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Precarious Positions: Toward a Theory and Analysis of Rhetorical Vulnerability

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PRECARIOUS POSITIONS:
TOWARD A THEORY AND ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL VULNERABILITY

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For my family.

For my friends.

For all those who are both.

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ABSTRACT

In "Precarious Positions: Toward a Theory and Analysis of Rhetorical Vulnerability," I develop a framework for treating rhetoric as a system for managing vulnerabilities to and through discourse. I contend that, through rhetoric, we are all put into a fundamentally precarious position, an unavoidable state of exposure to material, social, institutional, and rhetorical forces that work to condition us as both agents and audiences. Rhetoric is not simply something we use; it is also something that we respond to, something to which we are continuously exposed, whether we like it or not. There is, in other words, a necessary concern for vulnerability at the heart of rhetorical theory and praxis, which makes it possible to analyze rhetorical genres and situations in terms of how vulnerabilities are managed by rhetors, audiences, and others. In my first chapter, I examine current scholarship on vulnerability within and beyond rhetorical studies, ultimately arguing that vulnerability is both a universal condition and a unique position. I then apply this framework in my next chapter to the rhetoric of the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), which I describe as "trolling rhetoric" designed to provoke responses rather than persuade audiences. In my third chapter, I examine how opponents of the WBC attempt to manage their rhetorical vulnerability through legal appeals to decorum. Finally, in my fourth chapter, I examine the citational composing methods of the *God Loves Poetry* movement, an online initiative that manages rhetorical vulnerability by redacting the WBC's documents into poems.

INTRODUCTION
CONDITION, POSITION, PERSUASION:
VULNERABILITY AND RHETORICAL STUDIES

The question of what speech has made asks at least two things: what account can we give of language's capacity for effecting change, and at the same time, what account can we give of ourselves as manipulators of language's capacity for effecting change?
—Richard Marback, *Managing Vulnerability* (16)

On more than one occasion, I have had the unpleasant experience of passing through Louisiana State University's Free Speech Alley within earshot of a local Christian church group as they publicly vilify the stereotypical sources of modern America's moral disintegration, including unwed mothers, godless liberals, Muslims, and homosexuals. As a self-identified gay man born and raised in southern Louisiana, I am not unaccustomed to hearing such rhetoric, directly or indirectly, publicly or privately. Once or twice, I have considered joining the throng of students and civilians who gather around this group to hear about the perils of sin and the wrath of God, if for no other reason than to acknowledge their address. I have imagined myself confronting these speakers face-to-face, refuting their self-righteous polemics with a well-reasoned, well-researched argument, the kind I push my students to prefer in composition courses. Instead, I have made a habit of changing my route whenever this group appears on campus, drowning out their diatribes by humming to myself. Yet, even while I do my best to avoid their direct address, I always feel a creeping anxiety as I pass them, imagining that one of them will see me and shout, "Hey! Where're you going, faggot?"

I begin my study with this anecdote in order to foreground some of the key concerns that will occupy me throughout the following chapters. Ever since my first encounter with these demonstrators, I have been intrigued not only by their rhetorical strategies, but also by the ways in which their rhetoric make me feel vulnerable,

precariously exposed to the words and actions of those around me. From the moment I enter into the proximity of their protest, the scene of their rhetorical address, I am provoked (or perhaps "invoked") into making a decision about how to respond to that address. Beyond that moment, even if I choose to ignore them, I cannot avoid *responding* to them. As the rhetorician Diane Davis puts it, "You might whip out your Blackberry or plug into your iPod or feign sleep or complete absorption in your magazine, iPad, or Nintendo DS, but the active refusal to be responsive is a response and so no longer simple indifference" (*Inessential Solidarity* 11).

And so my decision to ignore these demonstrators is already a response to their rhetoric, and the provocation of that decision—the call to respond in some way, even if the response turns out to be a diversion—is partly a reminder that I am a vulnerable, rhetorical being—someone whose existence is contingent, perpetually exposed, and always subject to the effects of language (among many other factors). By "rhetorical being," I do not simply mean that I am able to affect others through language, a capacity that we might call *rhetorical agency*; I also mean that I am constantly exposed to the effects/affects of others, a capacity we might call *rhetorical vulnerability*. As Richard Marback notes in the opening epigraph for this chapter, the "question of what speech [or writing, or imagery, or gesture] has made" demands a two-fold answer: one accounting for the ways in which we effect change through language, and one accounting for the ways in which we are affected to change through language (11). The first account—of our capacity for using language—has been the subject of numerous commentaries concerning the nature of rhetorical agency (see, for example, Geisler, 2004; Turnbull, 2004; Greene, 2004; Lundberg and Gunn, 2005; Campbell, 2005; Wallace and

Alexander, 2009; and Cooper, 2011). The second account—of our susceptibility to language—has received much less explicit attention within rhetorical studies, though a growing number of rhetoricians have raised this concern in recent years.

Here, I bring together these voices and their accounts in order to advance my own framework for treating vulnerability and its management as a fundamental component of rhetorical theory and practice. By "fundamental component," I mean to suggest that the study of vulnerability can offer us as rhetoricians (1) a new theoretical approach to key rhetorical concepts, such as persuasion, agency, and decorum; and (2) a new analytical approach to the study of specific rhetorical genres and actions, particularly in terms of how they expose and manage vulnerability for rhetors, audiences, and others. These approaches can be especially helpful for studying genres related to injury, such as hate speech, and susceptibility, such as trolling. I will fully articulate these arguments in the coming chapters. For now, drawing upon the work of scholars such as Judith Butler, Diane Davis, and Richard Marback, among others, I argue that rhetoric functions not only as a means for effecting change through language, but also as a system for exposing and managing vulnerabilities to and through language.

To illustrate my thesis, let me return to the example of the anti-gay demonstrators I mentioned earlier. Framed in one way, my encounters with this church group could be described as a set of strategic decisions that I have made as a conscientious rhetorical agent: Do I confront them here and now? Do I ignore them and withhold the attention they loudly demand? What would be the best way to approach this particular situation? What can I hope to achieve given this set of circumstances? In the context of traditional rhetoric, these questions are necessarily contingent, shaped by a range of situational

exigencies and aimed at achieving a goal. However, although these questions are vitally important for any rhetorical situation, they account for only one side of the equation, stressing the capacity for rhetorical action, but understating the capacity to be acted upon that makes rhetorical action possible. That being said, let me make one thing clear. I am not trying to suggest that agency is unimportant in rhetorical studies, nor am I trying to establish an absolute binary with vulnerability serving as an opposite and underprivileged term. Rather, I am arguing that a fuller account of rhetorical agency requires a fuller account of rhetorical vulnerability, since the very practice of rhetoric presupposes both an audience vulnerable to the effects of language and a rhetor who acts in response to an assemblage of exigencies and constraints.

Let me put it another way. If my ability to effect change in a rhetorical situation depends on (1) the presumed openness of the audience to my rhetorical actions and (2) my ability to adapt and respond to circumstances that are beyond my control, then, in effect, my rhetorical agency is always already conditioned by a shared yet situational vulnerability, a fundamental but rhetorical relation that precedes any rhetorical action. On that note, let me preemptively address one possible critique here. If rhetorical agency is always already conditioned through rhetorical vulnerability, does that mean that rhetors do not have any real control in a rhetorical situation, that they are simply conduits for other, more powerful, more deterministic forces at work? Commentary on this impasse is nothing new in rhetorical studies, and attempts to either address or resolve it go as far

back as the now classic debate between Lloyd Bitzer and Richard Vatz regarding the nature of the rhetorical situation.[1]

However, even if we accept that our agency depends on our vulnerability, this does not necessarily require that our work as agents must follow some deterministic script. Rather, it requires that our actions must always follow exposure, a condition that (a) orients us toward a world overflowing with others, (b) provokes us into responding to those others, and (c) overwhelms our capacity to respond to each and every one of those provocations. Since we cannot respond in equal measure to every provocation in every situation, we have no choice but to improvise a response and manage our vulnerabilities as best we can, coordinated by exigency, contingency, and constraint. Thus, our agency does not begin with our capacity for self-conscious action, but with our responsibility— or "response-ability"—toward others (Rollins 549). Judith Butler touches on this point in her discussion of ethical responsibility following 9/11:

> Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned. We are at once acted upon and acting, and our "responsibility" [response-ability] lies in the juncture between the two. […] Being acted upon is not fully continuous with acting, and in this way the forces that act upon us are not finally responsible for what we do. (*Precarious Life* 16)

The idea that our active capacities are conditioned by our responsive capacities carries with it an important implication for understanding vulnerability in rhetorical studies. Agency as response-ability implies an always prior openness to others that we cannot

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[1] For example, in "The Rhetorical Situation," Bitzer asserts that "the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution. Not the rhetor and not persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity…" (6). Vatz objects to Bitzer's valuing of the situation by highlighting the work of rhetors: "Rhetors choose or do not choose to make salient situations, facts, events, etc. This may be the *sine qua non* of rhetoric: the art of linguistically or symbolically creating salience" (160).

reject or close off (though we might manage it), a *primary vulnerability* that undermines our dreams of autonomy even as it allows us to imagine that we are in control (Butler, *The Psychic Life* 20). This primary vulnerability is a condition to which we are all subject, despite our best efforts at resisting threats to our physical, mental, and social well-being. In this way, vulnerability may be described as a kind of equalizer, a fundamental *condition* that all living beings share for better and for worse.

