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Rhetoric and the Cultural Politics of Donald Trump

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BOOK REVIEWS

Rhetoric and the Cultural Politics of Donald Trump

Political Perversion: Rhetorical Aberration in the Time of Trumpeteering, by Joshua Gunn, U of Chicago P, 2020, 196 pp., $27.50 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-226-71344-1.

Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood, by Casey Ryan Kelly, Ohio State UP, 2020, 201 pp., $29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8142-5578-0.

Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump, by Jennifer Mercieca, Texas A&M UP, 2020, 338 pp., $28.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-62349-906-8.

Politics for Everybody: Reading Hannah Arendt in Uncertain Times, by Ned O'Gorman, U of Chicago P, 2020, 173 pp., $22.50 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-226-68315-7.

Rhetoric and Demagoguery, by Patricia Roberts-Miller, Southern Illinois UP, 2019, 245 pp., $40.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8093-3712-5.

American Catastrophe: Fundamentalism, Climate Change, Gun Rights, and the Rhetoric of Donald J. Trump, by Luke Winslow, Ohio State UP, 2020, 218 pp., $32.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-8142-5590-2.

Donald Trump and the political culture he represents are likely not going away anytime soon. Since losing the 2020 presidential election, he has repeated false allegations of massive voter fraud, spearheading a "stolen election industry" of media outlets and public figures campaigning and fundraising off unfounded conspiracies (Rothschild p. 7). Although he and his legal team have lost at least 61 lawsuits contesting the election results, Trump, along with a chorus of politicians and pundits, continues to declare him the legitimate winner of the 2020 election (Cummings; Garrison and Stewart). While writing this review essay, the US House Select Committee on the January 6th Attack on the Capitol completed its televised hearings to investigate Trump's possible role in the riots and published its 800-page final report. Yet he has announced his 2024 run for president and continues to hold rallies across the country where his fervent supporters gather to hear the message of America's decline from the man who promises to reverse it.

Six recent rhetorical studies monographs interrogate the question of Donald Trump and Trumpism, which seems to have taken hold of large swaths of the United States of America's political ecosystem (Gardner and Arnsdorf). Through impressive, at times exciting, analysis, these books shed light on the rhetorical performances of Trump and the communities and ideologies he energizes. These scholars invite us to think in new ways about issues that the 2016 election forced us to reconsider, such as the role of feeling and identity in public rhetoric, the impact of media on our political identities and fantasies, and the deeper rhetorical and cultural logics that structure our political habits. Each scholar calls our attention to the complex interplay of surfaces and depths, texts and contexts, that make up our political culture. And they all seem to agree that Trump's demagoguery, his catastrophic and apocalyptic rhetoric, and his perverse discourse are signs of a larger cultural phenomenon, a twisted politics that precedes and exceeds him. Yet these impressive books do more than provide insights into Trump; they offer insights into our contemporary political and media culture, from which Trump emerged.

While I do not have space here to provide each book the thorough summary and analysis it deserves, I want to highlight four themes that run throughout, themes that taken together form a larger

argument. First, our current political media culture—my perhaps overly broad term to include TV, the internet, news media, and televised political speech—privileges the impulses of spectacle, immediacy, and partisanship. Second, this media culture and our engagement with it encourages a kind of polarization made possible by figuration and fallacy, often in the forms of manipulative rhetorical figures and tropes as well as misleading argumentative strategies. Third, the moods that often animate this political media culture are apocalypse and perversion, a dual longing to both avoid and bring on catastrophe by fostering perverse actions and spectacles designed to seem justified. Finally, one key reaction to this political media culture is to return to questions of deliberation and judgment, to restore a sense of sound decision making that values our capacities for both reasoned argument *and* passionate feeling as well as non-immediate reaction—that is, the time and space needed to slow down and think and feel. My selective summary of each book is intended to highlight, although not exhaustively analyze, how this line of thought emerges across them.

Demagoguery and Weaponized Words

In many ways, Patricia Roberts-Miller's brilliantly argued monograph in historical rhetoric, *Rhetoric and Demagoguery*, sets the stage for any contemporary study of American political rhetoric. In it, she examines what she terms "train wrecks in public deliberation," moments when rhetors in public debate chose discourses of demagoguery over policy argumentation. Roberts-Miller analyzes a host of demagogic arguments, narratives, and myths dispersed across a range of texts involved in such debates as the Iraq War, the Peloponnesian War, the US internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, segregation, and eugenics-based science. Avoiding idealized and impossible-to-achieve goals for public discourse, Roberts-Miller provides a pragmatic definition, six key criteria, and twelve frequent characteristics to aid researchers and students alike in identifying demagogic discourse. Those criteria include the delineation of in-groups and out-groups, an emphasis on in-group identity, and the "scapegoating of an out-group," who is allegedly victimizing the in-group (173). Roberts-Miller understands demagoguery as a "polarizing discourse" that seems to offer stability for the in-group by refusing the complex work of policy argumentation, careful deliberation, and the "responsibility of rhetoric"; in its place, demagoguery reframes debates as contests of identity that pit the "good guys" against the bad, "us" against "them" (16). Putting rhetorical studies in dialog with sociology, psychology, and even applied linguistics, Roberts-Miller upends dominant conceptions of demagoguery that have stalled rhetorical studies research: a misguided focus on the demagogue as instigator, a persistent vilification of emotion in public deliberation, a conflation of demagoguery with populism, and the failure to account for the role of identity-based arguments premised on in-group favoritism and out-group vilification.

