestor by pointing at them, usually after the protestor made their presence known by blowing a whistle or screaming. Shortly after this, the audience's attention would shift to the unfolding confrontation between a protestor and nearby Trump supporters, leading to a loud round of booing. These boos would turn to cheers as security personnel identified the protestor and escorted them out of the arena. Trump offered commentary on several of the ejections by exclaiming: "get 'em out," "go home to mommy" and "man, do the cops act fast. He's already gone" ("Rally in Minneapolis," 2019). After the latter exclamation, Trump changed the subject from Democratic climate change proposals to his love of law enforcement and the need to defeat Minneapolis's "rotten mayor." In Minneapolis, Trump transformed the spectacle of protestor ejections into material proof of the imperative to reinforce the "thin blue line" that separates law-abiding citizens from lawless protestors, in turn positioning himself as the "law and order" president.

Trump rallies, through lionization of both Trump and the police as panaceas for disorder,

cultivate an attitude of uncritical and undemocratic deference toward law enforcement

institutions in their disputes with minority communities. The role of violence is crucial, as the

visible scenes of unruly protestors that accompany Trump rallies provide justification for

Trump's argument that order must be re-imposed by a strongman. By night's end at the rally in

Minneapolis, such violent scenes were plentiful and broadcasted around the country. Media

coverage noted the flaring tensions between Trump supporters and protestors as rally attendees

flooded out onto the streets after Trump's speech, the police's use of "pepper spray in an effort to

quell one disturbance," the burning of Trump memorabilia by protestors, and an arrest of a

person made by police "in connection with the rally and the protesting" (Walsh, 2019, paras. 5-

12).

Violence as an Activator of the "Authoritarian Personality"

These rhetorical properties of violence—its capacity to foster social bonding and stoke

anxieties about crumbling law and order—facilitated identification between Trump and his core

supporters, by playing into the tendency of humans to seek safety within an in-group when

confronted by situations of threat. Violence may therefore activate what psychologists have

described as "the authoritarian personality," which is "a stable, learned, social attitude with three

facets: submission to authority, staunch conventionalism, and anger and aggression toward out-

groups" (Borum, 2014, pp. 287-288; Altemeyer, 1996). Authoritarianism in this case does not

refer to a political ideology and is not a synonym for totalitarian governance, although in some

circumstances people with an authoritarian personality may support such government.

Authoritarianism is a cognitive framework characterized by antipathy towards out-groups,

idealization of an in-group, deference to authority figures, and an impetus towards conformity

(Vials, 2017). Authoritarians "obey," "seek order," follow leaders, "eschew diversity, fear 'the other,' act aggressively toward others, and, once they have identified friend from foe, hold tight to their decision" (MacWilliams, 2016, p. 717).

Extensions of Theodor Adorno's original authoritarian personality concept, which described authoritarianism as a kind of inherited trait (see: Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Sanford, & Levinson, 1951/2019), have instead emphasized that the mental structures of authoritarianism are cultivated through "nurture" rather than "nature" (Borum, 2014, p. 288). Authoritarian attitudes can "be 'acquired' through social learning processes" but remain dormant "unless and until the 'right' conditions emerge" (Morgan & Shanahan, 2017, p. 427). For instance, Feldman and Stenner's (1997) research demonstrated that "the manifestations of authoritarianism—intolerance, prejudice, punitiveness, and the like—will be more pronounced under conditions of threat" (p. 765). Violence can be one mechanism for generating threat perceptions and activating authoritarian sentiments. This analysis of violence at Trump rallies shows starkly that violence fuels "us versus them" logic, triggering the "latent potential" for authoritarian inclinations (Roiser & Willig, 2002, p. 91). These violent spectacles allowed Trump's audiences to experience "vicarious participation in the domination and punishment of out-groups," which "is a core part of the authoritarian wish to follow a domineering leader" (Smith & Hanley, 2018, p. 196)

The connection between Trumpism and authoritarian characteristics is well-documented (Cox, Lienesch, & Jones, 2017). MacWilliams' (2016) national poll of 1,800 registered voters found a statistically significant relationship between authoritarian sentiments and support for Trump. This explains why, during the Republican primaries, Trump was "the main beneficiary" of media focus on the Paris and San Bernardino terrorist attacks, and other "law and order"

issues relating to immigration and crime (MacWilliams, 2016, p. 717). Chattopadhyay's (2018) analysis of election survey data also found that "the authoritarian predisposition of voters played a prominent role in predicting favorability for Trump" (p. 413). Womick, Rothmund, Azevedo, King, and Jost's (2018) study showed that Trump supporters "were significantly more likely to exhibit group-based dominance and authoritarian aggression than backers of other Republican candidates" (p. 7). Similarly, McAdams (2017) argued that "Trump holds a deep and primal appeal for millions of Americans . . . because of how effectively he channels the psychology of dominance" (p. 11).

Indeed, the authoritarian personality manifests itself in plainly undemocratic views held by some Trump supporters. A poll conducted by Ipsos and the University of Virginia Center for Politics found that 31% of Republicans believed that "the president's term should be extended two years" to compensate for "Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election" (UVA Center for Politics, 2019, para. 2). At the rally I attended in Dallas in October of 2019, Trump supporters made light of fears that Trump would unduly prolong his presidency by chanting "8 more years" and "12 more years" (see also: Lizza, 2020). Investment of faith in a strongman capable of dominating out-groups and quelling chronic insecurity was a potent means for Trump supporters to bring a sense of certainty and stability to their lives during a time of economic and cultural transition. Violence, at Trump rallies as well as other places, helped make such a strongman narrative believable by creating a perceived need for domineering leadership and by clearly defining the in-group and out-group.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have synthesized my firsthand experience at Trump rallies with those of other observers and demonstrated that violence was a ritualistic feature of Trump rallies that

helped construct a beleaguered community. This is not to say that Trump supporters consciously waged violence for the intended purpose of community-building. Rather, at heavily protested rallies where rival social groups collide, violence functioned as a mechanism for enforcing in-group/out-group divisions. For Trump supporters, violence enhanced solidarity among in-group members and articulated a scorned out-group. Violence offered a positive means to demonstrate fealty to other community members, while building negative identification against protestors, who served as a scapegoat against which a group identity can be defined. This finding adds further depth to our understanding of the fraught relationship between rhetoric and violence, as Trump rallies exemplify violence's capacity to function as constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987; Crosswhite, 2014; Engels, 2013).

I also clarified why Trump maintains an ambiguous relationship to violence, alternatingly condemning and encouraging it. Trump thrives in situations of chaos and unrest. He "wants voters stirred up, angry and afraid," which ironically makes "disorderly and confrontational protesters" an unwitting ally in his efforts to present himself as a stabilizing strongman figure (Farber, 2016, para. 15). Visible displays of dissent are vital to his strongman narrative. There is scant evidence for Trump's argument that America faces an epidemic of crime, and by many measures, the nation is much safer than it was in the 1980s and 1990s (Baer, 2016). Moreover, data shows that Trump supporters do not typically live in areas with significant immigrant populations (Ojeda, Wynn, & Chen, 2016); nor is there any evidence that immigrants are associated with greater rates of crime (Flagg, 2018). Since Trump's narrative of a violent, immigration-fueled crime wave is not true, he is at a loss to produce tangible evidence of a breakdown in law and order. In this context, rowdy protestors serve as material proof that political correctness has run amok, allowing Trump to persuasively argue to his supporters that

American society has become too permissive and requires a top-down imposition of order. Although it is not clear if Trump has actively taken steps to choreograph the presence of protesters at his events as Nixon did (Lichtman, 2009; Perlstein, 2008), Trump's repeated expressions of nostalgia for "the good old days" when protestors were violently suppressed and the ritualized ejections of protestors and associated violent scuffles are a welcome inventional resource, illustrating the supposed lawlessness of his opponents and allowing Trump to demonstrate his own toughness.

This analysis also helps explain why demagogues across a variety of historical contexts have found strategic value in violence. Trump is often conceived of by his opposition as an aberration, a singular figure unlike any who has come before, and "a dangerous outlier whose removal would restore America to normality" (Heer, 2017, para. 9). Although Trump has indeed upended many conventions of American politics and has a resume unlike any other occupant of the White House, when it comes to violence, he is following a familiar playbook. Trump's demonization of political protestors and use of violence as an inventional resource is a strategy that can be traced back to at least the era of Richard Nixon and George Wallace, and also has parallels to tactics used in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. These historical episodes confirm the rhetorical potential of violence. The recurring violence of Trump rallies, when considered alongside past experiences with strongman figures, also serves as a warning that violence can activate latent authoritarian sentiments in audiences, by creating a perception of threat that demands in-group consolidation and identification with a forceful leader. Discovering the scenarios under which authoritarian personality types may be activated should therefore be an urgent priority for scholars across a variety of disciplines.

Another implication relates to the state of political discourse in the United States. As is apparent after a review of Trump's remarks during the 2016 election and afterwards, the norm against political figures endorsing violence has been shattered. Trump's frequent remarks goading his supporters to rough up protestors did not derail his presidential bid and likely improved his standing with certain authoritarian voters. The consequences of the deterioration of this norm are dire. Every year since Trump's victory has witnessed a steady increase in the frequency of hate crimes (Eligon, 2018).

Several incidents stand out as potentially influenced by the vitriolic climate of the Trump era. In 2017, a white man from Kansas shot two Indian immigrants, after calling them terrorists and yelling "get out of my country" (Burch, 2017). Later that year in Charlottesville, Virginia, white supremacists wearing the same red "Make America Great Again" hats found at Trump rallies murdered an activist in a vehicular attack, prompting Trump to issue a statement denouncing the violence but praising the "very fine people on both sides" of the white supremacist "Unite the Right" rally. The Charlottesville rally was organized in part by none other than Matthew Heimbach (Goggin, 2017). In October of 2018 as the nation prepared to vote in the midterm election, Cesar Sayoc, "a fervent Trump supporter" who owned a van covered in pro-Trump bumper stickers, mailed pipe bombs to a long list of the scapegoats pilloried at Trump rallies, including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and *CNN*, which Trump has called part of the "fake news media" and the "enemy of the people" (Weiser, 2019). Later that month, a white nationalist killed 11 people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Based on social media posts, the killer apparently targeted Jews because of his obsession with "a conspiracy theory insinuating that the migrant caravan . . . which President Donald Trump and conservative media have treated as an existential threat to the United States, is a Jewish plot" (Lind, 2018,

para. 5). The following spring in New Zealand, another mass shooter killed 49 Muslims in a place of worship. In an online manifesto posted shortly before the attack, the shooter used the same language of immigrant "invasion" that has been used by the Tree of Life shooter and by Donald Trump while discussing the migrant caravan and border security (Ward, 2019).

At a rally in Florida during May of 2019, Trump, referring to undocumented migrants, asked the audience: "how do you stop these people?" (qtd. in Rieger, 2019, para. 1). In response, a supporter shouted: "shoot them." Trump acknowledged the comment by pausing and smirking, before responding "only in the Panhandle can you get away with that statement" (para. 3). Trump then paused his speech for about 10 seconds, allowing the audience to cheer. Through this exchange, and his failure to condemn his supporters' call for violence, Trump "gave tacit approval to the use of violence against immigrants" (Goldberg, 2019, para. 1). Several months later, "a 21-year-old white man," who had posted an online manifesto with passages that "closely mirror Trump's rhetoric" on immigration, entered a Walmart in El Paso armed with a semi-automatic rifle and murdered 22 civilians while wounding dozens more (Rucker, 2019, paras. 3-8). Like Trump and the perpetrator of the massacre in New Zealand earlier that year, the El Paso shooter likened immigration to an "invasion" (Baker & Shear, 2019). The massacre ranks among the deadliest mass shootings in American history (Lawler, 2019).