However, calling vulnerability an equalizer of any kind is also problematic precisely because vulnerability is as singular as it is universal. Despite the fact that all of us are vulnerable at a fundamental level, none of us is ever vulnerable in exactly the same ways, because each of us is exposed to a different array of forces from one situation to another (though there is certainly overlap). For example, a white gay man in the Deep South of the United States is not vulnerable in exactly the same way that an outspoken Muslim schoolgirl in the Middle East is vulnerable. Although we could argue that both individuals share a kind of fundamental vulnerability, which is common to all of us, we should be careful not to simply equate the material, institutional, and social contingencies to which either person is subject from moment to moment. As Judith Butler points out, the fundamental vulnerability that makes us dependent on each other for survival also puts each of us into a uniquely precarious position:

> This fundamental dependency on anonymous others is not a condition that I can will away. No security measure will foreclose this dependency; no violent act of sovereignty will rid the world of this fact. What this means, concretely, will vary across the globe. There are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others. (*Precarious Life* xii)

In other words, vulnerability is not simply a *condition* of life; it is also a *position* in life, and different individuals are bound to occupy different positions at different times and in

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different places, depending on how social power and available means are distributed. The vulnerabilities and securities of any position can vary dramatically according to a wide range of factors, including legal protections, social mobility, food security, educational opportunities, job prospects, cultural legacies, and so on. As a result, vulnerability is not merely an ontological condition that we all share as a condition for interdependent living; it is also a social-political position that we each struggle to manage for ourselves and others, often unevenly, through a broad range of political, social, institutional, material, and even rhetorical processes.

It seems to me that this dual understanding of vulnerability as an onto-social condition of mutual and managed exposure can offer a great deal to the study of rhetoric, an intellectually rich and politically savvy tradition that is, as I hope to demonstrate, grounded in the management of vulnerabilities. On the one hand, it could help us attend to the fundamental openness that foregrounds rhetoric as the art of affecting others through language. On the other hand, it could also help us examine how vulnerabilities are exposed, articulated, and managed from one rhetorical encounter to another. After all, what purpose would rhetoric serve in a world where we could fully inoculate ourselves against the effects of language? Similarly, what purpose would rhetoric serve in a world where we are all vulnerable to the same appeals in exactly the same ways at all times? How can we study the uses and effects of rhetoric in our world without first presuming that others are (or can become more) affect-able? As Diane Davis has pointed out in her recent critical engagement with Emmanuel Levinas, persuasion and communication are possible "only among affectable existents," which means that the art of rhetoric can stake its claims upon us only by strategically exploiting or managing an always prior

vulnerability to persuasion and alterity (*Inessential Solidarity* 3). If, as Aristotle famously put it, rhetoric describes "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion," then we should acknowledge from the beginning that rhetoric is premised upon an always prior *availability*, not only of means, but also of agents and audiences (*On Rhetoric* 1.2.1). Furthermore, if our ability to function within rhetorical situations is dependent upon the shared yet unique availability of ourselves and others, then how can we imagine the possibility of rhetorical agency without the prior necessity of rhetorical vulnerability? To assess the opportunities and constraints of any rhetorical situation is in part to gauge the ways in which all participants within that situation (interlocutors, audiences, and even bystanders) are vulnerable to both discursive and non-discursive forces. There is, in other words, a necessary concern for vulnerability at the heart of rhetorical theory and praxis; without this concern, the entire enterprise of rhetoric would become little more than a series of rote exercises in disengaged discourse.[2]

Returning to the anti-gay demonstrators I mentioned earlier, I would like to propose a different reading of their rhetoric and my response, one that highlights this central concern for vulnerability. Framed in this way, my response to these demonstrators in LSU's Free Speech Alley could be read as a management of the ways in which I am exposed to the words and deeds of others. Whether I choose to confront or ignore them, I have already been made aware of my vulnerability to their address, an exposed condition that is as crucial to rhetoric as any notion of agency or contingency. The anxiety I feel whenever I cross paths with these demonstrators is a repeated reminder that I am always given over to others, never completely safe or secure in my own skin or subjectivity.

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[2] We might also apply this description to composition studies, but this will have to wait.

Whether they intend to make me feel unwelcomed on my own campus or not, the fact remains that when I enter into the scene of their protest, I become very aware of my openness to their actions as well as to the forces that enable and condition those actions. Furthermore, my vulnerability risks the potential not only for persuasion, but also for disruption, subordination, and harm. As Judith Butler has argued, this potential is made clear in cases involving hate speech, a genre that provokes controversy precisely because of the harm it is perceived to cause. When I then decide to ignore their hate speech, I make a conscious decision about how to manage my vulnerability to their rhetorical actions, removing myself from the scene, though I will never be able to fully immunize myself against their rhetorical address.

Drawing on this premise, I contend that rhetoric situates all of us in a fundamentally precarious position, an unavoidable state of exposure to material, social, institutional, and rhetorical forces that work to condition us as both agents and audiences. Rhetoric is not simply something we use; it is also something that we respond to, something to which we are continuously exposed, whether we like it or not. Starting from this position, we are able to recognize, as rhetorician Richard Marback has put it, "rhetoric's functioning as a managing of vulnerability…"; in other words, we can begin to study rhetoric as a system for managing our individual and collective vulnerabilities to and through acts of discourse (*Managing Vulnerability* 22). In this study, I call critical attention to both the condition and the position of vulnerability in rhetorical studies, and I work to apply these concepts not only to modern rhetorical theory but also to contemporary rhetorical practices.

In my first chapter, "Vulnerability Studies: A Concern across Disciplines," I establish the historical and intellectual groundwork for my project. In doing so, I propose a dual understanding of vulnerability as both an ontological predisposition to the influence of others and as a political position that must be negotiated, partly through rhetoric. First, I survey commentaries on vulnerability by contemporary scholars from a variety of fields, including law, feminism, political science, ethical philosophy, and media activism. These scholars, including Martha Fineman, Judith Butler, and Emmanuel Levinas, have called for academics and activists to reconsider the role that vulnerability plays within and beyond academic disciplines. In response to this call, I focus the remainder of this chapter on tracing rhetorical theory's longstanding concerns about the precarious and sometimes violent power of rhetoric to impact audiences. By highlighting the concern for vulnerability expressed by numerous rhetoricians, including Plato, Gorgias, Sally Miller Gearhart, Sonja Foss, Cindy Griffin, Diane Davis, Richard Marback, and James Brown, Jr., I show how rhetoric's power to impact audiences has long been a source of anxiety for rhetoricians, one that has prompted no small amount of controversy over the uses of persuasion and other effects. I also show how rhetoricians and scholars are attempting to refigure vulnerability as a foundation for subjectivity, responsivity, ethics, and agency.

One familiar genre of public discourse that emphasizes concerns about vulnerability to rhetoric is hate speech. In my second chapter, "The Artistry of Outrage: The Rhetoric of the Westboro Baptist Church," I apply my working theory of rhetorical vulnerability to the rhetoric employed by the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), an anti-gay church group located in Topeka, Kansas, that has become infamous for their hate-

filled and offensive protests at the funerals of gay rights activists and American soldiers, among others. After analyzing the church's rhetoric through the lens of hate speech and persuasion, I suggest that neither hate speech studies nor traditional rhetorical studies can provide a full account of the WBC's rhetoric because the church defies traditional rhetorical sensibilities, including those expressed through hate speech. As has been noted previously by scholars and by the church's own leaders, the WBC's demonstrators do not seek to persuade their audiences to join their cause or their congregation through traditional rhetorical appeals. Instead, the WBC's rhetorical goal is shock and outrage, which affords the church's demonstrators a great deal of public attention disproportionate to their small size. They accomplish this goal using what I call "trolling rhetoric," a strategy that focuses on managing audiences' vulnerabilities to achieve the most outraged reaction, thereby showing less respect for audiences than traditional rhetoric typically advises. Based on my analysis, I argue that this strategy not only allows the WBC to achieve its goal, but it also highlights something fundamental about rhetoric: that our vulnerability to language is continually exposed by and managed through rhetorical practices, including non-persuasive ones.

Given that the WBC uses trolling rhetoric to manage vulnerability, opponents of the church have worked to counter their rhetoric in a variety of ways. In my third chapter, "Strategic Vulnerability: Decorum in Response to Trolling Rhetoric," I focus on one of these counter-rhetorics in order to examine how key rhetorical concepts can be re-envisioned through a revised understanding of vulnerability. Here, I analyze how decorum functions both as a contingent code for rhetorical agency and as a strategy for managing vulnerability to offensive rhetoric. Today, our field is widely familiar with the

notion of rhetorical agency, the capacity for rhetorical action. Scholars have pursued the concept from many angles, and even the Alliance of Rhetoric Societies has featured roundtables on the topic. However, I contend that our field's interest in agency tends to ignore its flipside, rhetorical vulnerability. I also argue that a fuller theory of vulnerability can help us refigure key rhetorical concepts in terms of both agency and vulnerability. At the same time, it can help us as rhetoricians challenge a perceptual bias in the field that tends to assign more value to agency than to vulnerability. By way of application, I present one such refiguring of decorum, which rhetorician Walter Beale has described as "the most rhetorical of rhetorical concepts" (168). Ever since the WBC began protesting public ceremonies with anti-gay and anti-American rhetoric in 1991, critics have attempted to challenge them with appeals to public decorum. One such challenge, which specifically opposed the WBC's funeral picketing, reached the Supreme Court of the United States in 2011. Through an analysis of court documents from the case of *Snyder v. Phelps*, I argue that funerary decorum in particular functions not only as a code for rhetorical action but also as a strategy for managing rhetorical vulnerability to injurious, inappropriate, and offensive rhetoric.