Roberts-Miller begins (in Chapter 1) by considering how the lack of actual deliberation in the public discourse about the 2003 Iraq invasion hinged on questions of identity. This demagoguery, which marketed the Iraq war as a Manichean struggle that could not be refused, was not limited to political elites but found in op-eds, commentary, and even public opinion. Then she turns (in Chapter 2) to Cleon's arguments for war in Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War*, William Workman's defense of segregation in *The Case for the South* (1960), and the US Supreme Court's decision to uphold Japanese internment. In each, demagoguery depended on a vilification of deliberation as weak, unmanly, and unreasonable, and, in a surprising reversal of our usual assumptions about emotional demagogues, often featured a seemingly calm, unemotional tone, as in Workman's thoroughly racist arguments.

As Roberts-Miller demonstrates in Chapter 3, not all demagoguery is obvious at the time. In his testimony before a House Select Committee on the question of the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans, Earl Warren presented rumors, fears, and prejudice as unemotional statements of supposed fact and widespread public feeling. Warren's demagoguery was addressed not to the masses but to an elite audience and lacked the markers of high emotionality commonly used to identify demagogues.

Just as demagogic rhetoric need not be emotional, Roberts-Miller (in Chapter 4) showcases how it need not be very good either. Madison Grant's infamous *The Passing of the Great Race* (1919) did not sway mass opinion as much as reconfirm the existing prejudices and racist beliefs by providing a seemingly scientific argument that was not just logically inconsistent but nearly unintelligible, with its shifting and unstable concepts and misuse of previous research. The opacity and difficulty of the argument, Roberts-Miller maintains, seemed to enhance its authority with those who read into it a validation of their own bigoted and undemocratic positions. Roberts-Miller's fifth chapter considers demagoguery masquerading as scientific authority: E.S. Cox's *White America* (1922), Theodore Bilbo's *Take Your Place: Amalgamation or Separation?* (1946), and Hak-Sing William Tam's testimony in favor of Proposition 8. Each invokes types of academic expertise specifically designed to convince nonexperts who might not question the misuse and misrepresentation of sources and evidence. Roberts-Miller demonstrates that demagoguery can be flagrantly anti-intellectual, but it can also be selectively dismissive of expertise that contradicts in-group positions.

Her attention to the role of in-groups and out-groups, which in sociology is often termed social identity theory, marks perhaps the book's most enduring contribution to rhetorical studies. By spotlighting how the kindling of in-group/out-group division is the foundation of demagogic rhetoric, Roberts-Miller clarifies that demagoguery is not just a right-wing problem; it's a human problem, and she challenges us to interrogate our own political discourse. Ultimately, she reminds us that "good enough" policy argumentation is about refusing demagoguery's false promise of stability and not about banishing feelings. After all, emotion plays a key role in how we make decisions. The false dichotomy of reason versus feelings is just that: false. Her perspective on emotion in political argument resonates with Aristotelian rhetorical theory and draws explicitly from psychologist Daniel Kahneman's famous two systems model of decision making. According to Kahneman, our thinking about nearly everything is based on either fast, overly emotional, intuitive processes (System I) or slower, analytical, more deliberative ones (System II). Rather than suppress the former, Kahneman urges us to recognize that most complex decisions require the latter. When it comes to politics, reflection and deliberation can slow down unthinking, visceral reactions that play into demagogic tendencies, like scapegoating those we deem responsible for our in-group's woes. In one way or another, this preference for reflection, deliberation, and thoughtful judgment is echoed by the other authors I discuss.

In her award-winning book on the minutia of Donald Trump's rhetorical performances, Jennifer Mercieca offers a stunning analysis of the visceral, scapegoating tactics of the former president. In *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump*, she maintains that Trump's rhetoric appeals to distrusting, polarized, and frustrated voters, many of whom view him as a "heroic demagogue" and truth-teller who would "champion the cause of the people against the corrupt establishment" (11). Analyzing Trump's campaign speeches, books, interviews, and tweets, Mercieca identifies six strategies that Trump repeatedly used in speeches, interviews, and books: three unifying strategies connecting Trump with his audience (*argumentum ad populum*, appeals to US American exceptionalism, and paralipsis) and three dividing strategies distinguishing him from his competitors and the perceived political establishment (*argumentum ad hominem, argumentum ad baculum*, and reification). Through these strategies, Trump crafts a "weaponized rhetoric" that undermines not only reasoned deliberation but also processes foundational to a functioning democracy, while simultaneously forcing compliance and avoiding accountability (14).

In Part One, Mercieca shows how Trump deployed the six strategies to amplify distrust in government and mainstream political leadership. Throughout his campaign, as Chapter 1 explains, Trump used an *ad populum* appeal to attack notions of "political correctness," thus distinguishing himself from the political establishment and conventional media, both of whom, he claimed, were more concerned with adhering to outmoded decorum than solving America's problems. Unconcerned with petty social norms, Trump positioned himself as a truth-teller who would attack the political corruption behind the veneer of politics, all the while inviting his supposedly alienated audience to participate in the violation of norms

through overt expressions of outrage and resentment. Mercieca (in Chapter 4) demonstrates how Trump's strategies often shade into one another, as an *ad hominem* attack on journalists, such as his cruel impersonation of *Washington Post* journalist Serge Kovaleski's disability, leads to reification of the media as an enemy object. All the while, Trump uses these and other strategies while pretending not to be doing anything at all, and that is key to his discursive power and is arguably his signature move (as Joshua Gunn's work underlines from a psychoanalytic perspective): the use of paralipsis to simultaneously utter and disavow positions that cannot be confirmed or that violate presidential norms. In Chapter 5, she introduces this idea as she takes up Trump saying and yet not saying that Ted Cruz's father Raphael conspired with Lee Harvey Oswald in assassinating JFK.