Trump is not directly culpable for any individual attack, but his rhetoric contributes to a toxic political atmosphere where racist sentiments and threats of violence are casually exchanged. Although "it is notoriously difficult to demonstrate effect," it is abundantly "clear" that "rhetoric can create an environment in which violence can seem logical, necessary, justifiable, and even righteous" (Engels, 2015, pp. 15-16). Trump's repeated jokes about assaulting protestors have further normalized violent rhetoric. In a nation where deadly weapons

are widely accessible but treatment for mental illness is often unavailable, such statements pose a

clear safety risk. To say Trump bears no blame for such hate crimes is to willfully ignore the vast

reach and unrivaled influence of presidential rhetoric, which has the power to define "political

reality" (Zarefsky, 2004, p. 611). Restoring the norm against political leaders condoning violence

requires reversing the group identity dynamics described in this essay. Violence needs to be

transformed from an activity that bears a positive social valence and connotates membership in a

political community, into something taboo. This is a Herculean task with no easy solutions, but

at a minimum requires building "a culture where the words of a maniacal bully no longer

energize the most susceptible" (Mattson, 2018, p. 121). To restore this norm and work toward a

more peaceful public sphere demands that political leaders consistently condemn, rather than

condone, violence.

Chapter VI

"It's All Very Simple": Conspiracy Theory Rhetoric at Trump Rallies

On July 31st, 2018, President Donald Trump held a campaign rally in Tampa, Florida to promote the gubernatorial candidacy of Ron DeSantis, a Republican member of the House of Representatives. The contents of Trump's speech were unremarkable. He bragged about the economy, declared himself the most popular person in the history of the Republican Party, and "took aim at his usual list of piñatas, boogeymen and political targets" (Rogers, 2018, para. 3). Yet, for certain Trump supporters, this rally was a watershed moment. As DeSantis delivered remarks introducing the President, television cameras captured "a peculiar sign" held by a Trump supporter (Carter, 2018, para. 1). Clearly visible in the foreground of television broadcasts of the rally was a homemade paper sign containing only the caption: "WE ARE Q."

The sign was a reference to the far-right "QAnon" conspiracy theory that holds Trump is waging a crusade against a powerful network of child sex traffickers who are plotting a coup against his administration. In this moment, a fringe theory that had been gestating since October of 2017 "surged into public view" (McNeill, 2020, para. 9; Barkun, 2018). Several prominent media outlets, scrambling to explain the surprising number of supporters at the rally with "Q" clothing and signs, devoted airtime to detailing the QAnon community's origins and beliefs (Ohlheiser, 2018). The morning after the Tampa rally, when a reporter asked White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders about the theory, she deflected ("Press Briefing," 2018). Later that year, Vice President Mike Pence shared on social media, and later deleted, an image of him with Florida law enforcement members, including one Sergeant wearing "a red and black patch" with "a bold letter Q and the phrase 'Question the Narrative'" (Haag, 2018, para. 1). Since these incidents, the QAnon community has established itself as a visible fixture at Trump's

campaign rallies. Reveling in their newfound attention, one believer in the theory used "a livestream to 45,000 YouTube subscribers" to triumphantly declare: "This is the moment!" (Ohlheiser, 2018, para. 3). This series of events makes it imperative to explain how such an outrageous theory could attract such a large following.

Widespread belief in conspiracy theories is not a new phenomenon in American politics. At several crucial junctures in the nation's past, including as far back as the revolutionary era, conspiracy theories have been widely believed and influenced events (Gruber, 1969; Walker, 2013). Nonetheless, Donald Trump's election remains a striking development. Conspiracy theories have gone mainstream (Barkun, 2017). According to presidential historian Douglas Brinkley, "we've never had a president who trades in conspiracy theories, who prefers lies instead of fact" as Trump does (qtd. in Nicholas, 2019, para. 4). Trump's engagement in conspiracy rhetoric is well-known. Alongside other egregious examples, Trump has:

> publicly dabbled with JFK conspiracy theories, accused investigations into his administration as being part of a "deep state," alleged that he was wiretapped by Barack Obama, claimed that his voice on the infamous "Access Hollywood" tape was faked, and that he lost the popular vote in the 2016 election due to voter fraud. (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 130)

Donald Trump, after all, "emerged on the political scene" by stoking the racist conspiracy theory that Barack Obama was not born in America in an effort to delegitimize the nation's first black president (Prokop, 2016, para. 1). Trump's reliance on conspiracy theories was also evident in the decision to conclude the 2016 campaign with a final advertisement that identified billionaire donor George Soros as part of a network of global elites profiting at the expense of ordinary Americans (Vogel, Shane, & Kingsley, 2018). As with many of his claims, there was no

evidence to support it. During his presidency, Trump has drawn upon conspiracy theories to explain away the various controversies and investigations he has confronted. For example, Trump has alleged that a "deep state" of unelected bureaucrats has set their will against his and sought to thwart his administration.

More broadly, conspiracy theory animates Trump's worldview and infects nearly every aspect of his rhetoric, including his most basic economic arguments. Trump's conspiracy rhetoric can be "boiled down to a single unifying claim: Political elites have abandoned the interests of regular Americans in favor of foreign interests" (Atkinson, DeWitt, & Uscinski, 2017, p. 175). Consider two of Trump's core campaign themes: that immigration and lop-sided free trade agreements have economically weakened the nation. Even these simple anti-immigration and anti-trade arguments are expressed by Trump in terms of a conspiracy to benefit elites at the expense of hardworking citizens. Since 2016, Trump has argued that the United States immigration system has been consciously designed by corrupt politicians to engineer "open borders" and enrich powerful elites while impoverishing ordinary Americans, all with the cooperation of the media who are allegedly participating in a cover up of these facts (Trump, 2016). Similarly, on the issue of free trade, Trump has constructed a narrative where "corrupt elites" have "conspired to send manufacturing jobs out of America" and "colluded" with foreign trade partners "in this betrayal of America" to serve the interests of corporate campaign donors ("How Donald Trump," 2016, para. 4). According to Trump's "free trade conspiracy theories," initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) are part of a "China-backed plot" to weaken the United States (Palen, 2016, paras. 5-10). Importantly, Trump integrates both the anti-immigration and anti-trade sentiments into a single unifying conspiratorial argument. Trump explains the alleged harms of both immigration and free trade as stemming from the ideology of

"globalism," which by premeditated design allows "shuttered factories" and "unchecked immigration" as part of "an economic and political system rigged against the American people for the benefit of shadowy forces in the news media, the banks and the government" (Stack, 2016, paras. 1-3). Conspiracy theories are therefore fundamental to the rise of Trump.

Trump's conspiracy theories clearly resonate with many supporters. After conducting immersive research on Tea Party enthusiasts in Louisiana for five years, Hochschild (2016) concluded that this group overwhelmingly supports Donald Trump "*because* of his penchant for conspiracies, not in spite of it" (para. 2). A study conducted by researchers at the University of Cambridge supported this thesis, finding that voting for Trump was "associated with a wide range of conspiratorial beliefs – from science denial to takeover plots by Muslim migrants" ("Brexit and Trump voters," 2018, para. 1). Among Trump's most passionate supporters, who organize themselves online and through channels separate from the mainstream Republican party, conspiracy theories thrive (Herndon, 2019). Moreover, Trump's campaign rallies play a role in spreading conspiracy theories. While conducting rhetorical fieldwork at Trump rallies, I observed how these rallies regularly attract not only passionate supporters of Trump, but also a sizeable and visible contingent of QAnon believers. Trump supporters at these rallies brandish "Q" clothing and memorabilia, discuss the QAnon theory and other conspiracy narratives, distribute literature, and share information about where to read more about these theories online. Alongside their other functions, Trump rallies activate and mobilize a grassroots network of conspiracy theorizers.

Normalization of conspiracy theorizing poses a unique set of risks. Conspiracy theories can lead individuals to "act on dubious information, engage in scapegoating and, worse, attempt and commit violence and murder" (Atkinson et al., 2017, p. 165). The FBI now considers

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"conspiracy theory-driven domestic extremists," including believers in QAnon and "Pizzagate," to be a domestic terrorism risk (Collins, 2019). In December of 2016, a believer in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory entered a pizzeria in Washington D.C. and fired a rifle, prompting widespread panic and a police lockdown of the area (Lipton, 2016). The man claimed to be investigating unfounded claims that the restaurant was part of a child sex-slavery ring led by Hillary Clinton (Haag & Salam, 2017). In another frightening incident, in January of 2020, a Colorado woman was arrested for formulating a "plot to kidnap her son" from protective custody "through a raid conducted by QAnon believers" (Shammas, 2020, para. 4). Alarmingly, the QAnon theory has been embraced not only by those on the margins of the Internet, but by Republican congressional candidates (Kaplan, 2020; McIntire & Roose, 2020). As leader of the Republican Party, Trump has encouraged rather than discouraged the growing conspiratorial sentiment on the political right by using his Twitter account to amplify users who "portray [Trump's] political opponents as satanist pedophiles" (Rupar, 2020).

Given the prominence of conspiratorial thinking in contemporary American politics, there is an urgent need to understand such thinking and better comprehend how conspiracy can drift from the fringes into the political mainstream. The stakes are high: "Understanding why people believe in such conspiracies is vital," as the normalization of conspiracy theorizing may hinder informed political decision-making (Suessenbach & Moore, 2019, p. 1). Fringe theorizers may find unexpected influence in an era where the president "pays close attention to information circulated via social media and partisan news sources to an unprecedented degree" (Justice & Bricker, 2019, p. 410). In such an environment, conspiracy theories may have a real impact on government policy. Notably, Trump's attempt to leverage security assistance as part of a "pressure campaign on Ukraine," which eventually raised concerns about abuse of presidential

powers and sparked his impeachment, "began as an effort" by Trump "to vindicate the conspiracy theory" that "Ukraine stole Democratic emails in 2016 and framed Russia for the crime" (Chait, 2019, paras. 1-6; Bertrand, 2020; Shuster & Bergengruen, 2019). Further illustrating the influence of these theories on government policy, Attorney General Bill Barr appointed a federal prosecutor to investigate "right-wing conspiracy theories" about the origins of Robert Mueller's probe into links between Russia and the Trump campaign (Kirby, 2019, para. 1). Since conspiracy theorizing is not solely the province of those on the margins of society but appears to influence the decision-making of those whose hands are firmly on the levers of governmental power, it is imperative to understand how such thinking achieves widespread appeal.

Unfortunately, existing literature on conspiracy theories often explains how elite rhetors employ conspiracy rhetoric for strategic purposes, neglecting how conspiracies function for adherents. Neville-Shepard's (2019) study of the conspiracy rhetoric of Trump, for instance, sought "to better understand the 'supply side' of conspiracy theories, or how they function not for their adherents but for the elite rhetors who rely on them" (p. 180). Kelley-Romano and Carew (2019) also adopted a top-down focus by analyzing Donald Trump's role as an advocate of the birther conspiracy and his strategic use of conspiracy rhetoric to enhance his "political advantage" (p. 37). Similarly, Matheson's (2016) study of conspiracies theories involving the Jade Helm military exercises utilized a press release from Representative Louie Gohmert (R-TX) as its primary object of analysis.

Yet, the story of the rapid spread of conspiracy theories such as QAnon is in part a story of "grass-roots organizers flexing their muscle to get a message out," rather than only a story of top-down influence (View, 2018, para. 18). The spread of the QAnon theory demonstrates the

power of diffuse conspiratorial networks to "drive national conversations" (para. 5). The QAnon theory has obtained a large following despite efforts by pro-Trump media personalities and the institutional Republican Party to distance Trump from the theory, fearing that association with QAnon could damage Trump's image (Herndon, 2019; Sommer, 2018). Rhetorical scholarship on conspiracy must therefore account for the fact that conspiracy theories are often "the product of a relatively decentralized, 'grassroots' sense-making effort" (Wood, 2018, p. 488) and "are just as likely to be generated and spread horizontally as they are to be transmitted from elites to the masses" (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2016, p. 824).