In my fourth and final chapter, "Composing Holes: Redactance as Resistance to Hate Writing," I analyze another form of counter-rhetoric that has been launched against the WBC. Westboro's rhetoric is troublesome for rhetorical studies because it generally shirks traditional modes of persuasion and decorum in favor of provocation and attention. Therefore, some counter-protestors have abandoned attempts at deliberation, focusing instead on turning the church's available means of provocation against them. I focus my analysis in this chapter on one of these counter-protest movements, an online initiative

that challenges Westboro by encouraging activists and allies to redact the church's press releases into poems. This movement, called *God Loves Poetry*, serves as an example of how rhetorical vulnerability can be managed through writing as well as speech. Though the Westboro Baptist Church's rhetoric often tries to exploit rhetorical vulnerability through provocation, their use of writing and digital media nonetheless makes their rhetoric available for re-appropriation in ways that can generate responsive rhetorical agency. By using redactance (redaction and recirculation as resistance) to challenge the WBC's rhetoric, contributors to *God Loves Poetry* show how the availability of rhetorical means functions as a kind of enabling vulnerability to the repetition of hate speech in contemporary media.

CHAPTER I
VULNERABILITY STUDIES:
A CONCERN ACROSS DISCIPLINES

However, to further establish rhetoric's immanent, necessary conditions of possibility
will require a fuller engagement with rhetorical theory's investment in symbol-use as
human agency, a stronger explanation of vulnerability's relation to language/violence,
and a way to understand vulnerability as power rather than weakness. But this will have
to wait.
　　　　　　　　　　—Nathan Stormer, "On the Origins of Violence and Language" (188-9)

As both a term and a concept, vulnerability is not generally perceived in a positive

light. Rather, conventional wisdom tells us that vulnerability is either an unfortunate

exposure to the threat of subjugation and injury or an undesirable position that should be

avoided whenever possible. These typically negative connotations can be attributed to a

wide range of factors, including culturally learned presumptions and linguistic

associations. However, in recent years, scholars and critics from many different fields—

including psychology, ethical philosophy, political science, and legal studies—have

begun to question this conventional wisdom by reimagining vulnerability as a basic

condition for self-awareness, political distribution, and ethical engagement. Although

these thinkers pursue the concept of vulnerability from many different and sometimes

conflicting angles, they are also linked by a few common ideas: (1) that vulnerability is

more fundamental to our lives and actions that we readily acknowledge; (2) that

vulnerability is both an ontological condition that we cannot close off and a political

position that we must manage; and (3) that vulnerability offers us a new and sometimes

radical approach to ontological, psychological, material, social, and institutional studies.

Through this reimagining, Brené Brown, Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler, Martha

Albertson Fineman, and Andrea Bennett (among others) have generated a body of

literature that treats vulnerability as a complex object of study.

Similarly, in rhetorical studies, scholars such as Diane Davis, Richard Marback, and James Brown, Jr., have been developing theories of vulnerability that link rhetoric's potential for influencing audiences to much broader concerns about subjectivity, community, agency, and democracy. In their own unique ways, these scholars ask: How do rhetorical practices presume a kind of fundamental vulnerability, and how would a more nuanced understanding of this vulnerability improve or revise our thinking about rhetoric more broadly? As Marback has demonstrated, concerns about vulnerability are longstanding in the rhetorical tradition, going back to Plato's condemnation of "shameful" rhetoric (*Phaedrus* 260e). However, for Davis and Marback, rhetoric is not reducible simply to a codified system for effective communication and persuasion; rather, rhetoric is a practice that follows from and manages a very basic kind of vulnerability, an openness to language, in order to achieve effects such as persuasion, identification, and communication. Davis goes even further in her arguments, echoing and challenging the work of modern philosophers to argue that the vulnerable condition at the heart of rhetoric, the fundamental exposure to others and their appeals, is also the condition that makes subjectivity, community, and rhetorical agency possible in the first place. Drawing upon Davis and Marback in the context of new media studies, James Brown, Jr., calls for a reconsideration of vulnerability and *kairos* in our increasingly networked society. Since numerous others can enter into a modern-day network uninvited, Brown argues, rhetors today must be prepared to occupy a vulnerable position in which they will have to improvise responses without ready-made scripts or schemas. By rethinking vulnerability within rhetorical theory and analysis, Davis, Marback, and Brown, Jr., illuminate how a rethinking of vulnerability can function as a theoretical and pragmatic foundation for the

field, a radical means for generating knowledge and challenging assumptions in rhetorical theory, practice, and pedagogy.

In this chapter, I present a brief overview of these thinkers and their arguments in order to develop a tentative framework for theorizing and analyzing vulnerability within the context of rhetorical studies. Ultimately, I contend that as the art of affecting and being affected by others, rhetoric necessitates the management of vulnerabilities; from that premise, I argue that examining vulnerability and its management can tell us a great deal about the theory and practice of rhetoric. However, before I survey this literature concerning vulnerability, let me first explain what I mean when I say that vulnerability is both a universal condition and a unique position.

<center>Vulnerability as Condition, Vulnerability as Position</center>

The idea that vulnerability is both a condition and a position implies a paradox in terms. On the one hand, vulnerability can be perceived as a universal *condition* that affects all of us at a fundamental level, such that we all necessarily share in a common state of exposure regardless of circumstances. On the other hand, vulnerability can also be perceived as a kind of *position* that individuals and groups occupy differently, such that those who are privileged are less vulnerable to harm and loss than those who are marginalized.[3] By invoking this apparent paradox (vulnerability as both universal and particular), I do not mean to suggest that the term "vulnerability" can or should refer to opposite and unrelated concepts. Rather, I am suggesting that we cannot theorize or

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[3] Of course, those who are privileged do suffer their own vulnerabilities, and those who are marginalized can exercise their own modalities of power. For many years now, rhetorical studies has been particularly invested in identifying the vulnerabilities of the powerful and the strategies of the marginalized.

analyze vulnerability unless we acknowledge that, as both a concept and a reality, vulnerability implies a very basic social relation.

Just as any rhetor is dependent upon the available means of persuasion, anyone who is engaged with the world is dependent upon the available means of survival, including food, shelter, and social recognition. This dependent exposure is what Judith Butler, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, calls "primary vulnerability" (20). Whether we are rich or poor, black or white, male or female, straight or otherwise, we are all in need of resources that exist beyond ourselves, and we are all subject to forces that operate beyond our complete (or even conscious) control. In a sense, we need others to survive, even though this need also brings with it the risk of harm and loss. This state of always being subject to external forces—this ontology of being given over to others, even before we have a conscious choice in the matter—is the basis for thinking of vulnerability as a universal condition, something that we cannot choose to reject even if we pretend to ignore it. However, as scholars have recognized, this universal condition also places each of us in a uniquely precarious position.

For example, consider the vulnerabilities of a gay, white, male graduate student at an American university defending his dissertation in English studies while on the academic job market. Certainly, someone in this position would be vulnerable to a wide range of external forces: the heteronormativity of American culture, the criticism of his advisors, the bureaucracy of the university system, the waning popularity of the liberal arts, the uncertainty of employment, and the comparatively low wages earned during graduate studies, just to name a few. However, if we try to compare the specific vulnerabilities of this graduate student to the vulnerabilities of any other person, no

matter how similar their circumstances may seem, we would risk flattening significant differences in their experiences. Although it would be fair to say that each person is vulnerable in some fundamental (and maybe parallel) ways, it would not be fair to suggest that all of their specific vulnerabilities are identical, since they are each subject to a particular set of external forces and must therefore manage their positions differently. As legal scholar Martha Alberston Fineman puts it, "Vulnerability…is both universal and particular…"; it is experienced by all of us, but it is also "experienced uniquely by each of us" ("The Vulnerable Subject" 269).

Thus, to say that vulnerability is a position as well as a condition is not to say that the term invokes two completely separate and paradoxical ideas. Rather, it is to say that vulnerability implies a kind of inescapable sociality: a way of being with others in the world that no one can erase, but also a way of being exposed to and embedded in an ever-changing web of relations, resources, and responses. Since vulnerability is as situated as it is universal, the experience of it is bound to provoke a wide range of responses to varying circumstances. Furthermore, since vulnerability cannot be erased, it must instead be managed from one situation to the next, driving the allocation of means while also putting groups and individuals in more or less precarious positions.

In the sections that follow, I attempt to trace this universal-particular concept of vulnerability through a broad range of disciplines in order to highlight how it has been previously framed by scholars. I then focus my attention on the work of rhetoricians who have either implicitly or explicitly addressed concerns about vulnerability in modern rhetorical theory. Finally, I conclude my argument by describing rhetoric as a system for managing vulnerability to and through discourse.

Vulnerability Outside of Rhetorical Studies

According to conventional wisdom, vulnerability is generally something to be avoided or resisted whenever possible. As several researchers have pointed out, among the most common reactions to perceived vulnerability are aggression, resistance, and a longing for invulnerability. For example, Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work, highlights her own reaction to vulnerability in her 2010 *TED* Talk titled "The Power of Vulnerability." She describes meeting with her therapist to discuss her personal concerns about the research she was then conducting on perceptions of vulnerability and shame. "I have a vulnerability issue," she tells her therapist, "and I know that vulnerability is kind of the core of shame and fear and our struggle for worthiness. But it appears that it's also the birthplace of joy, of creativity, of belonging, of love, and I think I have a problem, and I just—I need some help." She goes on to ask her therapist for "strategies" that will help her deal with this "vulnerability issue." After a year-long "street fight" with vulnerability, as she puts it, Brown went back to her research and discovered several strategies that people commonly use to cope with experiences of vulnerability, including "numbing" ourselves to emotion, emphasizing certainty over uncertainty, seeking out perfection, and pretending that our actions do not affect others. Although Brown's struggle with vulnerability is rooted in her personal life, the aversion to vulnerability that she identifies in both herself and many of her study participants is, I would argue, symptomatic of a much broader perception in American culture of vulnerability as weakness.