In Part Two, Mercieca turns to Trump's use of these strategies to intensify hyper-partisan feelings by positioning not just Democrats and their policies as enemies of the nation, but even Republicans who stand against him and his supporters. For example (in Chapter 8), she carefully follows the dynamic development of Trump's *ad hominem* attack on fellow presidential candidate "low-energy Jeb" Bush; in doing so, she convincingly reveals Trump's ability to test out his rhetoric in response to audience reception. Trump frequently used Twitter as a trolling tactic by repeating objectionable claims without always saying them himself. His efforts to further polarize his audience frequently involved fear appeals, such as (in Chapter 10) his *ad baculum* strikes, first, against his own followers by suggesting Clinton and Democrats would take their guns and, second, against Democrats by suggesting that gun owners—"the Second Amendment people"—might be the ones to stop them.

In Part Three, Mercieca explored how Trump used these strategies to channel his supporters' frustration against their common enemies and to focus their charged feelings into action, namely electing him their president and champion. Notably (in Chapter 13), she explores Trump's evolving *ad baculum* use of the "Lock her up" chant common at his rallies. Here Mercieca describes how Trump increasingly encouraged the crowd to proclaim openly what he perhaps could not. She takes up paralipsis coupled with hyperbole (in Chapter 14), more specifically Trump's habit of "saying, without saying" when it came to allegations involving Clinton's emails and his public comments enlisting Russia's help. In Chapter 16, she delves into the misogynistic online world of men's rights activism and trolling, known as the manosphere, to spotlight how Trump's sexist language reified women as objects (with a particular electoral "use value") (179). In the book's conclusion, she draws from theorist Guy Deboard to assert that Trump represents "a demagogue of the spectacle" who combines showmanship and authoritarianism (210). Only by "controlling the demagogue" can we preserve democracy, and the best way to do that is "critical thinking about rhetoric and argument" (208). After eighteen chapters of meticulous analysis, Mercieca proves what democracy needs is a type of rhetorical criticism that enlightens and instructs, demonstrating the value of our hermeneutics while subtly inviting readers to join us.

In this, Mercieca's book and Roberts-Miller's beautifully complement one another. While Roberts-Miller does not give us a book on Trump, she identifies demagogic characteristics that are Trump's signature moves, such as the use of "binary paired terms," "cunning projection," and an "apocalyptic metanarrative" (174). Reading their exceptional books side-by-side raised, for me, questions about emotion and populism. First, Roberts-Miller carefully attends to the ways feelings (regardless of valence or intensity) often function as reasons in political deliberations, and thus should not be dismissed outright. Strong emotion, Roberts-Miller demonstrates, is not a required feature of demagoguery. Mercieca rightly interrogates Trump's exploitation of fear, rage, and other negative feelings. Yet her conception of rhetoric as "addressed to the conscious, rational mind" left me wondering if she sees a positive role for emotion, even intense emotion, in rhetoric and public debate (13). At his rallies, Trump supporters often seem to experience a type of exuberance. How might such feelings as enjoyment and pride, which Trump's rhetoric seeks to induce in his fans, factor into Trump's appeal? Can those feelings of enjoyment (to foreshadow the books by Casey Ryan Kelly and Joshua Gunn) be made to play well with reason?

Second, Mercieca makes clear the populist impulse beneath some of Trump's demagogic strategies—his assertions that establishment elites are untrustworthy and his promise to be the voice of the people. Roberts-Miller, however, suggests that populism is not inherently demagogic. With the rise of leaders like Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Jair Bolsonaro, who exploit populist rhetorical conventions, there is growing concern about populism's intermingling with demagoguery (evidenced in recent books by Jan-Werner Müller and Federico Finchelstein). While I do not disagree with her, I think readers, like me, troubled by this intermingling, could have benefited from a more extended treatment of the populist-demagogue relationship.

Catastrophic and Apocalyptic Impulses

Offering a blueprint to the hidden warrants, crucial *topoi*, and organizing logics of right-wing political discourse, Luke Winslow's *American Catastrophe: Fundamentalism, Climate Change, Gun Rights, and the Rhetoric of Donald J. Trump* examines a rhetoric of catastrophe that he views as a rejection of, and alternative to, rational argumentation. This catastrophic rhetoric embraces, even longs, for chaos and cataclysm, with the hope of forging a new order from the disordered aftermath. Building from Barry Brummett's concept of the rhetorical homology, Winslow highlights a "rhetorical aquifer" that runs beneath and springs to the surface of a host of right-wing religious, economic, and political positions (153). He identifies five "symbolic points of formal correspondence" that structure the media, genres, texts, and discourses that make up this catastrophic homology (9).