In addition, many studies examine conspiracy theorization as primarily a digital phenomenon, overlooking how networks of conspiracy theorizers may be grown through offline exchanges. Atkinson et al. (2017) likened the Internet to "the modern-day water cooler" and explained how conspiracy theories are disseminated online (p. 173). Similarly, Warner and Neville-Shepard's (2014) study approached conspiracy theories as a phenomenon enabled by online media echo chambers, arguing that "it is the nature of information dissemination in the digital age that allows conspiracies to continue to thrive" despite the existence of a "digital media environment that facilitates easy fact checking" (pp. 1-2). It is undeniable that new media platforms have facilitated the spread of misinformation, but attention to how conspiracy theorists mobilize offline is also needed in an era where believers in "conspiracy theories are increasingly making their presence known offline, including at President Donald Trump's campaign rallies" (Relman, 2019). Moreover, conspiracy theory played an important role in American politics long before the Internet existed (Walker, 2013).

Large-scale, physical gatherings of conspiracy theorists may be a particularly powerful means of spreading conspiratorial knowledge that is overlooked by digital accounts. Donald

Trump's campaign rallies draw conspiracy theorists out of the shadowy corners of the Internet and into the presidential spotlight, demonstrating the strength and vibrance of these communities to external audiences and combatting feelings of powerlessness and marginalization held by conspiracy theory adherents (Abalakina-Paap, Stephan, Craig, & Gregory, 1999; Hofstadter, 1964, p. 85; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Relman, 2019). Rallies also offer a prime opportunity to expand the conspiracy network's reach, by recruiting new believers through face-to-face encounters and circulating ideas and information about how to access additional content online. Clearly, attention to the offline dimensions of conspiracy theorizing is needed to supplement existing accounts of online dissemination of conspiracy theories. In this essay, I extend existing scholarship on conspiracy rhetoric by providing an account of how conspiracy theories are disseminated through rallies.

In what follows I argue that the conspiracies circulated by Donald Trump and his supporters can be illuminated based on the functions these theories perform for adherents. I develop this argument in four parts. I first outline the recurring forms that conspiracy theories take and the basic functions that conspiracy theories fulfill, arguing that existing literature on conspiracy rhetoric struggles to account for situations where conspiracies achieve widespread endorsement. Second, I argue that in situations where conspiracy theories resonate widely, scholars should closely examine the functions that these theories perform for adherents. Third, I integrate insights derived from rhetorical fieldwork at Trump rallies to argue that conspiracy theories perform three unique functions for Trump supporters: blame absolution, reassurance that dramatic changes to society are unneeded, and community-building. Finally, I conclude by explaining the implications derived from this analysis.

The Form of Conspiracy Theories

The basic formal characteristics of conspiracy theories have been clearly articulated by scholars from a variety of fields. Conspiracy theories are "commonly defined as explanatory beliefs about a group of actors that collude in secret to reach malevolent goals" (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018, p. 897). Since conspiracy theories often assume the form of stories of "good versus evil," they "by their very nature, are communicated narratively" (Desantis & Morgan, 2004, p. 320). Conspiracy rhetoric is characterized by several recurring "formal elements" including "the heroes, the villains, the relationships between heroes and villains, and the dominant narrative theme of infiltration" (Kelley-Romano, 2008, p. 110). Bricker (2013) further noted formal qualities that most conspiracy theories share, such as: "an alleged truth hidden by [the] existing order; a heroic investigative reporter; and, although the underlying truth remains hidden, anyone with enough fortitude can find the evidence" (p. 222). Such rhetoric commonly posits a shadowy, secretive network of elites as the villains behind a nefarious plot, while ordinary citizens are relegated to victim status.

Importantly, the malleability of this basic narrative template allows conspiracy rhetoric to resonate for people with very different views. Conspiracy narratives can feature a variety of antagonists, including: "societal leaders," "governmental institutions," corporations such as the fossil fuel or pharmaceutical industries, and "stigmatized minority groups," such as Jews or Muslims (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 771). Progressives may subscribe to conspiracy theories because of "their skepticism towards the motives of corporations," while conspiracy theories also "manipulate conservative fears of invasive government run amok" and cultural anxieties about out-groups (Bricker & Justice, 2019, p. 179).

Scholars have also outlined recurrent functions served by conspiracy theories. On a fundamental level, "conspiracy theories are born from uncertainty" (Miller, 2002, p. 50) and operate as an "ongoing sense-making procedure," explaining anomalous or frightening events by exploiting the basic human tendency to engage in pattern-seeking (Wood, 2018, p. 485; Ellis, 2018; van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018, p. 901). Conspiracy theories function to reduce uncertainty by creating the illusion of order and control in a world that is frequently random (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017, p. 539). This helps conspiracy believers preserve the notion that history unfolds in a predictable manner, as tragic or world-changing events are portrayed as not mere chance occurrences or accidents, but as the results of orchestrated plots. For example, understanding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy as part of a secret scheme by elites to gain power may make the world seem less chaotic compared to alternative explanations (Miller et al., 2016, p. 825).

Conspiracy theories also serve a "scapegoating function" by outlining friends and enemies (Landes, 2007, p. 14), responding to and creating "a strong ingroup identity and a sense of outgroup threat" (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018, p. 902). In this context, conspiracy theories "valorize the self and the in-group by allowing blame for negative outcomes to be attributed to others" (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 540). Donskis (1998) noted that conspiracy theories appear wherever "there is the need either for overgeneralized and simplified explanation of social evil or for the quest for enemies" (p. 356).

The conspiracies circulated by Donald Trump and his supporters possess these familiar formal qualities and fulfill these basic functions, but unlike many conspiracy theories that have remained fringe, several Trump-related conspiracy theories have achieved widespread endorsement. Trump's conspiracy-driven views on immigration and trade now have a

meaningful constituency in the Republican Party, as the Republican base's "hostility" to "internationalist big business," "big finance," "the international economy more generally," and "immigrants" has weakened the GOP's traditional support for free trade and liberalized immigration (Frieden, 2019, p. 46).

Beyond the Republican Party's acceptance of Trump's skepticism towards "globalism," several other conspiracy theories enjoy growing support among Republicans. These theories, rather than fading into obscurity, have been repeated by Republican officials on national television and in the halls of Congress (Hudson, 2019; Knutson, 2019; Panetta, 2019). Strong evidence indicates that many Republican voters now endorse Trump's narrative that his administration has been beset by sinister forces acting as a "deep state" to thwart his agenda. A 2018 Monmouth University Polling Institute poll found that 31% of Republicans believe that a deep state consisting of "unelected government and military officials who secretly manipulate or direct national policy" "*definitely* exists" ("Public troubled," 2018, para. 8). Similarly, in an *Economist*/YouGov poll about the impeachment inquiry into Trump, "70 percent of Republicans" responded that "the 'deep state' is trying to overthrow Trump" (Frankovic, 2019a, para. 5). Another *Economist*/YouGov poll found that "among Republicans who have heard of the term 'Deep State,' 83 percent believe it is trying to undermine Trump" (Frankovic, 2019b, para. 13). A poll conducted by Oliver and Wood (2019), both professors of political science, found that 51% of Republicans believe a related theory propagated by Trump that Russia's interference into the 2016 election was "a story planted by CrowdStrike, a security company that was hiding Ukrainian efforts to aid the Clinton campaign."

Although conspiracy theories are found in all cultures (van Prooijen & van Vugt, 2018, p. 785), only certain conspiracy theories gain significant endorsement (Howell, 2012; Warner &

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Neville-Shepard, 2014). These resonant conspiracy theories stand out by maintaining a stubborn

following among a sizeable minority of Americans. Such resonant conspiracy theories are more

dominant in the rhetoric of Trump and his supporters than in any other mainstream political

movement in decades. It is important to understand why Trumpian conspiracy theories have been

so much more powerful than the thousands of other conspiracies "circulating in public

discourse" that "exhibit these formal characteristics" yet are not "widely believed" (Bricker,

2013, p. 222).

Unfortunately, the formal approach to analyzing conspiracy theories initially developed

by Hofstadter, who traced the recurrence of the paranoid style throughout American history,

"falls short in explaining the ways that producers of these narratives successfully appeal to those

outside the extremist fringe" (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 120; Bricker, 2013, pp. 221-222). Focus

on the form of conspiracy theories alone may tempt scholars into dismissing believers as

backwards, pathological, and irrational, as Hofstadter did, rather than considering what benefits

these beliefs provide for adherents (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 120; Olmsted, 2018). I argue that

"understanding the broad appeal" of resonant conspiracy theories requires "moving past the

obvious formal characteristics of the paranoid style" and examining the functional qualities of

these narratives (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 129). Assessing the state of research on conspiracy,

van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) argued that:

> Much is still unknown about how social influence shapes conspiracy beliefs. For
>
> instance, what determines if conspiracy theories spread to a large audience, and what
>
> makes them persuasive? (p. 904)

In what follows, I extend existing research on conspiracy rhetoric and explain "why the paranoid

style resonates widely in some cases but not in others" (Howell, 2012, p. 432).

The Functions of Resonant Conspiracy Theories

Trump's conspiracy theories contain the general formal characteristics outlined by Hofstadter (1964) and other scholars but may be distinguishable from other theories on the basis of function. Beyond the most elemental functions performed by many conspiracy theories—such as uncertainty reduction and scapegoating (Howell, 2012; Landes, 2007)—certain conspiracy theories may become "particularly viral" when they offer potential adherents additional benefits (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 124). Miller (2002) noted that "desire for explanation is not the only reason that audiences accept conspiracy theories" (p. 50) and that audiences overlook logical inconsistencies and "accept conspiracy theories because they are interested in more than just facts – they are interested in judgements of the institutions and actors involved" (p. 52). Miller additionally argued that conspiracy theories can operate as "coded social critiques" that "serve as a way for non-expert citizens to critique the placement and administration of power" (p. 53).

In what follows, I outline three additional, interrelated characteristics of certain resonant conspiracy narratives. Conspiracy theories may achieve widespread resonance by: (1) advancing a blame-absolving narrative of in-group innocence, (2) suggesting reassuring solutions to structural problems, and (3) providing grounds for identification among believers. These factors do not explain why conspiracy theories succeed or fail in every case, as there are other contextual variables that influence the resonance of a theory. Nonetheless, outlining these functions contributes to our understanding of why conspiracy theories are appealing to many individuals.

First, conspiracy theories may resonate because they allow particular social groups to cleanse their hands of responsibility for society's ills. Consistent with Burke's (1970) observation that "there is guilt intrinsic to the social order," necessitating cycles of victimage and

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redemption (p. 224), scholars have noted how conspiracy theories can be used to scapegoat out-groups (Howell, 2012). A function closely related to externalizing blame is the capacity of these theories to generate feelings of righteousness among believers. Certain conspiracy theories may resonate if they contain a compelling "narrative of innocence," wherein a virtuous community suffers some great tragedy or injustice, setting "the stage for both nostalgia and paranoia over how that innocence was lost" (Sturken, 1997, p. 72). Conspiracy theories of this type function "defensively, to relieve the self or in-group from a sense of culpability for their disadvantaged position" (Douglas et al., 2017, p. 540). According to such logic, "average people . . . can never assume responsibility for their fate, since the world is dominated by the big and powerful" (Donskis, 1998, p. 351).

Second, certain conspiracy theories may resonate because they make the world seem like a safer, simpler place. Such theories reassure believers that major changes to society are unnecessary, because restoring the "mythic time of innocence" requires only foiling conspirators who threaten the myth (Sturken, 1997, p. 72). Hofstadter (1964) noted that conspiracy theories feature a "distinctly personal" "interpretation of history": "decisive events are not taken as part of the stream of history, but as the consequences of someone's will" (p. 85). Donskis (1998) labeled this theme the "personification of history," which entails explaining historical change in terms of premeditated choices by specific elite individuals rather than underlying economic and social processes (Donskis, 1998, p. 349).

Through the "simplistic presentation of a small but powerful elite at the core of the problem" these theories occlude "the structural nuances involved in any given situation" and instead suggest alluringly straightforward fixes to societal crises (Miller, 2002, p. 54). The gratification provided by this type of thinking is clear. For instance, the parent of an autistic child

is likely to find more reassurance in the belief that blame for autism lies with vaccines, and therefore the pharmaceutical industry and government regulators—who can presumably be defeated or otherwise influenced by sufficient public awareness and pressure—than the mainstream scientific belief that autism is a complex disorder caused by both genetic and environmental factors that offers no obvious solution (Bricker & Justice, 2019).