The events of September 11, 2001, and the political rhetoric that followed serve as recent examples of how Americans have recognized, channeled, and reproduced this

cultural aversion to vulnerability. The attacks on the World Trade Center violently and tragically exposed the vulnerability of an entire nation to lethal dangers from beyond its borders. In the aftermath of the towers' collapse, Americans experienced a sense of "heightened vulnerability" and responded almost immediately with aggressive militarism (Butler, *Precarious Life* xi). "Our nation has been put on notice," said then President George W. Bush to a Joint Session of Congress, just nine days after the attacks, "We're not immune from attack." While symbolically wielding the badge (or "shield," as he called it) of a fallen police officer, Bush offered these remarks about vulnerability, embedded within an exhortation for war:

> Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time—now depends on us. Our nation, this generation will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.

Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric (perhaps appropriately) invoked no small amount of pathos, frequently appealing to feelings of grief, outrage, and retribution. However, it also invoked a recognition of and a response to vulnerability, a "notice" that the U.S. is "not immune from attack" as well as a strategy for reacting to that tragically delivered notice. Those who would enact this strategy, according to Bush, would be invincible in their execution, immune to fear, exhaustion, and error. In other words, they would never show any signs of vulnerability. The "War on Terror," as it came to be known, transformed fear, an emotion rooted in our exposure to harm and uncertainty, into the enemy of an entire nation. Vulnerability was something to resist.

Of course, it would be unreasonable to trace American culture's aversion to vulnerability back to a single historical event. Negative perceptions of vulnerability can also be linked to the term's linguistic association with injury, weakness, and victimhood. Borrowing the words that Avital Ronell has used to describe idiocy (another term with longstanding negative connotations), vulnerability emerges from "the generality of a human predicament," but it "materializes itself in a kind of negative corporeal stylization…" (*Stupidity* 180). Similarly, as legal scholar Martha Albertson Fineman points out, the term "*vulnerable population* has an air of victimhood, deprivation, dependency, or pathology attached to it" ("The Vulnerable Subject" 266; emphasis in original). Traditionally, to speak of vulnerability is to invoke (or perhaps "provoke") an undesirable openness that marks us as weak and in need of protection—an unwelcomed exposure to injury, deprivation, and subordination. To be fair, this perception does not veer far from the word's origins. After all, the word "vulnerability" is etymologically derived from the Latin word *vulnus*, meaning "wound" (*OED Online*). To "be vulnerable" then, in the most etymologically precise sense of the word, is to be "susceptible to injury" or "open to attacks," which may be either physical or non-physical in nature. In other words, conventional wisdom regards vulnerability as a state of negative potential, an uninvited exposure to threats and constraints from beyond ourselves. This potential is actualized most obviously whenever we are subjected to acts of marginalization, deprivation, coercion, and violence. Given such a common definition, it is perhaps little wonder why so many people would prefer to avoid any kind of vulnerability in favor of security and autonomy.

However, in recent years, scholars in a wide range of fields have gradually rearticulated the concept of vulnerability within the humanities and social sciences, such that the term has now begun to invoke more than just injurability and dependency. This is not to say that scholars have merely inverted the negative connotations of vulnerability, as if it were possible to ignore the "wounding" that underlies the concept. Rather, it is to say that vulnerability has become recognized in scholarly discourse as a complex object of study unto itself. These studies have explored not only strategies for managing vulnerability, but also the fundamental and radical role that vulnerability plays within disciplines, institutions, and cultures. Marianne Hirsch describes this reconsideration of vulnerability in the Modern Language Association's call for papers for its 2013-14 conference. While highlighting growing interest in the topic, Hirsch explains that "[v]ulnerability and its antithesis, resilience, appear in studies of the environment, social ecology, political economy, medicine, and developmental psychology, as terms that help address the predisposition of people and systems to injury and understand their ability to recover from shock and catastrophe." She further notes, however, that vulnerability has been re-envisioned by feminist scholars working to engender new forms of intellectual, material, and political engagement:

> While acknowledging the vulnerabilities stemming from our shared embodiment, feminist theorists have also underlined the unevenly imposed and socially manufactured vulnerabilities faced by marginalized groups throughout history. They have seen vulnerability—both shared and differentially inflicted—not as weakness or victimhood but as a space for engagement and resistance emerging from a sense of fundamental openness, interdependence, and solidarity.

Hirsch's brief summary highlights the re-articulation of vulnerability that has been slowly but steadily developing in academia: on the one hand, vulnerability is an onto-social

condition that is both "shared and differentially inflicted"; on the other hand, vulnerability is also refigured as a generative "space for engagement and resistance," a reimagining that breaks away from the more conventional perception of vulnerability as a negative potential that must be guarded or averted. Importantly, this refiguring does not negate the injurious aspects of vulnerability, as if we could argue that all forms of vulnerability are equally just and desirable; rather, it problematizes vulnerability by acknowledging its important role in generating and managing social relations so that a sense of "fundamental openness" can be exposed.

If it is thus possible for vulnerability to open any space for engagement, then that space should be grounded in the sociality that vulnerability implies, the always prior openness to others that precedes our conscious uptake of any identity or community. In the Western philosophical tradition, one of the most prominent thinkers to write at length about this sociality through vulnerability is the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose work situates vulnerability at the center of both ethics and ontology. Although Levinas himself uses the term "vulnerability" only occasionally in his writing, the pre-subjective relation at the heart of his work presumes a primary condition of exposure to others that offers a great deal to the study of vulnerability. Throughout his writing, and especially in his later works *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas focuses his attention on the question of ethics in relation to alterity, or the encounter with radical otherness. His philosophical corpus thus works to overturn longstanding notions of ethical responsibility in Western thought by pursuing a new theory of relationality, one rooted in vulnerability and response as a fundamental condition (Raffoul). Traditionally, and still today, responsibility is perceived as a self-conscious accountability for oneself

and others, where we, as subjects and agents, are free to act independently and must therefore "think about" others in order to live ethically. "Usually," says Levinas, "one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say…that responsibility is initially a *for the other*…*" (*Ethics and Infinity* 96). In Levinas's writing, "for the other" describes a pre-subjective openness that compels us to respond even before we are fully conscious of that response. This openness is never closed off, but continually interrupts our sense of autonomy, and so we are always responding, always response-able to/responsible for the Other. What makes Levinas's refiguring of responsibility radical for Western philosophy is that, rather than arguing for a relation to others that begins with our ability to think and act self-consciously, Levinas argues for the inversion of that relation. Francois Raffoul describes this inversion of responsibility as such: "No longer a responsibility for oneself or for one's own actions, but a responsibility for the other and for the sake of the other; no longer following the freedom of the subject, but arising out of the other's demand on me…" (163).

To be fair, the idea that we are all primarily responsible for the other is not necessarily a radical idea at first glance. But for Levinas, being "primarily responsible" does not mean first taking an account of one's own actions and *then* accounting for the other. Rather, it means that we are first and foremost respondents to others, who "call" to us in ways that we cannot shut out, even if we choose to consciously ignore those calls. (A mobile phone may be an apt metaphor here. Even if we do not answer every call, we still receive those calls. Once received, we must respond, even if we respond by not

answering.)[4] To put it another way, Levinas takes the common notion of the responsible subject—which typically starts in the nominative position of taking action first—and displaces that subject into the accusative position of being acted upon first. As a result, our ability to act emerges more precisely as our ability to re-act. Responsibility, in other words, becomes "response-ability" for Levinas (Rollins 549).

This is the point where Levinas's philosophy intersects with the study of vulnerability, especially in the context of rhetorical theory. For Levinas, the (responsible) subject "is no longer a self-identity, an ego, a self-consciousness, nor even an authentic self…"; rather, the subject is a "pre-originary openness to the other…a welcome of the other…" (Raffoul 175).[5] This openness toward the other, according to Levinas, takes priority before any sense of self, and it cannot be closed off or denied. He writes: "The subjectivity of a subject is vulnerability, exposure to affection, sensibility, a passivity more passive still than any passivity…an exposedness always to be exposed the more, an exposure to expressing, and thus to saying, thus to giving" (*Otherwise than Being* 50). This "welcoming of the other" at the heart of Levinas's philosophy is what prompted Jacques Derrida, in his eulogy at Levinas's funeral, to suggest that the central theme of Levinas's work is hospitality, or welcoming (*Adieu* 16). Furthermore, this openness refigures the subject not as an autonomous agent but as a *response* to the other, whose call interrupts the subject's fantasy of ethical autonomy (free to act, but self-controlled).

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[4] For more on this relation between telephonic logic and the call of the other, see Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech.*
[5] As Raffoul explains, the openness to the other that Levinas describes is "pre-originary" because it "precedes the subject," such that our subjectivity comes into being only as a response to the other (175).

In this way, Levinas presupposes vulnerability as a condition not only for ethical relations but also for subjectivity and agency.

In his later work, particularly *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Levinas goes on to relate his theory of pre-subjective vulnerability to his own philosophy of language, a link that has not gone unnoticed in rhetorical studies.[6] Levinas approaches language in the same manner that he approaches ethics: by beginning with vulnerability rather than with pre-formed content. Thus, in his philosophy of language, Levinas distinguishes between "the said," which refers to the signifying (or communicative) function of language, and "the saying," which refers to the condition of being exposed to language and its effects, like communication (37). "It is through the *already said*," writes Levinas, "that words, elements of a historically constituted vocabulary, will come to function as signs and acquire a usage, and bring about the proliferation of all the possibilities of vocabulary" (37). The said, in other words, is the meaning-making dimension of language. For Levinas, although the said is crucial to language, it is not the *only* part of language. More fundamental, in fact, is the saying, a prior exposure to others and to language that prefigures the linguistic encounter:

> Saying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure. […] The unblocking of communication, irreducible to the circulation of information which presupposes it, is accomplished in the saying. It is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding done by the other. It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability. (48)

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[6] For example, see Suzanne Holland's "Levinas and Otherwise-than-Being (Tolerant): Homosexuality and the Discourse of Tolerance," published in JAC in 2003. Also, see *JAC's* 2009 special issue on Levinas and rhetorical studies.