First, "perceived marginalization" is a position unconnected to objective measures of oppression that characterizes the "traditionally empowered" as victims under threat (9). This reactionary rhetoric fosters a sense of unity in the self-ascribed community (the in-group) against the oppressor (the out-group). Second, Winslow describes "prophetic perversion" (p. 10) as a rhetoric that grants a prophetic voice and interpretative power to the catastrophic rhetors who stand against conventional sources of authority and expertise, including traditional religious and political institutions. As an alternative yet authentic voice of authority, the perverse prophet (perverse in a colloquial, nonpsychoanalytic sense) wields power over the community and deepens its distrust of outside influence. Third, a "hermeneutic of systematicity" (Winslow, p. 11) functions as a twisted imitation of scientific or scholarly interpretation, appealing (so it would seem to the in-group) to notions of objectivity, neutrality, and evidence. In doing so, this interpretative frame allows the catastrophic community to claim legitimacy for their arguments and experiences, while convoluting those same suspect standards. Fourth, "militant individualism" (Winslow, p. 13) is an ideology that entices the distrustful and the alienated into the community by suggesting a rejection of mainstream authority and encouraging retreat from the disordered world. It is this rejection and withdrawal that creates strong, well-equipped individuals prepared to defend the community from external threats, whether physical or ideological. Finally, "telic temporality" (Winslow, p. 14) is Winslow's term for the conception of time that organizes the communal orientations and activities of the group. Here, time is regarded as a linear progression characterized by periodic moments of crisis that lead to a final catastrophic end, one that makes renewal possible.

In his analysis chapters, Winslow provides a nuanced look into four right-wing communities—Christian fundamentalism, anti-environmentalism, the gun rights movement, and Donald Trump's rhetoric—whose in-group loyalty (my language, not his) is structured by a specific allegiance to chaos often understood as the only defense against the threatening out-group. Winslow's project attends to the complex interplay between text and context, by analyzing the ways catastrophic discourses of cataclysm produce the communities whose rhetoric, actions, and experiences are organized by that discourse. Winslow begins (in Chapter 1) by clarifying how Christian fundamentalism is constituted through the five features of the catastrophic homology. Walking us through major political and theological debates, such as questions of biblical inerrancy and Christianity's role in and response to the secular world, Winslow demonstrates that these features are key to the constitution and success of the

movement. Through a nuanced and engaging analysis, Winslow contends that Christian fundamentalism was constituted through a "counterpublic speech" made possible by catastrophic rhetoric. Arguably the cornerstone of his book, this exceptional chapter foreshadows how other communities will be interpellated by this discourse and offers an excellent primer on Christian fundamentalist thought.

He turns to gun rights discourses (in Chapter 3), specifically those furnaced by the National Rifle Association, that draw on the catastrophic homology not only as a source of "symbolic resources," but also as a means of fashioning a "political subjectivity" around gun ownership (88). By reconstructing the argumentation of an array of texts in each case study, Winslow's chapters provide an indispensable guide to the messaging of each community formed by this discourse as well as the reasoning that shapes a believer's faith in these catastrophe-yearning positions. For example, in Chapter 3, he provides an illuminating discussion of how the oft-repeated slogan "Guns don't kill people, people kill people" is meaningful to the community precisely because it condenses elements of the homology that organizes their identity. Winslow (in Chapter 4) interrogates Donald Trump's rhetoric, specifically the way it primed his audience for a looming calamity, thereby composing the rhetorical opportunity for that community's creation. Yet the appeal and power of Trump, as a "rhetorical construct," is made possible by larger cultural shifts of disintegration and distrust in American politics, specifically on the right (119). As in previous chapters, Winslow begins with a brief historical overview before diving into Trump's deployment of the homology.

His concluding chapter underscores the consequences of this catastrophic rhetoric, namely a heightened cynicism and a longing for chaos, while briefly (and perhaps too briefly) suggesting the "comic corrective" as a potential alternative to both (158). In his discussion of the ways new terms and framing might refocus the debates he has analyzed, Winslow acknowledges the sobering proposition that those who cannot be moved from this disastrous homology need perhaps instead "to be barred from influencing public policy" (163). Winslow does not view this cataclysmic discourse as the dominant strategy of mainstream American conservativism but instead the preoccupation of "demolition-minded perverts" who aim to dismantle political, religious, and cultural institutions (16). However, considering his work in concert with the five other books, and the persistent conspiracy theories of stolen elections, and the events and aftermath of the January 6th riots, mainstream conservativism seems to have surrendered to this catastrophic homology. As such, Winslow's book provides a necessary guide to the rhetoric undergirding that transformation. With a sometimes acerbic criticism of previous research he finds either too simplistic or wrongheaded, Winslow's commitment to nuanced answers propels his radiant analysis.

While Winslow spotlights a catastrophic rhetoric that animates antidemocratic right-wing movements, Casey Ryan Kelly, in *Apocalypse Man: The Death Drive and the Rhetoric of White Masculine Victimhood*, focuses our attention on the apocalyptic discourses of one facet of that world. Merging rhetorical criticism, media studies, and visual and performance studies, Kelly investigates how and why White masculinity is marked by both a melancholic attachment to a mythic past of supposedly idyllic male dominance and a compulsive need to reenact discourses, images, and performances of death, chaos, and the destruction of democratic institutions and the social order. In his introduction, he sets up his project by providing a brief historical overview of how contemporary White masculinity came to be constituted through seemingly contradictory tropes of dominance and victimhood, order and chaos. He then elaborates two largely Freudian concepts—the death drive and melancholia—used to theorize this apocalyptic manhood.