Not all conspiracy theories offer such reassurance. Some theories posit the existence of hostile forces so all-powerful that believers logically conclude they have no capacity to "influence or change the state of affairs" (Donskis, 1998, p. 358). These theories can engender "a sense of fatalism" by imagining history as "a grandiose scheme plotted out by extrahistorical forces" that are "following a teleological course toward some unavoidable catastrophe" (Popp, 2006, pp. 267-268). In contrast, conspiracy theories may resonate if they offer believers hope for "an easy solution out of the crisis" through the defeat of a readily identifiable set of perpetrators (Neville-Shepard, 2018, p. 121).

Third, resonant conspiracy theories may function as "as a tool of community-building" (Bricker & Justice, 2019, p. 179). Conspiracy theories, by outlining a victimized community and a scapegoat, presuppose the existence of an in-group and out-group, but can also reinforce a sense of identification. Certain theories may achieve widespread appeal by fostering a community of believers. Conspiracy theories "are not only spread from person to person; they generate communities of believers and both draw from and contribute to political culture," giving "concrete form to otherwise inexpressible social concerns" (Edy & Risley-Baird, 2016, p. 588). Kelley-Romano (2008) noted that a "function of conspiracy rhetoric" is that "it provides a community with which the individual can identify," in turn fulfilling "psychological functions in that it compliments believers by affirming they have knowledge of which most other Americans

are oblivious" (p. 117). Flat Earth believers, for example, maintain a vibrant online community that also meets together offline at conventions, reaffirming their status as an enlightened community that possesses special truths that non-members remain ignorant of (Moshakis, 2018). These conventions reinforce the community's worldview while allowing believers to interact in greater depth with fellow "Flat Earthers."

Crucially, the community-building function of conspiracy rhetoric can operate independently of facticity or even plausibility. Although the theory may seem dubious, "saying Pizzagate" is a way to "communicate a lot of information about who you are, who you listen to, and who you are in a coalition with" by implying that the believer is antagonistic toward the mainstream media and political establishment (Atkinson et al., 2017, p. 174). The community-building function helps explain why some conspiracies prove impervious to fact-checking and persist long after being debunked:

> In spreading outrageous stories . . . people may have been seeking less to persuade recipients (by way of the plausibility of the story) than to strengthen their membership in the group (by way of their disclination to question the plausibility of the story). The use value of the story in reinforcing a partisan political identity was more important than its truth value. (Polletta & Callahan, 2019, p. 66)

Regardless of form or accuracy, resonant theories may retain adherents by spurring a community devoted to debating and defending the conspiracy theory. In this way, conspiracy theories serve a social function by providing believers an enlightened community with which they can identify.

Trump Rallies as Conspiracy Theory Conventions

Endorsement of conspiracy theories by Trump supporters serves several functions that fortify the community's worldview. In this section, I draw upon my rhetorical fieldwork at

Trump rallies to explain the resonance of conspiracy theories for Trump supporters. I develop this argument in four parts. First, I briefly review conspiratorial beliefs that are commonly expressed by Trump supporters. Second, I argue that conspiracy theories allow Trump supporters to absolve themselves of responsibility for their perceived marginalization. Third, I explain how conspiracy theories allow supporters to place hope in simple solutions to structural problems, reconciling their faith in Trump's negotiating prowess with the reality that the problems affecting his core supporters in the white working-class are structural in nature. Fourth, I demonstrate that these conspiracy theories foster feelings of community.

Summary of Conspiracy Theories

Trump and his supporters frequently utilize conspiracy theory as a sense-making tool in a variety of contexts. As described above, Trump's basic anti-trade and anti-immigration arguments assume the form of a conspiracy theory, wherein liberalized trade and immigration policies are a globalist Trojan horse, sacrificing the nation's wellbeing on behalf of corrupt foreign interests. Perhaps the most commonly discussed conspiracy theory at Trump rallies relates to the "deep state." Deep state theories allege a conspiracy led by unelected bureaucrats within the government to thwart the popular will and sabotage Trump's administration (Michaels, 2017). For Trump, the deep state has proven a flexible antagonist that explains many of his administration's struggles. Who or what exactly constitutes the deep state has often been unclear, as the term has been used to refer to a multitude of actors. At various points, the deep state has been alleged by Trump and his defenders to include the Department of Justice (Lucey, & Superville, 2018), former President Obama and federal employees loyal to him (Weigel, 2017), Special Counsel Robert Mueller (Breuninger, 2019), the intelligence community (Kendall-Taylor, 2019), federal judges (Newkirk & Stohr, 2018), the whistleblower who raised

concerns about Trump's attempt to leverage aid to Ukraine (Wolf, 2019), the military industrial complex (Gingeras, 2019), and John Bolton, Trump's former National Security Advisor (Klein, 2020).

Trump is the most vocal proponent of the theory that a cabal of unelected bureaucrats has sought to stifle him, but the theory has also been propagated by other prominent elected Republicans (McCarthy, 2018). Although the deep state theory has been widely debunked (Ingber, 2017), its appeal to Trump and his supporters is clear. The theory exonerates Trump from any responsibility for his impeachment or other wrongdoing, pinning blame on perennial scapegoats such as Obama and Hillary Clinton, who are envisioned as manipulating the federal bureaucracy from afar. Consistent with Bricker's (2013) argument that "a conspiracy charge will be more likely to resonate if it is consistent with existing ideology," deep state theories tap into long-standing anti-government animus and antipathy towards federal bureaucrats among conservatives while dovetailing with Trump's campaign theme of "draining the swamp" (p. 226).

The president's supporters have appropriated the basic narrative of the deep state theory and made it their own in ways Republican elites could hardly have foreseen. The most prominent example of this is the QAnon theory, which is an offshoot both of deep state theories and the Pizzagate theory which asserted that Hillary Clinton runs a sex trafficking ring that engages in Satanic rituals from the basement of a pizza parlor in Washington D.C. The QAnon theory centers upon an anonymous person named "Q" who claims to be a government insider with security clearances and is privy to Trump's battles against the deep state (Bank, Stack, & Victor, 2018). Cryptic posts from Q, that supposedly contain classified information, appear on the 4chan and 8chan message boards and are subsequently shared by believers across the Internet on popular platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (Bank et al., 2018). The theory's

detractors believe these posts may be the work of leftist "trolls" seeking to mock gullible Trump supporters (Chang, 2018).

There is one unique plot detail of this theory that sets QAnon apart from the deep state theories proffered by Trump and Republican officials. QAnon narratives assert that Trump and Robert Mueller, who was charged with investigating collusion between Russia and Trump's campaign, are actually working hand-in-glove "against a pedophile ring filled with celebrities and political elites who have been covertly running the United States government for decades" (Collins, 2018, para. 4). This theory has achieved startling reach: a message board devoted to QAnon, before being banned, once boasted 49,000 followers (Bank et al., 2018). Moreover, YouTube videos about the topic have been viewed millions of times and a cell phone application devoted to the theory "was among the 10 most downloaded paid iOS apps in the Apple Store, according to an NBC report" (Bank et al., 2018, para. 26). QAnon is no longer "limited to a fringe corner of the internet" and has at times assumed a "front-and-center presence" at Trump's campaign rallies (para. 13). The theory has become increasingly visible. For example, during my drive to Dallas to attend a rally, I saw a pro-QAnon billboard along the highway with URL information for a popular QAnon website, "DoUKnowQ.com" (see also: Bort, 2018). The sudden public visibility of the QAnon community and polling showing that Republicans fear the influence of a malignant deep state (Frankovic, 2019a, 2019b; "Public troubled," 2018), demonstrate the appeal of conspiracy theory to Trump supporters. Rhetorical fieldwork and analysis can help explain this resonance.

Blame Absolution

The blame absolving functions of conspiracy theories regarding the deep state are clear. Through these theories, every scandal or misstep involving the Trump administration—the

Mueller investigation, the impeachment crisis over Trump's attempt to pressure Ukraine into aiding his re-election effort, difficulties in implementing policy and exerting control over the federal bureaucracy—are dismissed as a part of a concerted attempt to thwart Trump by bureaucrats, rather than the consequences of Trump's conduct. A passage from Trump's speech at the rally I attended in Grand Rapids is illustrative. Trump conspiratorially characterized the Mueller investigation as a "sinister effort" launched "by those who lost the election to try and illegally regain power by framing innocent Americans" through an "elaborate hoax" ("Rally in Grand Rapids," 2019). Trump only reluctantly acknowledged any shortcoming of his administration but explained that to the extent there were any problems with his administration, such as national division and poisonous debates, blame rested with treacherous investigators: "think of the time wasted and yet despite this terrible cloud, this phony, corrupt, disgusting cloud we have done more together in the first two years than any administration in the history of our country" ("Rally in Grand Rapids," 2019).

On Twitter, Trump (2018) has complained that "while my (our) poll numbers are good, with the Economy being the best ever, if it weren't for the Rigged Russian Witch Hunt, they would be 25 points higher!" For Trump, conspiracy rhetoric offers a tidy way to present himself as the persecuted victim of partisan overreach. Yet, conspiracy is more than a convenient means for Trump to explain away investigations. Trump also uses conspiracy rhetoric to absolve his supporters of any responsibility for difficulties in their lives. The blame absolving function of conspiracy theory is evident in Trump's economic rhetoric.

At the campaign rallies I attended in Michigan and Wisconsin, two traditionally Democratic "rust-belt" states that unexpectedly flipped to Trump and were crucial to his victory, Trump emphasized the sense of loss felt by these communities. In Grand Rapids, Trump echoed

the "American Carnage" vision of his inaugural address, describing the nation's "crumbling

infrastructure," and "broken trade deals," and bemoaning to the audience that "your empty

factories are still all over the place, they still haven't recovered from NAFTA" ("Rally in Grand

Rapids," 2019). At the rally I attended in Green Bay, Trump recounted the devastation allegedly

wrought by NAFTA, lamenting that if "you look around Wisconsin, you still see the scars, empty

buildings" ("Live in Green Bay," 2019). Crucially, Trump utilized conspiracy narratives to

absolve white working-class voters of responsibility for regional economic decline. In his

inaugural address, for instance, Trump (2017) blamed the struggles of the postindustrial regions

upon the schemes of elites:

> For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government
>
> while the people have borne the cost.
>
> Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth.
>
> Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed.
>
> The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.
>
> Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs;
>
> and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for
>
> struggling families all across our land. (paras. 7-11)

Through conspiracy theory, Trump helps supporters in electorally important states make sense of

their loss of a "privileged" position (McQuarrie, 2017, p. S133).

Although Midwestern states suffered from the decline of manufacturing and recovered

more slowly from the 2008 recession than other states (Schweitzer, 2017), the actual causes of

the economic stagnation experienced by the post-industrial Midwest are complex. A statistical

analysis conducted by researchers at Ball State University found that "almost 88 percent of job

losses in manufacturing in recent years can be attributable to productivity growth" spurred by automation, with foreign trade playing a smaller role (Hicks & Devaraj, 2015, p. 6; Miller, 2016). U.S. manufacturing industries are also highly sensitive to variables almost entirely beyond the president's control, including energy prices and upswings or downturns in the broader global economy (Van Dam, 2019). To the extent that foreign trade plays a role in job losses, NAFTA, "one of Trump's favorite punching bags," is not a primary factor (Spagat, 2017, para. 2). The decline of American manufacturing began decades prior to the enactment of NAFTA, when postwar politicians implemented trade policies that "permitted discrimination against American goods because of Europe and Japan's fragile economic and political circumstances," prioritizing foreign policy goals over the concerns of domestic manufacturers by allowing the American market to become "the safety valve for the export industries of U.S. allies, who quickly became economic competitors" (Stein, 2010, pp. 7-8). The choice by policymakers such as Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy to use trade policy to promote "international economic stability" contributed to the contraction of American manufacturing, not solely the trade policies of Trump's preferred scapegoats, Presidents Clinton and Obama (Farber, 2018, p. 40).