So for Levinas, language cannot be reduced to representation of content, the realm of the said and of the "constative" (Austin 3). Before we can even enter the realm of the said, where content claims can be registered in meaningful terms, we must first locate ourselves within the realm of the saying, where our vulnerability to the other is exposed as a prerequisite for any communicative exchange.

As an illustration, consider my initial anecdote about encountering anti-gay religious demonstrators on LSU's campus. Whenever I enter into the scene of the demonstrators' protest, the "proximity" of their address (as Levinas might call it), I am called (rather forcefully) to respond to them in some way (*Ethics and Infinity* 96-7). From that moment on, even if I ignore their invective, I am already in a position of responding to them. For Levinas, it is this obligation to respond, this openness to a demanding other that precedes the formation of my self-conscious subjectivity, that is the foundation for ontology, ethics, and communication. Granted, my example here is limited in scope when compared to the pre-originary vulnerability that Levinas describes. As Brooke Rollins has pointed out, we as rhetoricians must be careful not to simply conflate the rhetorical address of the other with Levinas's pre-linguistic ethical demand (551). Still, as Rollins herself suggests, "Though the forms are different (the rhetorical address occurs in a subjective realm while the saying is primordial) both the address and the saying disable our interpretive mastery and unsettle our self-sufficiency" (551). Thus, I would argue that the call to respond provoked by this rhetorical encounter exposes an aspect of vulnerability that Levinas describes.

Among those influenced by this strand of Levinas's thinking is the queer theorist and political philosopher Judith Butler, whose work over the years has followed a unique

trajectory "from a critique of identity politics, to an account of melancholic subject formation…to an ontology underwriting ethics…" (Shulman 228). Despite the varying topics that Butler has taken up since she published *Gender Trouble* in 1990, one of her most abiding concerns has long been the question of vulnerability, particularly "how subjects understand and respond to injury" (Shulman 229). As Butler herself writes in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, "The way in which we respond to injury may offer a chance to elaborate an ethical perspective and even become human" (101). Furthermore, many of her ontological and ethical arguments derive partly from her critical uptake of Levinas, especially his notion of sociality and responsibility as emerging from a pre-subjective condition of vulnerability. However, although Butler takes up much of Levinas's thinking in her work, she also challenges and expands upon his original premises by bringing vulnerability to bear within the realm of politics. In particular, she considers how Levinas "gives us a way of understanding ourselves as 'addressed' by [social] norms at a level that is not fully conscious or volitional" (*Dispossession* 95-6). She further expands upon Levinas's philosophy by describing vulnerability in two ways. In her books *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), published in response to the attacks on 9/11 and the War on Terror, Butler adopts the terms "precariousness" and "precarity" to refer to a pair of "intersecting concepts" framed by an understanding of shared vulnerability in the modern world (*Precarious Life* 25). She writes:

> Lives are by definition *precarious*: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed. In some sense, this is a feature of all life, and there is no thinking of life that is not precarious….*Precarity* designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. (*Frames of War* 25; emphasis added)

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Here, we can begin to identify a dual understanding of vulnerability in Butler's work. Precariousness, as she defines it, refers to vulnerability as a condition, an always prior, Levinasian openness to and dependency upon others for survival and recognition. "In a way," she writes, "we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt" (*Precarious Life* 29). As exposure, it takes us out of our own skin, giving us over to others in ways that are not always safe or assured, and imposing a social relation upon us. "Precariousness implies living socially," she explains, "that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" (*Frames of War* 14).

Precarity, on the other hand, refers to vulnerability as a "politically induced" and managed position (25). Although vulnerability is a shared condition for all, it can become "highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited" (*Precarious Life* 29). As Butler points out in many of her works, some individuals and groups will be less protected by institutions and communities than others due to issues of recognition, consequently increasing their potential for suffering and injustice. For Butler, it would be dangerous for us to forget that vulnerability is shared, since the mutual condition of vulnerability is vital to rethinking our social and ethical relations; however, it would also be dangerous for us to forget that people are vulnerable in unique ways, since the available means of survival and recognition are not distributed evenly. Butler thus develops this view of vulnerability in order to explore an alternative approach

to political philosophy, one grounded in the understanding that all people are uniquely vulnerable to and therefore responsible for others.

However, in addition to advancing this rethinking of vulnerability, Butler also orients this rethinking toward language in a way that resonates with rhetoric. In her 1997 book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, she offers one of her earliest explications of vulnerability by extending her theory of performativity to the topics of hate speech, pornography, and antigay military policy. Drawing upon the philosophies of J. L. Austin, Jacques Derrida, and Louis Althusser, among others, she proposes what she calls "linguistic vulnerability," a concept referring to the formative role of discourse in the construction of our subjectivity. She writes:

> Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms? If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power. (1-2)

Butler's concept of linguistic vulnerability is rooted in Althusser's scene of interpellation, where the subject is called into being through the address of another (2). If subjectivity is grounded in this address, then, Butler argues, this formation through language must also expose us to potentially injurious rhetoric, such as hate speech and obscenity. However, Butler insists that our "vulnerability to language" is not the limit of our rhetorical agency; rather, it is the condition that makes rhetorical agency and the subversion of injurious speech possible in the first place. Though she herself uses the term "rhetoric" sparingly, Butler's theory of linguistic vulnerability resonates with rhetorical studies insofar as she proposes a kind of foundational affectability—a fundamental "rhetoricity"—that makes language both constitutive and compelling (8).

In *Frames of War*, Butler expands the rhetorical dimensions of her theory through her discussion of the role that frameworks play in the perception of vulnerability and the distribution of power. If vulnerability is one of Butler's most abiding concerns, then recognition—or "recognizability"—is another, one that Butler explicitly links to vulnerability (5). For Butler, it is not enough to recognize that others are vulnerable in shared and singular ways; it is also necessary to examine the normative frames that shape our recognition of life and harm. She writes that all subjects, no matter how vulnerable, are "constituted through norms which, in their reiteration, produce and shift the terms through which subjects are recognized," and so "our very capacity to discern and name the 'being' of the subject is dependent on norms that facilitate that recognition" (3-4). In other words, for a life—or a subject, or a being—to be recognized and then protected in any society, it must be rendered recognizable through a set of norms, of which we may not be readily conscious. In a sense, then, we are vulnerable not only to material forces, but also to the norms that people and institutions impose upon us (such as gender and sexuality), which shape and condition us into recognizable beings before we are even fully aware of that conditioning. Unfortunately, these norms of recognition cannot apply to all people equally, since there will always be those who do not fit neatly into such categories, such as queer and disabled subjects. Thus, those who are left on the margins of a normative frame generally occupy a more vulnerable position in the world, since their lives, identities, and relations are not recognized in ways that are would normally assign social value. A seemingly obvious solution here would be to expand the frame and include more of the margins.[7] However, as Butler contends, the "problem is not merely

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[7] For more on this topic, see Butler's *Gender Trouble*, published in 1990, as well as

how to include more people within existing norms, but to consider how existing norms allocate recognition differently" (6).

Here, Butler establishes an important link between vulnerability as a "politically induced" position and the (rhetorical) management of perceptions (25). All frames of recognition—including the recognition of life and harm—depend on social structures that impose categories, discipline bodies, and regulate affects. "We are given genders or social categories, against our will," Butler explains, "and these categories confer intelligibility or recognizability, which means they also communicate what the social risks of unintelligibility or partial intelligibility might be" (167). In other words, these frames establish norms of recognition while also marginalizing non-normative others, putting those others at greater risk. So, if a life is not "recognized" as a valuable life, one worthy of being lived and then being mourned when lost, it is more likely that that life will occupy a more vulnerable position. Furthermore, Butler insists that it is not enough simply to expand our normative frames to include more social categories, since there will always be others still excluded from the picture. Instead, Butler calls for a critical engagement with the very norms that impinge upon us and shape our perceptions:

> If certain lives are deemed worth living, protecting, and grieving and others not, then this way of differentiating lives cannot be understood as a problem of identity or even of the subject. It is rather a question of how power forms the field in which subjects become possible at all or, rather, how they become impossible. […] The matter is, in my view, more dire and requires a kind of analysis capable of calling into question the framework that silences the question of who counts as a "who"—in other words, the forcible action of the norm on circumscribing a grievable life. (163)

Jeffrey Nealon's *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity*, published in 1998. Both of them discuss what Butler calls the "embarrassed 'etc.'" of identity politics, those always left out of the expanding frame (*Gender Trouble* 182).

The allocation of norms of recognition—which happens largely through discourse, such as when an infant is labeled a boy or a girl—goes hand-in-hand with the differential distribution of vulnerability, the "forcible action of the norm on circumscribing grievable life" (163). For Butler, it is not enough for the marginalized to simply demand a reallocation of norms within established frameworks. Rather than resisting vulnerability through appeals to identity politics, which would simply adjust the frame by assimilating something else into the norm, Butler calls for an ongoing critique of the frames that make some lives livable at the expense of others. She thus connects the management of vulnerability with the management of perception, identification, and discourse. In this way, she implicitly links vulnerability to discursive practices, making it possible to view rhetoric as a system for shaping perceptions and affecting others, one of many systems through which vulnerability is managed.