The death drive, like many of Sigmund Freud's ideas, is an evolving concept that came to mean the subject's drive toward annihilation, even nothingness, as a means of resolving the tension between the ego and the libido. This destructive drive, at odds with the libido, is often expressed as self-destruction, outward-facing aggression, or both—as well as a reenactment of the traumatic experience that signified the hoped-for accomplishment of the drive. That reenactment, that compulsive repetition, can play out in dreams, fantasy, or action in the real world. Kelly finds in the death drive and melancholia a way of making sense of the fantasies and

performances of trauma and persecution that beleaguer the apocalyptic White man. The death drive initiates a yearning for lawlessness and annihilation, a yearning that becomes a loss that melancholia refuses to mourn and instead preserves in the subject. The simultaneous projection of powerful dominance and besieged victimhood, and the compulsive repetition to reenact and yet repudiate this conflicted position: these are the coordinates Kelly skillfully traces in his five case studies.

Kelly begins (in Chapter 1) with an analysis of the reality TV show *Doomsday Preppers* and his experience at a prepper convention. Survivalist prepping provides a space for simulating the end of the world, thus offering White men opportunities to perform rituals of survival viewed as repudiations of the supposedly feminine trappings of contemporary society, a society that robs men of their primacy and primality. The "apocalyptic paranoia" that animates these rituals is played out in demonstrations of male labor, paternal "know-how," and the domestication of women to supportive, motherly roles (47). Ultimately, Kelly contends, this fantasy promises and yet fails to accomplish a recuperation of the "hero-victim" (6). The fourth chapter's title, "Sun's Out, Guns Out," riffs on the jesting slogan to demonstrate visible gun ownership as an embodied argument, public performance, and—through its photographic documentation— image event (in Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeple's use of the term). The public performance of open carry indexes cultural archetypes of the "virile gunslinger," specifically reaffirming law-and-order archetypes of the cowboy, soldier, and militia man (107). The gun, then, symbolizes White male phallocentric sovereignty in the face of a state that seeks to emasculate men, an overreaching government countered through militaristic assertions of power. Yet the photographs of visible open carry center male victimhood alongside heroism, a primacy coupled with inferiority. The open carry movement creates a "persecuted fantasy" that upholds men's rights ideology, while embracing male victimhood (109).

In his study of Donald Trump's key speeches (in Chapter 5), Kelly contends that Trump's rhetoric oscillates between, on the one hand, White male (and White US American) vulnerability to a system that conspires to rob them of their prominence and, on the other, the possibility of retributive justice against this victimhood. Trump's monstrous America is a revenge fantasy premised on sadomasochistic enjoyment, even as it relishes the supposed agony, insecurity, and resentment of his White audience. Through his reality TV personae, his speeches, and the spectacle of his rallies, Trump highlights the vulnerability, humiliation, and debasement of his audience and invites them to reexperience their supposed victimhood. He brandishes his wealth and success as a contrast to their economic precarity and social struggle. As their champion and apocalyptic prophet, Trump promises revenge on their enemies (an out-group composed of non-Whites, liberals, Democrats, and elites), whom his fans are completely justified in punishing. In doing this, Trump implores them to enjoy the vengeance and the execution of power that his election will make possible.

Kelly concluded by reflecting on the Unite the Right rally held in (my now-home) Charlottesville, Virginia, on 12 August 2017. To repudiate this apocalyptic manhood, Kelly calls for "counternetworks" of men, both online and off, who resist the narrative by holding themselves and other men accountable for their misogyny, racism, and abuse of power (156). Like Roberts-Miller and Winslow, Kelly suggests that democracy depends on people taking responsibility for their words and actions. While Kelly critiques this destructive politics of the death drive and its insistence to enjoy victimhood, he leaves open more generative possibilities for the death drive, specifically those that embrace a more productive tension with Eros. It is in this closing gesture that I can see most clearly the subtle and perhaps underdeveloped presence of Jacques Lacan's ideas in Kelly's otherwise Freudian-focused analysis. There is throughout Kelly's remarkable book a kind of Lacan-between-the-lines that is most visible in his discussion of enjoyment (which is shaped by Christian Lundberg's Lacanian monograph). Kelly astutely attends to an experience of a thwarted enjoyment tinged with suffering that is crucial to the compulsive repetition of this apocalyptic manhood. Does he understand this as a kind of misogynist and often racist mode of jouissance? If so, might there be ways to traverse this fantasy of apocalypse (to adapt a phrase from Lacan)? Is this perhaps what he sees Spike Lee doing in his 2018 film *BlaKKKlansman*, which joltingly included footage from the violent events of the Unite

the Right rally? (Or are these questions that only someone like me, convinced of the value of Lacanian thought, would ask?)

Winslow's and Kelly's impressive arguments powerfully complement one another, as many markers of the catastrophic rhetoric Winslow identifies, such as perceived marginalization and militarism, are witnessed in the apocalyptic manhood Kelly explores. Another point of shared concern is the constitutive rhetorical function of the discourses, texts, and media they examine. In Chapter 2, Kelly asserts that media technologies "predicate" the content of social media, thus calling attention to the affordances of the networked digital media through which these misogynistic, racist, and apocalyptic fantasies are generated (68), while Winslow argues that fundamentalist discourses create "audiences that would not otherwise exist" (60). The communities Winslow and Kelly analyze are composed through and enact fantasies fostered by these cataclysmic discourses. By ending their monographs with Trump's rhetoric, Winslow and Kelly underscore how Trump's most ardent supporters are constituted through and enlivened by the former president's transgressive discourses of chaos and annihilation. The perversity of Trump and Trumpism that Winslow (colloquially) and Kelly (psychoanalytically) reference is the focus of Joshua Gunn's own book-length argument.