Moreover, as automation decreases opportunities for manufacturing employment, the path to a "good job and concomitant dignity" increasingly "runs through higher levels of postsecondary education" (Austin, 2019, para. 3). Citizens struggling in an economy that places a premium upon obtaining a college degree have often suffered "not only wage stagnation and the loss of jobs" but "the loss of social esteem" and "humiliation" (Sandel, 2019, para. 40). Trump's conspiracy narratives explain these dispiriting trends as the work of the ill-defined—but rhetorically powerful—figure of "the establishment" (Trump, 2017). Corrupt politicians,

"globalism and international cooperation" have proven to be "useful scapegoats" for these economic woes (Rohac, 2019, p. 4). Citizens in struggling regions harbor suspicions that "globalization has taken opportunities away from them" (Goldberg, 2019, para. 8) and are therefore "receptive" to Trump's nationalist narrative that a "globalist elite class" has preyed upon them (Finley & Esposito, 2019, p. 9).

Through displacement of blame onto globalist elites, Trump's conspiracy rhetoric tells white working-class voters that their loss of status is not of their own making. This narrative of innocence—"that everything wrong in your life is someone else's fault" (Vance, 2016, para. 27)—not only provides a scapegoat (in the form of elites and immigrants) but relieves feelings of guilt and "helps them to understand why they lack the power to control their own lives" (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999, p. 644). Although Trump's blame-displacing conspiracy narrative does not correspond with realty, its simplicity offers more comfort than alternative explanations that attribute responsibility for deindustrialization to diffuse economic processes.

Reassuring Solutions

Framing the nation's economic struggles as the product of a vast conspiracy also allows Trump and his supporters to place faith in silver bullet solutions. If the decline of American manufacturing has been deliberately engineered by corrupt elites (rather than being the byproduct of automation and economic variables beyond the control of any single decisionmaker) reversing these losses and restoring the lost golden age is only a matter of selecting the right leader. At the rally in Grand Rapids, Trump said precisely this, and reassured the audience:

> I don't know if you know it or not Michigan but Mexico took about 30 percent of your car business. Not when I was here. When I'm here they are not . . . It's all very simple.

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People try and make it too complicated. It's all very simple. ("Rally in Grand Rapids,"

2019)

The conspiracy theories circulated by Trump and his supporters personalize history, by

portraying politics as a battle of wills between powerful individuals: Trump vs. elites, or Trump

vs. the deep state. This individualistic frame is consistent with Trump's core theme that he is a

superb dealmaker: "The *deal* is the lens through which Trump makes sense of the world" (Kane,

2016, para. 3). Johnson (2017) argued that this rhetorical frame "offers his supporters refuge

from multiple problems, ranging from trade to terrorism, by configuring each of these problems

as flowing from the lack of authoritative, masculine leadership," noting that "no matter the topic,

Trump's solutions return to his leadership and negotiating savvy" (p. 245). The emphasis on

Trump's legendary deal-making skills obscures inconvenient facts about "how politics works"

by inflating "the capacity of 'great men' to effect" change "by force of personality" (Zelizer,

2015, p. 7).

During his 2016 Republican National Convention address, Trump boasted that "I alone

can fix" the many problems supposedly afflicting the nation. As President, Trump's deal-making

abilities have not proven sufficient to fulfill his campaign pledge to repeal the Affordable Care

Act, avert two separate government shutdowns, negotiate superior diplomatic agreements with

Iran and North Korea, address the infrastructure crisis or a host of other problems (Olorunnipa &

DeBonis, 2019; Sullivan, 2019). Notably, his promised border wall remains unbuilt and he has

been unable to stem job losses due to outsourcing (Greenwood, 2017; Rizzo, 2019; Sainato,

2019). The economic story is largely one of continuity with the final years of the Obama

administration (Chait, 2018; Ponnuru & Strain, 2018), yet the government's budget deficit has

ballooned to almost $1 trillion (Long & Stein, 2019). Internationally, polling shows declining

respect for the United States abroad under Trump (Drezner, 2018). Although the Trump administration passed corporate tax cuts and confirmed judicial appointments at an impressive rate, his overall record remains one of promises unfulfilled.

How then do Trump supporters reconcile Trump's reputation for deal-making with the gridlock, policy failure, and continuous scandal that has largely characterized his administration? At the rallies I attended, Trump supporters fiercely resisted this characterization of the state of the nation, arguing that the economy is "booming" and that the border wall is being built, likely owing to the insulated conservative media ecosystem that they inhabit. Yet, through my fieldwork I also gained insight into how conspiracy theory helps Trump supporters to reconcile the myth of Trump's deal-making prowess with the realities of the American political system. Rather than concede that the U.S. government is too complex and difficult for one individual, even the president, to dominate – which would negate Trump's "I alone can fix it" narrative – Trump and his supporters posit the existence of an amorphous antagonist, almost as powerful as Trump, that is thwarting him.

The antagonist of these conspiracy narratives is often an amalgamation of Democrats, the media, and the deep state (Shear, 2018). While warming up the crowd for his father in Grand Rapids, Donald Trump Jr. asserted that allegations of collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign were "funded by Hillary Clinton and the DNC" and "perpetrated by . . . 95% of the mainstream media" ("Rally in Grand Rapids," 2019). In Green Bay, Trump Jr. described "the Mueller investigation" as part of "the Democrat funded war on Trump" ("Live in Green Bay," 2019). Trump Jr. then lionized his father as the singular solution to corruption, but noted the resistance he has faced in implementing his agenda, describing the president as "a full frontal assault on the establishment—on both sides—he's the sledgehammer that needed to be brought

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to Washington . . . we're draining the swamp, but the swamp's been there for a long time" ("Live in Green Bay," 2019). Trump supporters I observed viewed Trump's relationship with the Washington establishment in similar terms. At the Minneapolis rally, a Trump supporter touted supposed progress made toward building the wall, the low unemployment rate, and successes in combatting the illicit drug trade, and attributed the investigations into Trump to the deep state. The supporter characterized the deep state as encompassing "politicized" elements of the CIA and FBI and accused these forces of acting as an arm of the Democratic Party by launching a "coup" against Trump out of desperation, because they know he cannot be defeated at the ballot box by the likes of Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren. At the rallies I attended, Trump supporters treated this narrative not as a conspiracy "theory" but more as an established, taken for granted truth.

Conspiracy narratives secure a worldview where "great men" such as Trump are the engine of change, inhibited only by readily identifiable antagonists rather than complex problems. This serves a reassuring function, as creating desired societal changes and remedying the sense of loss felt by many Trump supporters is only a matter of empowering Trump, the master dealmaker and sledgehammer, and foiling his deep state antagonists. Moreover, these theories preserve Trump's reputation as a heroic leader and expert negotiator. According to this narrative, Trump has been plagued by scandal and struggled to implement campaign promises because he has been stabbed in the back by deep state renegades, not because of any lack of competence on Trump's part. The stakes of this argument are high. If Trump supporters can cling to the myth of Trump's masterful deal-making, they can also cling to the notion that there are easy solutions to stubborn problems such as offshoring and the decline of manufacturing.

Conspiracy theories allow supporters to reconcile the claim that Trump possesses mythic

negotiating skills with his actual governing track record.

Trump's conspiracy narratives take complicated situations—such as the decline of

American manufacturing, or Trump's struggles to overcome legislative and bureaucratic

resistance to his agenda—that might otherwise inspire pessimism and resignation, and instead

offer "the promise of redemption and victory" (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 85). In reality, Trump's lack

of accomplishments stems from the nature of the U.S. political system, which is by design

cumbersome and contains numerous chokepoints where reforms may stall or die altogether, as

well as his own ego-centric and often simply incompetent management style (Sullivan, 2019).

Conspiracy theory allows Trump supporters to continue to view Trump as an ultra-successful

dealmaker, a comforting view that helps them cope with "feelings of uncertainty and fear" (van

Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015, p. 571).

Community-Building

Conspiracy theory also reinforces bonds of identification shared by Trump supporters,

while framing believers as part of an enlightened community that is wise to the schemes of "the

swamp." Trump's campaign rallies serve as conventions for this community: a judgment-free

space where believers in theories such as QAnon can commune with the likeminded. At the first

Trump rally I attended in Grand Rapids, I was struck by the prevalence of conspiracy theories.

Beyond the numerous individuals wearing QAnon gear, Trump rallies attracted conspiracy

theorists as though by magnetism. At the rally in Grand Rapids, a "Flat Earther" waited in line

with supporters and recorded conversations about the theory.[1] Also present in the pre-rally line

were representatives of the LaRouche movement, a network dedicated to promoting the work of

the conspiracy theorist Lyndon LaRouche, who died a little more than a month prior to the rally.

These individuals offered literature to Trump supporters and called for Trump to "investigate the investigators."

Opportunistic purveyors of conspiracy sensed a chance to recruit new believers for their pet theories at the rally, and not without reason. Trump rallies are a breeding ground for conspiracy, and not only because Trump and his surrogates (such as Donald Trump Jr.) have a tendency to spread conspiracies during their primetime speeches. Trump supporters use conspiracy narratives to explain problems of all shapes and sizes. At the rallies I attended, supporters claimed that: pictures taken of supporters at rallies could be used by Facebook facial recognition software to identify supporters and destroy their lives, "pedophiles run the world," the National Security Agency has proof that Obama is a Muslim, Hillary Clinton only won Minnesota during the 2016 election because of rampant voter fraud in Minneapolis, activists demonstrating against Brett Kavanaugh's appointment to the Supreme Court were "paid protestors," and that Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota married her brother and is a "national security risk." Although each of these theories is false, the act of sharing such theories serves as grounds for bonding and signals a shared hostility to establishment politicians and the mainstream media (Atkinson et al., 2017).

For Trump supporters, conspiracy theorizing is a collective enterprise rather than an activity performed by isolated individuals. The communal sentiment is encapsulated by the signature slogan of the QAnon community, which I saw emblazoned across clothing and hats at every rally I attended and is one of the community's favorite hashtags on Twitter: "Where We Go One, We Go All" (#WWG1WGA). The QAnon believers I encountered emphasized the sense of identification that underpins the theory. A believer in Green Bay described QAnon as a "movement" and "information dump" aimed at taking the country back, while a proponent of the

theory in Dallas described QAnon as "an alliance of Trump supporters." Bricker (2013) noted that conspiracy narratives commonly feature a "heroic investigative reporter" (p. 222). The QAnon community positions ordinary Americans in this role, portraying believers as noble truth-seekers who by researching and circulating QAnon content and recruiting new believers help break the control of sinister elites over politics. The QAnon conspiracy theory is therefore a participatory and cooperative effort, where ordinary believers are given a role to play in investigating the battles between Trump and the deep state, combatting the fatalism that is sometimes associated with conspiracy theories (Donskis, 1998; Popp, 2006). QAnon narratives occasionally adopt religious overtones. At the rallies I attended, believers wore QAnon clothing with the captions "The Great Awakening" and "The Storm is Here." For QAnon believers, the prophesized day of salvation when thousands of sealed indictments against corrupt Democrats and pedophiles are announced by the Trump administration is always, and perpetually, imminent (Barkun, 2018; Sommer, 2019).

A conversation I had with a QAnon believer in Dallas illustrates how the theory constructs an enlightened and empowered community. The man, who along with his wife was wearing Q clothing, boasted that QAnon believers are "a year ahead of everyone else" because they learn about breaking news far in advance of ordinary citizens, and declared that "we are the news now." He asserted that the theory explains seemingly unrelated events such as the arrest of Jeffrey Epstein, who was charged with sex trafficking, and the controversy over the Biden family's business dealings in Ukraine; according to Q, these developments are both part of Trump's efforts to root out deep state corruption. In an attempt to raise awareness about the theory, he suggested a slew of sources to consult and expressed excitement that I would soon discover the community's secrets for the first time. The believer described QAnon as "something

you get interested in, then obsessed with" and stated that "Q is my life." At several points during the day, the man had similar conversations with other Trump supporters. For believers, the QAnon theory combats the feeling of powerlessness that is associated with belief in conspiracy theories by portraying adherents as having unique insights into reality while non-believers remain deluded or brainwashed (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Hofstadter, 1964; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). In the theory's narrative, believers are positioned as the guardians of secret knowledge that society writ large remains ignorant of and are tasked with the special mission of raising awareness and spreading the truth.