The idea that vulnerability is both a condition with ontological implications and a position with political implications is not limited to the fields of philosophy and politics. In the field of legal studies, Martha Albertson Fineman has followed a similar trajectory by calling critical attention to prevailing cultural assumptions about vulnerability in the United States. She suggests that the "concept of vulnerability can act as a heuristic device, forcing us to examine hidden assumptions and biases folded into legal, social, and cultural practices" ("The Vulnerable Subject and the Responsive State" 266). Similar to Butler, Fineman voices skepticism about protecting marginalized populations through continually revised laws of recognition, and she suggests that vulnerability can become a more powerful framework for understanding our responsibilities. For example, in "The Vulnerable Subject and the Responsive State" (2010), Fineman discusses the fallacies

underlying common identity-based appeals to equality in U.S. jurisprudence, proposing that "the concept of vulnerability can help us better understand how to actually realize that often-glorified American commitment to equality of opportunity and access" by opening a space for thought that links equality with state responsibility:

> My ultimate assertion is that true equality of opportunity carries with it the obligation on the state to ensure that access to the societal institutions that distribute social goods, such as wealth, health, employment, or security, is generally open to all, and that the opportunities that these institutions provide are evenly distributed so that no persons or group of persons are unduly privileged while others are disadvantaged to the extent that they can be said to have few or no opportunities. (256-7)

Here, Fineman highlights the notion that vulnerability is a precarious *position*, one that groups and individuals occupy differently based on a variety of social, material, and institutional factors. Drawing upon this idea, she suggests that scholars and lawmakers can better serve the needs of marginalized and oppressed populations by shaping policies for vulnerable, dependent subjects rather than for the independent, self-made subjects traditionally celebrated by American culture.

However, though she premises her argument on this idea of differentially distributed vulnerability, she also insists on a dual understanding of vulnerability that begins with a common *condition* shared by all people. In an earlier article on equality, published in 2008, Albertson calls for a refiguring of the term vulnerability that accounts for its "potential in describing a universal, inevitable, enduring aspect of the human condition that must be at the heart of our concept of social and state responsibility" ("The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring" 8). As Fineman points out, arguments about the conditions of vulnerability often go hand-in-hand with arguments about the conditions of dependency, which is another term frequently rebuked in American culture. In response

to this association, Fineman suggests that vulnerability "is a more encompassing concept [than dependency]" since dependency "is episodic and shifts in degree on an individual level for most of us"; therefore, "analyses centered around vulnerability are more politically potent than those based on dependency" (11). In other words, dependency, according to Fineman, is somewhat easy for critics and lawmakers to ignore since it can be perceived as something circumstantial. For instance, an infant is perceived as being extremely dependent upon others, but we typically expect our children to "strike out on their own" and "fend for themselves" as they develop. This expectation is especially prevalent in contemporary American culture, which tends to glorify independence and treat dependency as a symptom of too little effort. "By contrast," Fineman argues, "understood as a state of constant possibility of harm, vulnerability cannot be hidden" (11). In other words, vulnerability, as a political concept and an inescapable reality, can potentially generate stronger arguments than appeals to dependency alone. Here, Fineman speaks to other feminist scholars who have critiqued the reification of autonomy through appeals to interdependence. Although she insists that vulnerability should not supplant dependency in scholarship or policy, she proposes that vulnerability, when used as a central framing concept for analysis, "may ultimately prove more theoretically powerful" for addressing concerns about inequality and responsibility in modern society (11).

This rethinking about vulnerability has not gone unnoticed outside of academia either. For example, in December of 2012, *AdBusters* magazine, a periodical marketed primarily toward American liberal activists and countercultures, published an article by Andrea Bennett, an associate editor, in which Bennett presents vulnerability as a potentially radical approach for activism. She writes:

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> Ideological individualism shapes the way we conceive of less sensational social processes…things like tax contributions, business success, and the role of government. We're all vulnerable and dependent, but we don't want to believe it; similarly, none of us are self-made, even though this belief is at the heart of the dominant conservative narrative. (par.11)

As an example of this ideological bias, Bennett considers a now infamous line spoken by Barack Obama during the 2012 presidential campaign: "You didn't build that." This line was addressed to business owners as part of a much larger appeal to the idea that the American system was built through collaboration: "If you were successful," Obama said beforehand, "somebody along the line gave you some help." He went on to offer roads and bridges as examples of collaboration that are taken for granted (qtd. in par. 12). However, during the campaign, conservative critics frequently cited this standalone quote as an example of Obama's presumed socialism. To be sure, the resulting criticism had as much to do with ideological partisanship as it did with ideological individualism. Nonetheless, this criticism also showcased Americans' tendency to deny vulnerability by celebrating individualism, despite the fact that, as Fineman writes, vulnerability can never be hidden ("Anchoring Equality" 11).

To counter this way of thinking in mainstream culture, Bennett argues that activist movements should think about the frameworks of power that inform this mindset. She cites as an example a 2008 study from the University of Amsterdam and Leiden University, which showed that people are more likely to be generous with others whom they perceive to be powerless (and therefore nonthreatening). From this conclusion, Bennett suggests that adversarial activism is not always the most effective form of advocacy, though it can be appropriate. In contrast, she contends that rethinking our

social relations in terms of universal and individual vulnerability can help activists and others discern new methods for negotiating power:

> This re-envisioning of vulnerability, precarity and relationship could make for a stronger lobby than piecemeal struggles against pipelines or tuition hikes…. If conditions of post-modernity and capitalism have bred a population of "sophisticated profit maximizers" who need to consistently protect their illusion of impermeability through violence and dispossession, then what we should lobby for is the acceptance of complex personal vulnerability—a shift in perception of strength that would come not from donning body armor…but from acceptance of interdependency—on other humans, other creatures, the air and water and land that sustains us. (par. 21)

Although she does not advance a specific agenda for activism based on vulnerability, Bennett provides a valuable example of how vulnerability can be powerfully reimagined not only in activist circles but also in academic circles. By echoing Butler's theory of precariousness and precarity, Bennett presents vulnerability as both a condition (all people are faced with it) and a position (not all people are faced with it equally) that simultaneously implies a fundamental relation and an ethical-political imperative. She also suggests that vulnerability can function as a powerful framework for generating new approaches to activism, thereby opening new spaces for engagement with others. Finally, she shows through her analysis of political speech how rhetoric is implicated in our perception and management of vulnerability.

From this brief survey of commentaries, we can begin to draw out a few important points about vulnerability. First, vulnerability is a universal condition insofar as it is an inevitable reality that affects all of us before we are even aware of it; in this way, vulnerability is more fundamental to our existence than we like to readily admit. Second, vulnerability is also a unique position, since the experience of vulnerability will vary from person to person depending on the norms and contingencies to which that

person is exposed. Third, vulnerability implies both sociality and injurability. In a sense, being vulnerable means that we are "given over" to others and to the world, such that we can never be truly self-sufficient; however, being vulnerable also means that we are subjected to the risk of violence, deprivation, and coercion, and this risk is heightened when our lives are not valued. Finally, vulnerability is exposed and managed through a wide range of norms, institutions, and strategies, including rhetoric.

The Concern for Vulnerability in Rhetorical Studies

In the same way that culture, ethics, politics, and law are all implicated in the management of our material, social, and institutional vulnerabilities, so too is rhetoric implicated in the management of our vulnerability to linguistic and non-linguistic forces. This implication points to the fact that rhetorical practices take for granted a kind of vulnerable sociality, without which such practices would lose their capacity for effecting change or affecting others. Furthermore, rhetoric is implicated in the management of perceptions, identities, communities, resources, and policies—the available means that make possible the differential distribution of vulnerability. In this way, rhetoric works with or against other (material/social/institutional) forces to manage vulnerability within and across various (rhetorical) contexts. In short, there is an inevitable concern for vulnerability at the heart of rhetorical studies.

To say that this concern for vulnerability is inevitable is not to say that it has always been explicitly addressed within the field. But even so, an implicit concern for vulnerability is about as old as the rhetorical tradition itself. Since the days of Plato and the Sophists in Ancient Greece, vulnerability has emerged repeatedly as a source of anxiety for both rhetoricians and their critics. After all, Socrates's condemnation of

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rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias* stems at least in part from his suspicions about how easily

people can be fooled into believing false character and acting on untruths (455a-460e).

Similarly, as Brooke Rollins has argued, one of the oldest texts in the rhetorical tradition,

Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, simultaneously elaborates *and* exploits vulnerability

insofar as it treats persuasion as a force, both in the body of the text—when Helen is

characterized as being unable to resist the power of speech—and in the performance of

the text—when Gorgias concludes the speech by calling attention to his own attempt at

persuasion (8-21). Rhetoric is troublesome, then, not merely because it can be deceitful,

but also because it can be compelling, exerting a kind of force on audiences that cannot

be easily detected, avoided, or diverted.[8]

Other examples of this implicit concern for vulnerability include contemporary

studies that theorize rhetoric in relation to violence. On the one hand, some have argued

that rhetoric (or "good" rhetoric," at least) provides a counterpoint to violence, a method

for civilizing people, enacting change, and engaging others that does not impose itself

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[8] Socrates' ideas about vulnerability are, of course, more complicated than this, as can be seen in his heated argument with Polus and Callicles in the *Gorgias*. David S. Gutterman and Sara L. Rushing, in "Sovereignty and Suffering: Towards an Ethics of Grief in a Post-9/11 World," read this exchange in order to argue that both Socrates and Judith Butler highlight vulnerability in their ethical philosophies, but they part ways insofar as Socrates argues for an ethics in spite of vulnerability, whereas Butler argues for an ethics based on vulnerability.