Perversion, Deliberation, and Judgment

With *Political Perversion: Rhetorical Aberration in the Time of Trumpeteering*, Gunn offers one of the most convincing demonstrations of psychoanalytic theory and criticism in recent years. In it, he argues that Trump's rhetoric—his persona and person—enacts and exemplifies a style and genre of political perversion. While he concedes that Trump's rhetoric is authoritarian, fascist, and demagogic, Gunn contends the former president is perverse in a much deeper, psychoanalytic sense that involves a "structural disavowal of consensus reality at the core of political ecology" (5). Combining rhetorical studies and cultural studies, Gunn's project sets out to define this problem of our contemporary politics and offer a critical vocabulary for the deeper structural and affective impulses at play.

Gunn explains (in Chapter 2) the factors that have precipitated our perverse political moment: (1) a technoculture of immediacy, and (2) a loss of anchoring authorities. He recognizes in our relationship to screens, public discourse, and even each other an impulse for acceleration that undermines the typical neurotic psychical structure premised on reflection and hesitancy in relation to larger social norms. Drawing from Paul Virilio on the consequences of speed in technologically saturated modern life, Gunn argues that our "social networks" are racing us toward psychosis. More than networked digital platforms, Gunn's term "social networks" references broader social relationships made possible by the intermingling of communication technologies, psychical structures, media rhetoric, and human subjectivity (52). Our thorny relationships to screens, discourses, and each other contribute to what Slavoj Zizek and Jodi Dean have termed "the decline of symbolic efficiency," a resistance to or rejection of traditional sources of expertise, authority, and truth that function as necessary sources of reference and prohibition (48). For Gunn, our social networks of speed and immediacy make it difficult to hear and obey the "No!," to heed the traditional symbolic authorities, leaving us no time to reflect or deliberate. And it is the cultural psychosis that makes possible the structurally perverse politics of Donald Trump.

Gunn probes (in Chapter 4) how a psychical structure can coalesce in and through genre, specifically how a perverse style can solidify into a perverse genre. He does this by explicating how Trump's repetition of disavowal and demand, always seemingly geared toward gratification, is echoed in his form of governance and his reality TV showmanship. In doing so, Gunn returns to a question posed earlier in his book: can we ethically label Trump a pervert? He provides a microhistory of similar debates in rhetorical studies that lead to what he terms the Wizard of Oz rule; namely, that a rhetor's performance is not necessary indicative of the person. This rule, as Gunn points out, assumes, first, that there can be a genuine self beneath and apart from persona (a position critiqued by poststructuralism) and, second, that evaluating personas implies an irresponsible moral judgment. Thus, we are

frequently left with, as Gunn sees it, a "dissatisfying" focus on persona and formal patterns of discourse, even if we view the line between person and persona as potentially illusory (104).

For Gunn, Lacanian theory offers a way through this impasse by emphasizing that psychical structures are repeated, patterned dispositions toward others (both real others and the big Other) and by distinguishing between perverse structure and perverse acts. Trump manifests a perverse structure readily apparent at the level of genre, specifically the reality TV genre and his twisted version of the press conference that often demands acceptance of some counterfactual claim while disavowing widely held facts. Gunn homes in on Trump's infamous October 2016 press conference that included women who accused Bill Clinton of rape, a public spectacle held after the release of the *Hollywood Access* tape and before his second debate with Hillary Clinton. By juxtaposing his supposedly ordinary perversion (his crude, sexist comments) against the Clintons' supposed judicial perversions, Trump denies social norms when applied to his behavior while simultaneously affirming those norms for others. Because genres and psychical structures are both patterned habits of relating to others, Gunn explains how the perverse genres of Trump are key to understanding his audience, who are enacted in part via these genres, and the political perversity that animates our current media, from news to TV and film. Political perversion as genre, in the case of Trump, provokes a recurring pattern of disavowal, recognition, and denial in the audience, a disposition Gunn vividly characterizes as, "Fuck it, I'm voting for Trump!" (115). If perversion in the structural sense is a habitual pattern of behavior characterized by a demand that disavows then, Gunn assures us, Trump can be called a pervert.

His conclusion offers a brief meditation on perverse politics as homologous to the violence of mass shooting. Like political perversion, our cultural relationship to guns intimates a demand politics that rejects responsibility. Even our news media coverage of mass shooting, or "active shooter television" as Gunn terms it, re-creates the "traumatic stressors" by framing the violence in ways that downplay larger systemic causes, just as the gun itself provides a synecdoche for individualized power and control—an immediacy that negates reflection (130). In lieu of a solution, which his introduction warned he would not provide, Gunn turns to Winnicott's conception of play and creativity, which is crucial to the subject's development as a "self-conscious person in the social world" (124). He references the humous play of common perversion so clearly represented in Hal Asby's film *Harold and Maude* (1971), and Gunn's own pun-drenched style, with its allusive prose, enacts a form of perverse play that requires us to engage different with expected academic conventions. But I could not help but wonder about ways regular people (not just writers, researchers, and artists) can participate in a productively perverse form of play. Considering his persuasive concerns about the psychosis of speed that defines our social networks, are there ways to engage with play and creativity to slow down, to reflect, to use our judgment in service of democracy?