At rallies, supporters also use conspiracy theories to construct an alternative information network that operates outside of mainstream channels. Trump's rallies are used by the campaign to collect data about supporters, including cell phone numbers and email addresses, so that the campaign can remind them to register to vote and send them Trump-friendly news updates (Bender, 2019). It is also common for Trump to use his rally address to praise his favorite media personalities and thereby recommend their television and radio programs to his followers. Yet, supporters play a role in the process of constituting an alternative information network, which is often a misinformation network. In Grand Rapids, the supporters of a "real news" newsletter walked up and down the line holding clipboards, registering Trump supporters for their news service. In Minneapolis, representatives of "MAGA Media," a pro-Trump website with a well-trafficked Facebook page, advertised the availability of "content no one else will break" to supporters. At each rally, supporters distributed physical literature containing information about how to access Trump-friendly media sources. At the rally in Minneapolis, I was handed a card instructing Trump supporters to "STOP viewing and listening to the misinformation and disinformation – fake news – of the Mainstream Media" and to "START getting your daily news

from truthful news websites" including Whatfinger News, WorldNetDaily, and the Daily Caller. All three of these sites espouse a far-right worldview and traffic in conspiracy theories.[2] At the rally I attended in Dallas, QAnon believers distributed hundreds of bright blue rubber wristbands – in the style of the yellow "Livestrong" bracelets designed to raise awareness about cancer – bearing the captions "qmap.pub," the URL to a QAnon website that aggregates Q's posts on 4chan/8chan, and "@StormIsUponUs," a Twitter account that posts QAnon content.

At Trump rallies, conspiracy theory believers both forged connections with fellow members of the enlightened community and brought new followers into the network. In this way, the "secrets" exchanged between QAnon believers generated "a sense of community" through "the invention of mystery and intrigue" (Gunn, 2008, p. 246, p. 269). This process of community-building through conspiracy theory operated independent of the official Trump campaign and was in fact resisted by the campaign, as the QAnon community maintains a tenuous relationship with the Trump campaign. Although QAnon believers lionize Trump, Trump's campaign does not always reciprocate this admiration. At the rally I attended in Dallas, security officials ejected supporters who brought homemade QAnon signs into the arena for violating the campaign's rule that only approved official signs be brought into the venue (see also Bump, 2019). The startling reach of the QAnon theory, and the spread of this theory at Trump's rallies, illustrates the capacity of loose grassroots networks of conspiracy theorists to build identification and gain national recognition while acting outside of mainstream political institutions.

Conclusion

In this essay, I demonstrated the centrality of conspiracy theory to Trump's appeal. Conspiracy theorizing is more than a strange quirk of Trump's personality that leads him to

make outlandish claims tying Senator Ted Cruz's father to the JFK assassination or suggesting that Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia was murdered. Conspiracy theory is fundamental to the worldview of Trumpism, underpinning its most basic economic arguments regarding free trade and immigration while explaining the Trump administration's testy relationships with the other branches of government and the bureaucracy. By incorporating rhetorical fieldwork methodologies into an analysis of this community's conspiracy rhetoric, I revealed three key implications. First, I demonstrated the exigency for rhetorical analyses of conspiracy rhetoric that emphasize the functions that these narratives perform for their adherents. Second, I provided insights into how conspiracy theories spread throughout American culture. Third, I illustrated contextual factors that contribute to conspiracy theories becoming a pervasive and stubborn phenomenon.

The Need for a Functional Approach

This essay demonstrates the value of a functional approach to conspiracy rhetoric. Discussions of conspiracy theories often reflect Hofstadter's "penchant for pathologizing the opposition, and thereby simultaneously stigmatizing and underestimating the appeal of the resurgent American right" (Olmsted, 2018, p. 42). Through rhetorical fieldwork conducted among believers, I explained that belief in conspiracy theories is not necessarily a sign of irrationality or an underlying mental pathology. In fact, using conspiracy as a lens for understanding politics offers adherents several clear benefits. Conspiracy theories help Trump voters make sense of their perceived marginalization, absolve blame for this situation by offering a scapegoat, and provide believers with a sense of community during a polarized age defined by isolation and alienation. These theories resonate not because of their accuracy, but because they provide an implicit critique of American society and perform a reassuring function, dispelling

fears that the current state of affairs is intractable by offering Trump's mythic deal-making skills as a silver bullet (or sledgehammer) solution that can undo the world's injustices and defeat shared enemies such as the deep state.

Moreover, conspiracy theory is the glue that holds the worldview of Trumpism together. Conspiracy theory is necessary for Trump because much of his worldview is false. Trade deals such as NAFTA are not solely responsible for deindustrialization, which is a complex process driven by multiple factors that do not lend themselves to easy panaceas (Hicks & Devaraj, 2015; Miller, 2016; Van Dam, 2019). Similarly, the United States is not experiencing a massive influx of immigrants, and the economic effects of immigration are largely positive (Dalmia, 2019; de Brauw, 2017; Sullivan, 2017). Although the causes are difficult to identify and quantify precisely, certain regions that were important in deciding the 2016 election have indeed suffered from economic decline in spite of the positive economic climate in much of the country (Schweitzer, 2017). To explain these disparate economic outcomes, Trump uses conspiracy theory to simplify the situation, reassuring supporters that their marginalization isn't their fault (it's because of elites, NAFTA and immigrants) and that he can fix it. Trumpism intuitively identifies that many voters would rather endorse a simple story that reaffirms their pre-existing worldview than be told a complicated, albeit more accurate, story without clear heroes and villains.

The functional approach developed here explains how conspiracy theories can foster community and illustrates why certain theories remain persistent in the face of discrepant information and fact-checking. Indeed, the QAnon theory shows no signs of fading despite the conclusion of Mueller's investigation and the failure of its prophecies to come true (Coaston, 2019). Individuals "rationally endorse conspiracy theories not only because they believe they are

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true but also because conspiracy theories can effectively discriminate between individuals with conventional versus fringe views" and create feelings of belonging (Atkinson et al., 2017, p. 177). Given that conspiracy "communities face a threat to their existence" when confronted by fact-checking efforts, adherents respond with "psychological resistance" and counter-arguments to defend the core beliefs of a community that provides a sense of empowerment and stability (Edy & Risley-Baird, 2016, p. 591). These feelings of community facilitated by conspiracy theories may be just as important as "the actual content" of the conspiracy theory for believers that become emotionally invested in a theory and its community of defenders (Gunn, 2008, p. 251). To enhance understanding of the changing role of conspiracy theories in society, a functional approach that examines "the complex relationship between audiences, symbols, and environments" is needed (Bricker, 2013, p. 224). Rhetorical scholars, when analyzing conspiracy theory, should seek to not only detail the patterns and forms these narratives take, but also explain the sense-making, ideological, and constitutive functions these theories perform for those that embrace them.

How Conspiracy Theories Spread

In this essay, I also provided an account of how certain conspiracies spread and take root. Contrary to the tendency of some rhetorical scholars to focus on elites as the key purveyors of conspiracy theories, this analysis illustrated the capacity of decentralized communities to circulate conspiracy theories throughout the broader public, using both online and offline methods. My fieldwork revealed several ways that far-right conspiracy theories spread at Trump rallies, from both the top-down and from the bottom-up. In their much-anticipated addresses, Trump and his surrogates—who command great credibility from their audience—routinely outlined shadowy plots aimed at thwarting the will of the people. While Trump supporters

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waited in line during the hours leading up to the speeches, conspiracy theories spread through old-fashioned word of mouth, from supporter to supporter in everyday conversation. Moreover, rallies reinforced a sealed information loop, by introducing non-initiated Trump supporters to online information networks where additional conspiratorial content can be accessed.

Trump rallies may therefore enable what far-right online communities have termed "red-pilling" on a potentially large scale. The term red-pilling refers to a scene in the film *The Matrix*, where the protagonist is given the "choice to either take the red pill and see the truth or choose the blue pill and remain in a manipulative sleep" (Schwarzenegger, 2020, p. 365). To be red-pilled is to experience an awakening or revelation, by encountering a piece of knowledge that is suppressed by the mainstream society, altering one's perception of the world, such as belief in "white supremacy, Holocaust denial, the danger that immigration posits for white Americans, the oppression of men by feminists, and so forth" (Lewis & Marwick, 2017, p. 19). The language of "awakening" is ubiquitous in the rhetoric of the QAnon community, and a woman at the rally in Minneapolis, for example, described herself as a lifelong Democrat until she researched Wikileaks and the Pizzagate conspiracy theory. Trump rallies, by gathering large numbers of believers in a single venue and providing them ample opportunity to engage with potential recruits, reinforce and expand information networks that circulate conspiracy theories. Through rallies, attendees are introduced to new theories and are taught where to seek out additional information about these theories online from sources that are likely to fortify a conspiratorial mindset.

Why Conspiracy Theories Spread

This essay also illuminates contextual factors that allow certain conspiracy theories to resonate. Van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) noted that "belief in conspiracy theories is highly

sensitive to social context" (p. 898). Although conspiracy theories are pervasive across human cultures, individuals are more open to endorsing them during "times of social strain" (Zarefsky, 1984, p. 73), or in situations where trust in institutions is low and there is a "decline in widely accepted social authority" (Edy & Risley-Baird, 2016, p. 600). It has also been recognized that "in order to resonate, conspiracy theories must have a 'kernel of fact'" (Bricker, 2013, p. 227). Indeed, beneath even the wildest assertions of the QAnon theory is an uncomfortable truth: "that certain elite networks of influence, complicity and blackmail have enabled sexual predators to exploit victims on an extraordinary scale" (Douthat, 2019, para. 16). That certain elites—such as Jeffrey Epstein and Harvey Weinstein—have engaged in reprehensible behavior with little consequence undoubtedly lends credibility to theories such as QAnon for individuals already feeling alienated from society.

In the contemporary climate of plummeting trust in the media and other institutions, especially among conservatives, a small sliver of truth may be all that is needed for a conspiracy theory to resonate (Ingram, 2018). Donskis (1998) warned that "whenever the conspiracy theory is resurgent, it is therefore a symptom that a moral order of a given society fails to encompass the Other" (p. 360). As the basic narratives that once provided social cohesion, such as the American Dream, break down for many citizens (Dickerson, 2016), it becomes easier for some individuals to imagine one's fellow citizens not just as political opponents, but as enemies willing to engage in the unspeakable acts described in theories such as QAnon and Pizzagate. Some conspiracy theories are relatively harmless or are even accurate. Other theories – such as the theory espoused by the gunman who fired a rifle at a pizzeria while investigating a sex ring on the flimsiest of suspicions – "may serve as radicalization multiplier" (van Prooijen, 2018, p. 92). Yet, the state of affairs is not bereft of hope. Miller et al.'s (2016) study "identified trust as a

mitigating factor" on belief in conspiracy theories (p. 838). To the extent individuals "believe the world is a trustworthy place, they are less able to convince themselves that political rivals are engaging in nefarious, secretive plots" (p. 838). Offering appealing alternative narratives to conspiracy theories must therefore begin with rebuilding trust in institutional knowledge sources that have become increasingly discredited in the eyes of many Americans.

Notes

1. Trump supporters reacted to the Flat Earth theory with skepticism. Some attendees feared the Flat Earther, who held a recording device, was trying to obtain tape of Trump supporters endorsing the theory to make them look crazy or stupid. These supporters, in essence, claimed that the presence of a conspiracy theorist was part of a conspiracy to discredit them.

2. Whatfinger News is a news aggregation website (similar in style to the Drudge Report) that expresses a far-right worldview and circulates conspiracy theories. WorldNetDaily is another website that traffics in conspiracy theories, infamous for spearheading "Birtherism" by publishing hundreds of articles supporting the debunked theory (Roig-Franzia, 2019). Faris et al.'s (2017) study of social media coverage of the 2016 election found that the Daily Caller "legitimated and normalized the paranoid style that came to typify the right-wing ecosystem in the 2016 election" (p. 17).