For further readings of performative elements in Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*, see Segal, Consigny, McComiskey, Takis Poulakos, and John Poulakos. On the topic of persuasion as a kind of force in the history of rhetoric, see Brooke Rollins's "Persuasion's Ethical Force: Levinas, Gorgias and the Rhetorical Address" and John Muckelbauer's *The Future of Invention: Rhetoric, Postmodernism, and the Problem of Change*. Muckelbauer, in particular, links the idea of rhetorical force to longstanding suspicions about rhetoric; he writes: "It is worth noting, of course, that for some of the ancients, this [force] was an illustration of the moral shortcoming at the heart of rhetoric: through rhetoric, people appeared to be capable of acting in accordance with justice and virtue without truly knowing what justice or virtue was" (18).

oppressively on audiences.[9] On the other hand, some, including feminist rhetoricians, have argued that rhetoric (in its traditional, masculine, agonistic form) actually enacts its own kind of coercive violence upon others.[10] Sally Miller Gearhart makes a case for the latter quite clearly in her 1979 article "The Womanization of Rhetoric" when she asserts that "any intent to persuade is an act of violence" insofar as it attempts to coerce rather than communicate (195). She further describes students of modern rhetoric as "weapon specialists who are skilled in emotional maneuvers" and "expert in intellectual logistics" (197). Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin echo Gearhart's characterization, writing that any "act of changing others not only establishes the power of the rhetor over others but also devalues the lives and perspectives of those others" (3). They further suggest that the distinction between persuasive and physical force is unsustainable:

> Although these discursive strategies allow more choice to the audience than do the supposedly more heavy-handed strategies of physical coercion, they still infringe on others rights to believe as they choose and to act in ways they believe are best for them. (3)

Challenging the coercive power of persuasion, Foss and Griffin propose what they call "invitational rhetoric," defined as "an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination" (5). Implicit in

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[9] For example, see George Kennedy's *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* and Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric*. Kennedy links rhetoric to vulnerability by suggesting that rhetorical practices came from an instinct to survive and control, which could be done "by direct action—force, threats, bribes, for example" or "by the use of 'signs'" (3). Booth suggests that "the effort at genuine, deep listening [or listening-rhetoric] has fewest successes when violence and war are at stake" (150). He thus implies that "good" rhetoric is most successful when it is separated from violence.

[10] Outside of feminist rhetorical studies, this perspective is evident, for example, in Rita Kirk Whillock's theory of rhetorical strategies and rhetorical stratagems. Whillock draws her terms from military vocabulary, and she describes rhetorical strategies as "discourse involved with the *clash* of reasoning, supported by emotional appeals and designed to *induce compliance*" (32; emphasis added).

both of these feminist critiques of persuasive rhetoric is a concern for how vulnerability is managed by rhetors. As Rollins observes, Gearhart's "weapon specialists" are able to exert their persuasive force from a "safe distance," thereby "encroaching on the space of the other without ever endangering the self" (542). Similarly, Foss and Griffin argue that persuasion "can constitute a kind of trespassing on the personal integrity of others" (3). Their critiques thus characterize rhetors as strategists who attack others from guarded positions, exploiting vulnerabilities and imposing their wills upon audiences. Against this paradigm, Gearhart, Foss, and Griffin restructure the scene of rhetoric by proposing less violent ways of managing vulnerability.

In recent years, more explicit commentaries on the link between rhetoric and the management of vulnerability have begun to circulate. One of the most explicit examples comes from Richard Marback, who wrote in 2012 that the concern for vulnerability "can be seen to run through the whole of rhetoric itself" ("A Meditation" 2). To make his case, Marback compares what he calls "weak versions" of rhetoric with "strong versions" of rhetoric based on how they attempt to manage vulnerability. He begins with the weak version, which he links to the pejorative view of "mere rhetoric," or "the kind of [deceptive] rhetoric Plato disparaged as cookery":

> Mere rhetoric is persuasion to which we are so vulnerable we become uncomfortable with it once we make ourselves aware of it. There is a well-known paradox in this formulation of rhetoric as so overwhelmingly persuasive at the same time it is so obviously manipulative. For Plato, Augustine, Kant, and the many others who caution us against appearances and deceptions, people cannot, at least not without critical reflection, make themselves aware of—and so guard themselves against—the influence of mere rhetoric. (1-2)

Here, we can already see a link between a rhetorical understanding of vulnerability and the condition of vulnerability described by Levinas, Butler, and others. According to

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Marback, critics of "mere rhetoric" (including Plato) acknowledge the fact that rhetoric's powers of persuasion are based on a prior vulnerability to the effects of language, which lends rhetoric its potential for deception and motivates mistrust of persuasive appeals. To be fair, we should remember that Plato's Socrates does temper his condemnation of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* when he acknowledges a "genuine art of speaking"; even then, however, Socrates remains guarded as he provides instruction about rhetoric's possible uses: "It's not speaking or writing well that's shameful," he tells Phaedrus, "what's really shameful is to engage in either of them shamefully or badly" (258d, 260e). Thus, even if Socrates is willing to acknowledge rhetoric, he remains suspicious of its persuasive powers. We should also remember that rhetoric is far more than "mere rhetoric," as Marback himself readily admits in his meditation. Nonetheless, what Marback astutely identifies here is an enduring suspicion of rhetoric that stems partly from the art's persuasive, potentially deceptive force.

For better or for worse, ongoing anxieties about persuasion and deception still motivate us to manage our vulnerability to rhetoric. "An aversion to deception, to being led astray, to giving in," Marback writes, "can and does motivate us to commit some of our energies to defending ourselves against empty words and deceitful representations" ("A Meditation" 2). For instance, although our vulnerability to persuasion—our openness to language—precedes our conscious recognition of it, rhetorical training may help us to develop a fuller awareness of others' (sometimes shameful or harmful) appeals (2). However, this awareness is not contiguous with becoming invulnerable to rhetorical effects. If it *were* possible to completely guard ourselves against the influence of others, we would become *a-rhetorical* beings, immune to the address of others, so secure in

ourselves that we would be unavailable to the means of persuasion. Fantasies like these

may be comforting, or even compelling, especially in cultures with an explicit aversion to

vulnerability (like the United States), but they remain fantasies nonetheless.

This idea—that "none of us are so self-sufficient that rhetoric is without

persuasive power"—describes what Marback calls "strong versions" of rhetoric, which

presume that all rhetoric is underscored by vulnerability as a condition of sociality (3).

"Recognizing our interdependence through our appeals to each other," he writes,

"compels us to accept that rhetoric leads us beyond ourselves to experiences, feelings,

ideas, sensations, and thoughts we can embrace as our own and that we could never have

had alone" (3). Rhetoric, in this view, always involves a prior exposure to appeals and

constraints, a "giving" of ourselves to others, or a kind of dispossession that precedes our

awareness of it. Even if we claim some ideas or experiences as our own, they are always

already embedded in this inescapable sociality derived from vulnerability. Thus, strong

rhetoric is a "calling into being through the skill and training of the rhetor of a sociality

all already share," a perspective that Marback links to classical rhetors including

Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian (3). He continues:

> Rhetoric is a given; people cannot have relationships or communicate with each other except through their aspirations to appeal to, influence, inspire, or persuade each other. The rhetor who appeals to and has influence over an audience by virtue of awareness and preparation and strategy is at the same time influenced by an audience's awarenesses, expectations, preferences, and responses. The nature and extent of the rhetor's influence does not blind an audience. Instead, both audience and rhetor are made aware of the contingencies of being and knowing through their participation together in rhetorical activity. (3)

Insofar as strong versions of rhetoric are premised on a prior vulnerability shared by both

audience *and* rhetor, it becomes possible to think of rhetoric not simply as an art of

persuasion, but as an art of precarious positioning, of addressing and being addressed, of appealing and being appealed to in dynamic engagements. With this in mind, "strong rhetoric offers assurances that all involved are participating in the managing of their openness to each other" (4). Rhetoric, as vulnerability, therefore implies both a "given" and a "giving," a dispossession of ourselves to rhetors and audiences, to symbols and gestures, to norms and institutions, to conventions and contingencies. "Vulnerability is an activity," Marback writes elsewhere, "a making do in the conjoined mental and physical worlds of embodied expression" ("Unclenching" 60).

However, although strong versions of rhetoric accept the reality of vulnerability, they do not necessarily embrace vulnerability in a positive way. Marback explains that while "mere rhetoric is grounded in a blatant fear of the devious rhetor preying on an audience's vulnerability, strong rhetoric responds to fear of audience susceptibility with the guarantee of a rhetor's good intentions and an audience's shared responsibility for meaningfulness and valuation" ("A Meditation" 4). When the audience of strong rhetoric is deceived or exploited like the audience of mere rhetoric, it is for much the same reasons, "as matters of error or weakness, matters of being left too vulnerable by being underprepared, unguarded, or indifferent" (4). So while the strong version of rhetoric acknowledges vulnerability, it does not necessarily appreciate being vulnerable. Instead, it protects audiences by promoting self-assurance and a commitment to being "engaged in a robust enough rhetorical activity" (4).

Thus, whereas vulnerability to weak rhetoric is managed through self-sufficiency and a reduction of rhetoric, vulnerability to strong rhetoric is managed through self-assurance and an expansion of rhetoric (4-5). In both versions, however, vulnerability is

rendered as an openness that is ironically unwelcome, a condition of exposure that must be guarded. This aversion subsequently inflects our concepts in the field, including our notions of agency and efficacy. Marback writes that both versions of rhetoric "share a commitment to rhetorical efficacy as a kind of strength defined in terms of a capacity to avert the self-pity and self-loathing that come from being duped" (5). So when we realize our rhetorical efficacy, we also minimize our rhetorical vulnerability. Both versions therefore treat vulnerability as *negative* potential.