Both Gunn and Mercieca argue convincingly that occultatio or paralipsis is a defining characteristic of Trump's rhetorical performance. And with this, they (like Roberts-Miller) underscore how certain rhetorical figures and moves seem to dominate contemporary political media culture. Trump's proclivity for saying while not saying, demanding while disavowing, still dominates the rhetoric of his rallies and Truth Social posts. Like what Roberts-Miller identifies as cunning projection (one of her twelve characteristics of demagoguery), Trump's paralipsis often projects his misdeeds, his guilt, his violation of norms onto others. We witness the same gesture of proclamation and dismissal in the victim-hero performances of apocalyptic manhood that Kelly foregrounds. For Gunn, our perverse politics, exemplified by this disavowal and demand, is made possible by our social networks of immediacy and acceleration (digital and otherwise), which contribute to the erosion of anchoring authorities. Surprisingly perhaps, Gunn's psychoanalytic claim finds a point of intersection with Roberts-Miller's psychological one: that is, we need space and time for reflection, deliberation, and slower thought. Without it, we are evading rhetorical deliberation and informed judgment, work crucial to democracy.

Ned O'Gorman's *Politics for Everybody: Reading Hannah Arendt in Uncertain Times* addresses the work necessary to move beyond the politics of Donald Trump as well as to achieve the full promise of democracy. And for Ned O'Gorman, Hannah Arendt's conception of politics is the

best, perhaps only, way to achieve both forms. By thinking with the ideas of Arendt, particularly the commitment to rhetorical action that runs often subtly through her work, O'Gorman seeks to defend politics (an Arendtian version for sure) and rekindle the "republican spirit of speech and action" integral to democracy (xiii). In his introduction, he proffers an Arendt-inspired notion of politics as the art of "living in freedom and equality with others" (3)—a process and practice, a daily choice even, only possible "*when people come together as equals to speak about, or act on, matters of common interest*" (12, italics in original). He juxtaposes this "authentic politics," as he terms it throughout, with our current twisted politics of resentment, partisanship, and hopelessness, an unproductive politics that leads us to hyperfocus on the agonistic struggle or to tune out completely. O'Gorman implores us to see that our only way forward is a genuine politics enacted and sustained by coming together freely, in our plurality, to speak and think and act as equals about what is common to us all. Unfairly perhaps, I found myself reading O'Gorman's work as a kind of solution to the problem the other authors so powerfully raised; no doubt that is exactly what O'Gorman intended.

With a nod to Eisenhower, he describes (in Chapter 1) the "electoral-entertainment complex" of our current politics, a spectacle of celebrity and intrigue that demands our attention and appeals to our cynicism. This reality TV, winner-takes-all contest frames politics as either a business or a battle, both of which are premised on zero-sum contests, cost/benefit analyses, inevitable precarity, and imperialist violence. If re-engagement with a different conception of politics is the only alternative to our current twisted system, we cannot afford to cling to antipolitical (in the Arendtian sense) or exclusionary substitutions, such as Enlightenment views of rationality. After all, democratic republics involve three necessary modes of participation: constitutions and lawmaking; governing; and citizenship. More than just a status one can achieve, citizenship is a set of practices and habits on which the other two modes depend. Any supposed solution that interferes with citizens coming together as equals is not a solution but a distraction from the real work of politics. O'Gorman takes up (in Chapter 3) what for Arendt was the crucial mental capacity that made possible authentic politics—judgment. Yet the quality of our judgments and the processes by which we form them are paramount. Judgments of a lesser quality, O'Gorman explains, rely on "prejudice," "thoughtlessness," and "ideology," while those of a greater quality require "practice, experience, and knowledge" (60; 61). Rather than conform to rule-bound procedures, political judgments should resemble the aesthetic judgments that form connoisseurship, for only then can we account for both the particulars and the universals as well as the multiple perspectives of others in the way that poetry and storytelling often teach us to do.

One feature of our twisted politics of contest and spectacle is the seeming ubiquity of lies. Arendt teaches us, however, that not all lies are the same; we must learn to distinguish between what O'Gorman terms "ordinary lies," "habitual lies," and "organized lying" (78). In Chapter 4, he sets out to do just that by first distinguishing between telling the truth and being trustworthy; that is, one can fail to do the former in the very act of living up to the latter. Critical factors, such as the context of deception, the quality or type of deception, and the general trustworthiness of the speaker, impact how we judge the lie. O'Gorman contends there are three major reasons why politicians engage in ordinary lies. First, they might conceal information based on the constituent they are addressing. Second, they might "work around the truth" as part of the usual activity of governing, like concealing negative opinions or playing nice (84). Third, politicians might lie to protect themselves or others. O'Gorman contends that lying as a form of self-protection exhibits "a strange respect" for the truth, in that concealing or denying information acknowledges the power of truth. While I would argue that someone lying does not respect the truth as much as fear the consequences it might bring, O'Gorman is quick to acknowledge that ordinary lies (even about one's personal life) can damage public trust if read as indications of habitual lies. This second category of habitual lying shows no respect for the truth and no sense of responsibility for repeated acts of deceit. Perhaps the most dangerous, organized lying is a "planned, concerted, and distributed effort" to conceal the truth (87). It can include such activities as scapegoating, propaganda, and disinformation; it evidences a corrupt and pernicious antidemocratic strategy that Arendt identified as a mechanism of totalitarianism.