"President Obama thinks the nation is not as divided as people think. He is living in a world of the make believe!"

- Donald J. Trump, July 10th, 2016, via Twitter.

Chapter VII

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have conducted a rhetorical analysis of Donald Trump's campaign rallies, detailing from start to finish how Trump and his supporters collaboratively build consubstantiality at these events. Rallies are an integral component of the Trump administration's public outreach strategies and the centerpiece of his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. This project supplements existing rhetorical research on Trump by illuminating why this rhetoric resonates for his supporters and why the bonds between Trump and his core supporters have proven so durable. Trump rallies are impactful because they contain much more than just a Trump speech. This dissertation outlined the multifaceted and powerful ways – Trump's populist outsider persona, political rituals, scapegoating, fandom activities, violence, and conspiracy theories – that Trump rallies constitute a community.

Importantly, my rhetorical fieldwork revealed a more complex portrait of Trump supporters than is typically offered in rhetorical scholarship or media accounts. Through fieldwork research I contested the assumption, prevalent in some rhetorical scholarship and in public discourse, that Trump supporters are a "mindless" mob or passive listeners (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. ix). Rather, Trump supporters are rhetorical agents who, at rallies, collaboratively enact a vision of America as they would like it to be. These insights serve as a reminder that rhetoric is the province of not only politicians and elites, but ordinary citizens who,

through "everyday rhetorical practices" build identification (Endres, Hess, Senda-Cook, & Middleton, 2016, p. 515).

Considering what motivates Trump supporters is an important goal. Although Trump will eventually depart office, the tens of millions of people who voted for him will remain a force to be reckoned with in American politics for decades to come. Throughout this project, I have highlighted how this community's support for Trump cannot be reduced to either economic anxiety or cultural/racial anxiety. It is the interactive combination of these factors, crystallized in the sentiment that Trump is the sole defense preventing a fast-changing nation from slipping through their fingers, that motivates many supporters. Trump offers his supporters a coherent, if largely false, narrative that frightening economic and cultural changes both stem from the failed policies of the establishment. Rallies are important because they offer supporters an opportunity to invert this narrative of loss and marginalization, by turning out in large numbers to reassert the strength of their community and scapegoat the community's enemies.

In addition to elucidating the roots of Trump's appeal and the reasons for the special bond between Trump and his core supporters, this study has broader implications for understanding contemporary American political rhetoric. I identify four key insights provided by this project. First, this research underscores the decline of the American Dream myth. Second, this study of Trump rallies highlights the power of narrative in political campaigns. Third, this project points towards rhetorical strategies for countering authoritarian populism. Finally, this project demonstrates benefits of a rhetorical fieldwork approach.

The Decline of National Myth Systems

I have highlighted how anxiety over demographic change, economic pessimism, Americans' heroic expectations for presidential candidates (otherwise known as the cult of the

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presidency), the decline of social capital, and the atmosphere of hyper-partisanship, among other factors, gave power to Trump's message. This project also highlights the collapse of the mythic system that underpinned American life, the American Dream. The American Dream is a sacred-secular myth that can be defined as "the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it – material or otherwise – through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success" (Hochschild, 1995, p. xi). This myth serves as the nation's "guiding mythology" (Samuel, 2012, p. 1) and as an "ideological system" that fulfills "axiological, epistemological, and identity functions" (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 132). Although the nation has struggled to make the dream available to all, the myth nonetheless acts as a cultural anchor that provides "meaning, identity" and "a comprehensive understandable image of the world" (Fisher, 1973, p. 161). Moreover, the myth holds that Americans are united by their shared pursuit of this dream regardless of creed, race, gender, ethnicity, and other identity characteristics.

Trump has scrambled the traditional ideological divide over how to interpret the American Dream myth. For at least a half century, conservatives advanced an individualistic interpretation where "enactment of personal values ensures fulfillment of the American Dream" while liberals advanced a community-oriented interpretation presenting "societal values (and policies flowing from them) as the key to achievement of the American Dream" (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 432). In Donald Trump's narrative, he is the key to achieving the American Dream. Trump's retelling of the American Dream myth accepts the premise of the community-oriented variant that individuals cannot always succeed on their own in an imperfect system, breaking from the conservative interpretation that emphasizes individual initiative and a small government. Rather than offering traditional conservative solutions to problems or outlining

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ways that Americans can band together to work towards the common good, Trump presents his expert leadership as the key to unlocking opportunity and appeals to fear instead of hope.

The resonance of Trump's "strongman" politics is a bellwether indicating declining faith in the American Dream. In Trump's telling of the story, the American people are victims in need of a savior. It may be that the "cult of the presidency" – the tendency of Americans to assign messianic expectations to the president (Burk, 1981; Healy, 2009; Koch, 2016; Mercieca & Vaughn, 2014; Nelson, 2008) – and the American Dream myth cannot coexist indefinitely. The American Dream is a narrative "about ordinary people who accomplish extraordinary things" (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 430). By contrast, "the mesmerizing power of presidentialism . . . encourages citizens to believe that their democratic agency depends on presidential power, instead of the other way around" (Nelson, 2008, p. 4).

Trump's narrative resonated in part because, in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, many Americans doubted their ability to succeed on their own: "Survey after survey finds that when asked about the next generation, Americans are pessimistic, saying that it will be harder and take more effort for the next generation to get ahead" (Cooper, 2015, para. 5; Dickerson, 2016). A 2015 survey by the MacArthur Foundation, for example, found that 79% of Americans believe downward mobility is more common than upward mobility ("Prolonged Housing Crisis," 2015). Challenging the notion that Americans optimistically maintain faith in the possibility of upward mobility despite living in a society where such mobility is rare, Cheng and Wen (2019) found that Americans are in fact "pessimistic about the equality of economic prospects" and skeptical that hard work alone can propel them up the ladder of opportunity (p. 13914). In this climate, many Americans find Trump's "strongman" politics, exemplified by his assertion that "I

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alone can fix it," more appealing than traditional interpretations of the American Dream myth that have come under strain in light of ongoing inequality.

At Trump rallies, the fraying of the American Dream myth is plain to see. Donald Trump, of course, descended the escalator at Trump Tower and announced his presidential candidacy in 2015 by declaring: "the American dream is dead" (Trump, 2015). Given Trump's overriding divisiveness, his subsequent assertions that the American Dream has been revived by his administration ring hollow. The Trump supporters I observed during my fieldwork didn't claim a sense of shared identity with Americans that they disagree with. Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, who spoke at the Trump rally in Dallas I attended, labeled Americans with opposing viewpoints the "enemy" rather than "opponents" (qtd. in Hooks, 2019, para. 10). At the rallies I attended, Democrats and progressives were charitably described by Trump supporters as "brainwashed" or "zombies"; deluded, but perhaps not altogether evil. Supporters and speakers who were feeling less charitable described Trump's opponents as radically anti-American, pro-terrorism, and pro-infanticide. A basic premise of the American Dream myth – that Americans are united by shared values – has fallen by the wayside for a considerable group of Americans.

Moreover, previous presidents such as Obama and Reagan spoke about the need to make the American Dream available to all. In 1981, Reagan called the United States "a nation of immigrants," declaring that "more than any other country, our strength comes from our own immigrant heritage and our capacity to welcome those from other lands" (para. 1). Later that decade in his farewell address, Reagan (1989) likened America to a "shining city on a hill" and said that if the shining city had to have walls, "the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here" (para. 33). Similarly, Obama, then a state Senator from Illinois, burst onto the national political scene in his 2004 Democratic National Convention

address by emphasizing the essential commonalities of all Americans, proclaiming: "there's not a liberal America and a conservative America — there's the United States of America. There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America" (paras. 12-13). Trump, by contrast, told a rally crowd in Florida that Democrats "want to destroy you and they want to destroy our country" (qtd. in Allen, 2019, para. 2) and has labeled undocumented immigrants "animals" (Davis, 2018). Trump's rhetoric, rather than arguing that the American Dream should be made available to all, stokes anxieties about the crumbling of this dream and tells Americans that the dream needs to be protected from unworthy and dangerous outsiders.

Declining faith in this mythic system is an alarming development. Scholars have rightfully criticized the American Dream myth for overlooking structural inequality in the United States and implying that initiative and grit are enough to achieve upward mobility in a nation where racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression remain persistent obstacles to success (Cloud, 1996; Winslow, 2017). Nonetheless, the disappearance of any shared national narrative for politicians and ordinary Americans to draw upon threatens to exacerbate worrying trends in American politics, such as polarization, hyper-partisanship, and alienation.

The Limits of Rational Argument and Power of Narrative

This analysis additionally illustrates the limits of rational argument in the context of political campaigns, and the power of narratives that tap into audience values and affect for building identification. Since Trump's election, there has been a public debate about why many working-class Americans seemingly voted against their own interests by voting for Trump despite his regressive economic agenda (Sartwell, 2019; Zeitz, 2017). Critics have highlighted Trump administration policies that cut against the interests of his own voters, such as efforts to

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undermine the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid. Metzl (2019), for example, argued that "the policies at the core of the Trump agenda function similarly to [hu]man-made risk factors like second-hand smoke, pollution, or asbestos—shortening lifespans for the most vulnerable persons in his base" (para. 4). Despite President Trump's implementation of policies that actively worsen his supporters' quality of life, his supporters have remained loyal (Page, Behrmann, & Santucci, 2019). What explains this seeming contradiction?

The answer to this puzzle is that voters conceive their "interests" to encompass more than just policy positions: "even the most informed voters" tend to select candidates "not on the basis of policy preferences or ideology, but on the basis of who they are—their social identities" (Achen & Bartels, 2016, p. 4). Voters are not irrational, but rather make sense of politics using a form of narrative rationality where the values and emotions activated by a candidate are weighed alongside policy and ideology (Fisher, 1985). In searching for a candidate to support, policy is only one factor among many that voters consider when determining if an alignment of interests, or a sense of consubstantiality, exists with regards to a candidate. Once a voter develops an affective bond with a candidate, the salience of policy positions is lowered. Political science research has shown that "in elections all across the world, voters tend to pick a candidate or party first — and *then* adopt the ideological positions that rationalize their choice" (Levitz, 2017, para. 34). That voters first and foremost look for a candidate they can identify with, with policy as a secondary concern if it is a concern at all, helps explain the puzzling behavior of individuals who voted for Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016.

This project is valuable because it helps explain how such sturdy bonds between candidate and supporter are formed in the first place. The analysis of Trump rallies conducted here not only reveals the limits of rational argument: it illustrates that emotionally powerful

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narratives, when linked to audience values, may resonate even when these narratives are false, especially in age of polarization and partisan echo chambers. Trump's narratives speak to the anxieties of his core constituents. Although the United States has not experienced an immigration-fueled crime wave and undocumented immigration and trade deals such as NAFTA are not primarily responsible for the economic struggles that Trump describes, these narratives nonetheless resonate for Trump supporters because of the functions they perform—scapegoating, blame absolution, and sense-making—and the values and emotions they activate, such as fear, anger, resentment, patriotism, and nostalgia. Through communal rituals, Trump rallies also activate positive emotions and values—joy, friendship, and community—that further bind supporters to Trump. The activation of these emotions and values is what motivates many people to vote in a way that seemingly betrays their material self-interests.

Explaining and Countering Authoritarian Populism

While conducting rhetorical fieldwork at Trump rallies, I was puzzled by a basic tension in how Trump and his supporters described the world. On the one hand, the rallies often had a triumphal atmosphere, and served as an opportunity for Trump supporters to celebrate that their movement had, in defiance of expert prognostications, successfully elevated the unlikeliest of candidates to the highest office in the land. Years after the 2016 election, the rallies still felt like an extended victory lap commemorating Trump's improbable win. Donald Trump Jr., for example, fired up the crowd in Grand Rapids by asking: "are you guys sick of winning yet?" ("Rally in Grand Rapids," 2019).