If one important way we exercise political judgment is sorting out whether, how, and why we are being deceived, we must be able to listen to others' positions and arguments, assess them, and form our own through a process of collaborative meaning making. Rhetoric, as O'Gorman contends in Chapter 5, is foundational to achieving authentic politics. Political authority and power are not just accrued through knowledge and expertise; instead, they are cooperatively built with others through trust, deliberation, and often compromise. For rhetoric to function as a trust-building act, O'Gorman suggests we must follow three rules, which are influenced by his impressive reading of ancient rhetorical theory. First, we must approach one another as different yet equal. Second, the aim of our rhetoric must be to persuade—not to teach, command, or manipulate, in that each of these three imply a relationship of inequality. Third, we must appreciate rhetoric's potential as a form of political rule, one in which we meet others where they are and allow them the freedom and opportunity to use their faculties of listening, speaking, and judging. Because rhetoric deals with claims that might always be otherwise, it requires a certain level of vulnerability. We might be wrong or misled; our own ideas might be challenged, and we might need to revisit ideas we hold as true. He views the "humble art" of rhetoric as animating Arendt's republican values in that her work emphasizes the need for plurality (an acknowledgment and respect for difference) and publicity (a politics that is visible to and belongs to the public, not just a few, not just the powerful).

O'Gorman's work calls us to rethink at the most basic level what we mean by politics, to distinguish the twisted politics of our hyper-partisan electoral system from the Arendtian concept of politics his book elegantly introduces. As a queer person, however, I cannot help but wonder how I am to engage in Arendtian politics with those who refuse to see me as an equal, but instead treat me as depraved, corrupt, even demonic. While Arendt found positive, even redemptive examples from religious traditions (as I also do), US American politics for some time has been animated by far-right religiously oriented ideologies that seem completely opposed to Arendt's authentic politics. While O'Gorman's work should not be expected to solve this problem, I think readers would have benefited from what no doubt would be his nuanced approach to this dilemma, especially considering some of the critiques that have been leveled against Arendt's position on the political struggles of some marginalized groups. Perhaps the tension I wish to see O'Gorman tease out is more subtly found in the nine evocative drawings by the artist Sekani Kenyatta Reed, which are dispersed throughout the book, and his arguments' relation to those images. Intended, as O'Gorman describes it, not to illustrate his book as much as generate a kind of "visual discussion" of many of its ideas, Reed's at times haunting images work alongside his argument more than with it (xv). The way they frequently expand on or counter his ideas enacts the kind of politics Arendt espoused and O'Gorman so cogently proffers: the coming together as equals in our plurality and with the full expanse of our difference.

Conclusion

Each book strikingly demonstrates how rhetorical criticism can help us make sense of this political moment, while showcasing the variety and sophistication of what we do. Specifically, the authors shed needed light on shadowy corners of public rhetoric many of us would rather not consider, in the process pushing our thinking in new directions. As such, each deserves a wide readership in rhetoric studies and beyond. They also challenge us to interrogate our own engagement in political discourse, political media, and electoral politics. Taken together, they contend that we live in and, by doing so, co-construct a political media culture premised on entertainment, immediacy, and partisanship. This culture and our engagement with it offer forms of figuration and argumentation that are weaponized to divide, by forming in-groups and out-groups. Animated by the twin impulses of apocalypse and perversion, this political media culture seems to promise both escape and triumph for "people like us." Yet perhaps our best response to this culture of speed, partisanship, and spectacle is to return to the very core of what we, as rhetorical studies scholars, do: deliberation and judgment. How might this

political media culture be different if we all embraced a conception of rhetoric that refuses the binary of reason and emotion, if we fostered a sense of judgment that is flexible, rooted in self-interrogation of our own demagoguery, and trained in and through the mutual play of experience and reflection?

Or have we come to enjoy the perversion of this political media culture too much to sacrifice the pleasure? As one who acknowledges the failures of our current politics, yet experiences a perverse enjoyment in its agonistic contest, I find each of these books productively unsettling. While we may not revel in a catastrophic worldview, a melancholic compulsion toward annihilation, or a politics premised on structural or behavioral perversion, that does not exactly let us off the hook. What enjoyment do we derive from the demagogic discourse of people like us? Or what gratification from the unthinking immediacy of social networks? Can we learn to experience the same kind or intensity of enjoyment from a politics like the one Arendt and O'Gorman describe? And can we do it before it's too late?

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We Are Not One People: Secession and Separatism in American Politics Since 1776, by Michael J. Lee and R. Jarrod Atchison, Oxford UP, 2022, 285 pp., $35.00 (paperback). ISBN: 9780190876500

We Are Not One People is a vivid history of separatist sentiments that rhetorical readers will find highly relevant, not least because it feels so profoundly *familiar*. As authors Michael J. Lee and Robert Jarrod Atchison note from the outset, the secessionisms that pervade our history and contemporaneity also grip our cultural imaginary, pervading daily life and shaping basic convictions about what it means to be American. That notion struck home for me as a native of Nevada, a state famed for disunities from the far-right violent militance of the Bundys to the idiosyncrasy of Molossia, a self-proclaimed micronation that declares sovereignty over 11 acres of remote high desert. It spoke, too, to my decade of adult life in a state that, like an aged high school football star still clinging to that one glorious championship, still prizes the idyll of its brief stint as the sovereign Republic of Texas. Shocking numbers of that inimitable state's residents still hold that only it may legally secede from the union—