Yet, despite all the winning allegedly underway, the rallies also had melancholic undertones. At times, Trump supporters seemed like sore winners. Despite the Republican Party's control of the Presidency, the Senate, a majority of governorships, and successful efforts

to reshape the federal judiciary for a generation, Trump supporters still felt as though they were losing. Trump supporters described themselves as marginalized by society and the media, expressing fear that public knowledge of one's status as a Trump supporter could carry negative consequences and sharing stories about family members they had alienated by supporting Trump. Supporters worried that an ascendant generation of young, liberal voters could alter the nation for the worse and expressed bitterness at (what they perceived as) the growing politicization of popular culture and sports, longing for a time when celebrities and athletes were not uniformly on the opposite side of the culture wars as them. Unassimilable immigrants, and their potential to become a reliable Democratic voting bloc and dilute the voting power of current citizens, were another source of anxiety. At each rally, Trump and his surrogates painted a dismal picture where Trump was the only buffer standing between innocent Americans and a resurgent, godless, oppressive liberalism. Despite the Republican Party being near the zenith of its power, these Trump supporters still felt they were losing their country.

This sense of impending loss, stoked by fears of rapid cultural and economic change, has been capitalized upon by opportunistic populists across the globe. Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, for example, has stoked fears about India's growing Muslim population to activate a sense of anxiety for his Hindu supporters (Filkins, 2019). Similarly, many citizens of the United Kingdom who voted in favor of the country exiting the European Union were motivated by "nostalgic nationalism" and longed for a return to Britain as it was in the twentieth century (Campanella & Dassù, 2019, p. 109). Elsewhere in Europe, Viktor Orbán rose to prominence by "galvanizing his base via a ruthless deployment of identity politics rooted in nostalgia for Hungary's lost glory" (Schwartzburg & Szijarto, 2019, para. 32). A similar theme has emerged in the rhetoric of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, who presents the era of military dictatorship in Brazil

as a lost golden age of stability and order (Tharoor, 2019). In a variety of contexts, right-wing politicians have exploited fear of change to support their agenda. This is an alarming development:

> When the forces of authoritarian populism rise to power, it is widely feared that they are likely to close borders to refugee families fleeing conflict zones, to erode alliances and multilateral cooperation . . . to embolden bigots and extremist hate groups in society, to corrode social trust and ethnic tolerance, and to replace pluralistic give-and-take in politics with the divisive and polarized politics of animosity, hatred, and fear. (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 23)

How then should opposition groups counter reactionary populist leaders? Rhetorical critics are "responsible for providing alternative constructive rhetorics that can be used to at least try to counter some of the effects of these pernicious mythic structures" (Hasian, 1997, p. 207). This dissertation suggests avenues for counterarguments that may be fruitful.

One promising strategy for countering authoritarian populism is to sever the perceived sense of consubstantiality between the demagogic populist leader and "the people." Trump, like other populists around the world, portrays himself as a bulwark protecting ordinary people from the dangerous forces of globalism. According to this narrative, Trump is the living embodiment of the will of the people and is aligned totally with their interests. Given that many Trump voters actively embrace Trump's crude language and braggadocios behavior, viewing it as a sign of his authenticity as an outsider, there are limits to the Clinton campaign's strategy of criticizing Trump's unconventional style and personality (Stein, 2017).

Although the Clinton campaign's frequent attacks on Trump's temperament and vulgarity were ineffective, focus group research suggests that undermining his populist credentials may be

more powerful (Foer, 2017). Rather than attacking authoritarian populists as rude or offensive, opponents might find more success by arguing that the populism of these figures is hollow. This could be accomplished by highlighting biographical details that contradict the notion of a shared identity between the supposed populist and their supporters, or by arguing that their policy agenda serves the needs of rich elites. In the Trump era, it is common for liberals to argue that the Republican Party has betrayed its core principles, by allowing Trump to strong-arm the Party into adopting his preferred stances on free trade, immigration, foreign policy, and other issues. A more compelling line of argument would be to highlight the ways that Trump has capitulated to the Republican Party on the stated principles of his first campaign.

Candidate Trump, after all, distinguished himself from his rivals in the Republican primary by declaring "we're going to take care of people who are dying on the street" (Kamisar, 2016, para. 7) and promising to protect Social Security and Medicare while providing health insurance coverage to all (Becker, 2016). As President, Trump betrayed these pledges by allowing conventional Republicans such as Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell to dictate his domestic agenda, resulting in healthcare policies that worsened, rather than expanded, access to care (Pradhan, 2019). Opponents should cast authoritarian populists as tools of elites rather than heroes of the working class, undermining a crucial element of their narrative. The aim would be to use policy-based arguments to invoke an emotional reaction through a narrative that makes plain the chasm between the authoritarian populist's values and the values of their voters. The potential power of this strategy is evidenced by the fact that Trump's approval ratings hit their nadir as the public and media scrutinized Republican proposals on healthcare and tax cuts during late 2017 (Yglesias, 2020).

Opponents of authoritarian populism should also emphasize shared values as a means of dampening cultural anxieties. During his presidential campaigns, Obama activated a diverse coalition in part because he minimized racial tensions by explaining "feelings of anger present in both the black and white communities" as stemming from "the larger failure of the nation to make the American Dream available to all" (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 146). Countering movements that appeal to fear of change will to some degree require opponents to reassure racially and economically anxious parts of the public that these changes need not threaten their livelihoods or that the worrying consequences of such changes can be addressed without regressive and xenophobic policies. This is not a simple task. In the United States, the conservative media apparatus complicates efforts to advance such a message. In other places where authoritarian populism has arisen abroad, weak or non-existent press and speech freedoms are another obstacle. The messenger matters as well; these themes may not resonate if articulated by a divisive or uninspiring standard-bearer. Regardless, opponents of authoritarian populism must challenge the narrative advanced by reactionary movements and insist on a more inclusive interpretation of "the people."

Benefits of Rhetorical Fieldwork

At the rally I attended in Minneapolis, I witnessed an exchange that encapsulated the bitterness of American politics. In the hours leading up to the rally, Trump supporters and protestors were physically separated for their own safety. The Trump supporters and I waited in a long skywalk tunnel that connected a parking garage and the Target Center, where Trump was scheduled to speak. Within the skywalk, Trump supporters were confined by caution tape so that police and security personnel could easily walk through the hall. The arrangement resembled an

online enclave brought to life, where political homogeneity is mandatory and alternative perspectives are excluded.

After hours of waiting in line, we eventually reached a stretch of the skywalk consisting of large glass windows overlooking the city streets below us. Predictably, the presence of hundreds of Trump supporters in this transparent glass skybridge did not go unnoticed by passersby below. Eventually, two protestors carrying "Impeach Trump" signs and a balloon depicting Trump as an orange baby in a diaper stopped to wave their signs at Trump supporters. One Trump supporter standing nearby me reacted by yelling at the protestors and pressing a shirt he purchased earlier that day against the glass. The shirt bore the caption "IMPEACH THIS" and featured a picture of the electoral map from Trump's 2016 victory, showing large swathes of red in the heart of the country with tiny blue areas bunched together on the coasts and several cities. This moment struck me as an apt illustration of the nation's basic predicament: two parties, both convinced of their righteousness and exchanging angry insults while physically separated by a glass barrier. In such a context, communication is all but futile.

My rhetorical fieldwork, and the Trump era in general, has taken place against a backdrop of "cultural fragmentation" and "political polarization" (Serazio, 2019, p. 4). In the past half century, "the Democratic and Republican coalitions have sorted by ideology, race, religion, geography and psychology" (Klein, 2020, para. 5). As a result, Republicans and Democrats increasingly operate according to disparate facts and understandings about the nation. This trend toward polarization and fragmentation is in part due to the divergent information streams of Democrats and Republicans (Justice & Bricker, 2019). Geography also plays a role: Democrats and Republicans now "live in different worlds," both figuratively and literally (Zitner & Chinni, 2019). The clustering of Democrats in urban and suburban areas while Republicans

dominate in "working-class and rural districts" has made the "urban-rural divide" a "defining feature of politics" (paras. 1-6). This geographic and cultural distance manifests itself in heightened negative partisanship. Pew Research Center (2016) polling has shown that "sizable shares of both Democrats and Republicans say the other party stirs feelings of not just frustration, but fear and anger" ("Partisanship and Political Animosity," para. 2).

Polarization not only alienates citizens from one another; left unchecked, widening partisan divides tear at the fabric of democracy itself. Extreme polarization encourages rival political factions to "perceive the 'Other' in such negative terms that a normal political adversary with whom to engage in a competition for power is transformed into an enemy to be vanquished" (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018, p. 19). These dynamics hinder effective governance, fueling chronic gridlock as "communication and trust break down" and ruling parties seek "to overturn the predecessor's policies at every chance" (p. 19). In the long term, "perceptions of the out-party as a threat to the nation" may "lead to violation of democratic norms" and weaken the constitutional foundations of the nation itself (p. 25). For democracy to flourish, citizens must adopt a "comic" (rather than "tragic") frame that depicts political opponents "not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*" (Burke, 1959, p. 41).

What can be done to mitigate polarization? There are no simple solutions, as polarization is a complex process driven by changing patterns of media consumption, demographics, geography, institutional design, and psychology (Hibbing, Smith, & Alford, 2014). Nonetheless, a rhetorical fieldwork approach may help reduce polarization, if only slightly, by making Americans seem less foreign to each other. To the extent that this project provides a more nuanced account of Trump supporters than the usual stereotypes seen in media coverage, or helps readers better understand the motivations of Trump supporters, the cause of de-polarization

will be bolstered. Of course, greater outreach cannot by itself alleviate polarization. Vulnerable populations should not be expected to reach out to political adversaries who demean them, and efforts by academics to step outside of their political comfort zones may not amount to much if individuals on both sides of the partisan divide do not also muster the courage to venture beyond the comfortable confines of their "bubbles" (Thornton, 2016). Reducing polarization will also require political leaders who emphasize common values rather than constantly highlighting division.

Yet, confronting polarization—and all its attendant risks for the future of democracy— requires individuals to undertake good faith efforts to understand opposing viewpoints. Institutional and political solutions to polarization deserve thorough examination and debate, but, at a fundamental level, citizens must take the initiative to reach across partisan divides in their everyday lives for the sake of the nation's civic health. Social-psychological research demonstrates that increased contact between different groups can dampen prejudice and conflict (Allport, 1954). Communication scholars have provided further support for this theory, showing that "the tools developed in intergroup communication can be adapted to political communication as interventions to improve the health of our democratic culture" (Warner & Villamil, 2017, p. 461). Outreach efforts that involve "being exposed to 'the other side' of an argument, or to members of an out-group, can be invaluable" (Bond, Shulman, & Gilbert, 2018, p. 4334), because intergroup contact "not only . . . leads to improvements in how we treat each other, it also nourishes attitudes that are vital for the survival of a robust democratic culture" (Warner & Villamil, 2017, p. 461). Absent such exposure to opposing viewpoints, "people remain ignorant of others' beliefs and experiences, and instead rely on false, stereotypic, or

logically flawed perceptions of the other point of view" (Bond, Shulman, & Gilbert, 2018, p. 4334).

Fieldwork methodologies not only allow unique insights into how ordinary Americans practice politics; they offer an opportunity to listen to those who we disagree with, which is necessary for the survival of democracy. Making an effort to leave one's bubble and encounter opposing viewpoints is an intrinsic good, "since it is always good to better appreciate those with whom we are sharing the planet" (Hibbing et al., 2014, p. 252). Rhetorical fieldwork, along with broader efforts on the part of Americans to understand each other, can help chip away at polarization by encouraging "openness to the life experiences of others" (Tracy, 2013, p. 233). Fieldwork methodologies that attend to emotional, "sensory embodied experiences" are particularly valuable for "learning about other people's worlds" and "understanding other people's experiences, values, identities and ways of life" (Pink, 2015, pp. 25-26, p. 53). The openness towards alternative perspectives that is inculcated by rhetorical fieldwork can "generate politically transformative experiences out of ordinary interactions among strangers" (Allen, 2004, p. 171). In 1858, a Republican from Illinois warned that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." More than a century later, the nation once again confronts a period of great division. Rhetorical fieldwork, although incapable of fully healing such divides, can if nothing else build understanding about the nature of these divides.

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