To counter this perception, Marback proposes a rethinking of vulnerability's non-negative potential. This is not to say that he advocates gullibility; rather, he suggests that, if vulnerability is so central to rhetoric, then we as rhetoricians should consider how we might manage it differently. And we have good reason for doing so:

> What we gain in acknowledging and accepting our vulnerability to the appeals of others is an awareness of ourselves in our responsiveness to others. If we are aware of our responsiveness to others, we are aware of ourselves as being affected by them; we are aware at some level and in some sense of the irresistible power of their persuasiveness. Such awareness cannot but sensitize us to the subtleties and gradations of our vulnerabilities. (10-11)

As an example of managing vulnerability differently, he considers individuals who are deeply loyal to others. Loyalty, as Marback describes it, is something more than just a rational commitment based on self-centeredness. "We are either loyal or we are not," he writes, "it is how we are with others" (9). On the one hand, loyalty "demands something from us," something that goes beyond reason; it requires us "to risk those feelings of betrayal…to risk the destruction of relationships and the disruption of sense of self that comes with that relationship" (9). It thus exposes us to the potential for deception, harm, and other dangers, which would normally raise our shields. But on the other hand, loyalty

is generally perceived as a positive quality, and the vulnerability that is expressed through it can be read as indicative of sincerity and strong character. "Up to a point," Marback writes, "we accept the difficulty and the pain of being loyal, and we make ourselves willing to accept some measure of disappointment because we are loyal. Our integrity, that part of us that is made vulnerable to the other through our loyalty, demands of us that we make allowances" (9). On this point, Marback is careful to point out that obsessive loyalty can become unnecessarily self-destructive; however, "[g]enuine loyalty seems to require some degree of risk" (8-9). In this way, loyalty represents a gesture of embracing openness to others despite the threat of deception and harm. To resist that gesture, to resist vulnerability in favor of always being secure, is also to reject the commitments sustained by a sense of loyalty.

Marback furthers this argument in his most recent book on democratic rhetoric in post-apartheid South Africa, in which he describes how the management of vulnerability is a basic condition for rhetorical processes of democratic deliberation. "If we are to take part in deliberations," he writes, "we must at least accept the prospects of acquiescence, compromise, and defeat" (*Managing Vulnerability* 131). He goes on:

> Accepting a measure of vulnerability involves more than resigning ourselves to the limits of our rhetorical capacities. While everyone at one time or another will experience disappointment with deliberation, we constrain our participation if we cynically conclude that disappointment is inevitable as the price to be paid for hope in a common good. (131)

In other words, rhetorical deliberations, like loyalty, demand something from us, require us to risk ourselves and our ambitions in pursuit of a common good. Although these risks may result in disappointments, they are essential for deliberations to achieve anything other than extending conflicts and complaints. This does not mean that we should treat

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vulnerability as nothing but the potential for failure; rather, it means that we must accept

the "virtues as well as the vices of our vulnerabilities," the commitments expressed

through vulnerability as well as the dangers, if we want to produce anything meaningful

through rhetorical deliberation (132).

Marback's vision of vulnerability as a fundamental yet manageable condition for

rhetoric intersects productively with the recent work of Diane Davis, who has on several

occasions called for more critical attention to the conditions that make rhetoric and its

various interests possible.[11] However, whereas Marback pursues a concept of

vulnerability that can be managed at some level, Davis pursues a concept of vulnerability

that precedes the possibility for such management. In her 2010 book *Inessential*

Solidarity: Rhetoric and Foreigner Relations, for example, she takes up the philosophy of

Emmanuel Levinas, among others, in order to propose a philosophy of rhetoric that

begins with exposure and responsivity rather than signification and cognition. Davis thus

challenges rhetoricians to consider how all of us are made available to rhetoric before

means and meanings are made available to us. She explains:

> If rhetorical practices work by managing to have an effect on others, then
> an always prior openness to the other's affection is its first requirement:
> the "art" of rhetoric can be effective only among affectable existents, who
> are by definition something other than distinct individuals or self-
> determining agents, and whose relations necessarily precede and exceed
> symbolic intervention. (3)

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[11] In addition to the works discussed here, see "Finitude's Clamor; Or, Notes toward a
Communitarian Literacy," published in *CCC* in 2001; "Addressing Alterity: Rhetoric,
Hermeneutics, and the Nonappropriative Relation," published in *Philosophy and Rhetoric*
in 2005; "The Fifth Risk: A Response to John Muckelbauer's Response," published in
Philosophy and Rhetoric in 2007; and "Identification: Burke and Freud on Who You
Are," published in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* in 2008.

In other words, if rhetorical action is to have any impact (be it Aristotelian persuasion or Burkean identification), there must be a foundational persuade-ability or identify-ability that goes before and beyond its effects. However, an important caveat to Davis's theory is that this "prior openness" to rhetorical effects is not an "essential" element of human subjectivity. By "essential," she does not mean that this vulnerability is not necessary (in fact, she argues the opposite); rather, she means that our predisposition to rhetorical effects cannot be essentialized into whatever identities or communities we claim as our own, such that our vulnerabilities become just another aspect of our identities. The vulnerability that she homes in on is therefore an "originary (or preoriginary) rhetoricity" that makes identity and community conceivable (2). "[S]olidarity," she explains, "is at least the rhetoricity of the affect as such, the 'individual's' irreparable openness to affection/alteration" (4). Hence, Davis dubs this concept "*inessential* solidarity," an unavoidable, "*other-oriented*" vulnerability that sets the scene for all rhetorical activities (Jost and Hyde 29; emphasis in original).

Although Levinas himself was not sympathetic to the study of rhetoric, Davis adapts his philosophy of pre-subjective exposure and response-ability in order to advance her rethinking of community, meaning, agency, and even humanism in the context of rhetorical studies.[12] Her theory thus echoes Levinas's distinction between the "said"—communication as the reproduction of meaning—and the "saying"—communication as prior exposure to others, which disrupts our interpretive capacities (16). More than that, her theory also takes up Levinas's notion of the ethical imperative—the obligation to

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[12] See, for example, his essay "Everyday Language and Rhetoric without Eloquence," published in *Outside the Subject* (1993), in which he writes, "Rhetoric brings into the meaning in which it culminates a certain beauty, a certain elevation, a certain nobility and an expressivity that imposes itself independently of its truth" (138-9).

respond to the other before we even realize it—and recasts it as what she calls the

"*rhetorical* imperative," the "underivable [and obligatory] provocation to response" (14; emphasis in original). For Davis, then, rhetoric begins not with the design of an appeal, nor with the conscious uptake of an appeal. Rather, it begins with the vulnerable sociality that opens us up to appeals, calls us to respond, and commits us to being engaged with the world before we have even processed it.

This vulnerability is not merely an abstract concept either. In a more recent essay on "Creaturely Rhetorics" (2011), Davis applies this theory to rhetorical studies' burgeoning interest in animals by responding to George Kennedy's assertion that "rhetoric is a form of energy" that is "prior in biological evolution and prior psychologically in any given instance" ("A Hoot" 4). Though Kennedy's claim resonates with the notion of a pre-conscious rhetoric, Davis contends that what Kennedy misses is "an always prior rhetoricity, and affect*ability* or persuad*ability* that is due not to any creature's specific genetic makeup but to corporality more generally, to the *exposedness* of corporeal existence" (89; emphasis in original). She explains further:

> Your material incarnation is the site of a passivity more ancient than the active/passive dichotomy. It's the condition for your exposure, susceptibility, vulnerability, and therefore for your *responsivity*. Responsibility (response-ability) begins not with a subject who recognizes itself but with "proximity," in Levinas's terminology, immediate (as in nonmediated) contact and responsivity.... (90)

Vulnerability to rhetoric, then, is not simply a matter of cognitive uptake. Rather, it is rooted in our embodiment, our exposure to and dependence on the world around us, which closes in on us and at the same time keeps us open. "There is no representational power," Davis remarks, "that could catch up to this immediate 'touch,' this persuasive appeal…," and so rhetoric arises as "an underivable provocation, an imperative to

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respond," even at the material level (90). Whatever capacity we have for effecting change in our environments through language is predicated on this fundamental, "creaturely" vulnerability that goes beyond the active-passive, thinking-unthinking, human-animal binaries still rehearsed in rhetorical studies.

The expansive scopes of both Marback's and Davis's theories of vulnerability invite a wide range of possible applications. James Brown, Jr., for example, applies their arguments to the study of networked rhetorical situations in the digital age. Taking the performances of stand-up comedian and TV personality Louis C. K. as his focus, he argues that networks change the dynamics of the rhetorical situation and makes new modes of invention possible through the management of vulnerability. According to Brown, Jr., "Networks, for all of their promise, raise difficult questions about audience and expose the rhetor's vulnerability" (1). He goes on to explain these differences in terms of response, echoing Davis: "Others arrive from all angles, and these arrivals invite us to consider how the rhetor is called to respond. This problem is not created by networked life, but life in the network certainly exposes the predicaments of vulnerability to others" (1). Since rhetors in networked situations are exposed to the unexpected arrival of unknowable others, they require an "attune[ment] to *kairos*, the opportune and unpredictable moments of persuasion, moments that call on the rhetor to respond" (2).

Currently, the dominant mode of response for rhetors in networked and mediated spaces, according to Brown, is snark, which functions as a strategy for managing one's vulnerability in digital spaces. He writes that snark "offers jabs and opinions in a knowing tone, attacking the opposition coldly or preemptively insulating the author against attacks and trolling. […] Snark attempts to protect against shame and

vulnerability" (3). In contrast to this mode, Brown offers Louis C. K.'s "weird ethic" of putting himself into precarious positions whereby he must respond immediately and directly to *kairotic* circumstances, confronting the possibility of failure with neither snark nor scripted responses available (2). Brown writes that this method "insists upon an opening up to kairos and vulnerability":

> The rhetor exposes herself to shame. S/he is placed into a vulnerable position and must craft a kairotic sensibility…There is no practice behind the scenes or using snark to guard against unpredictability. Instead, the rhetor practices in front of the audience, creating a high stakes situation to which s/he must respond effectively. (4-5)

Louis C. K.'s method, then, enacts the kind of responsive, precarious positioning that both Marback and Davis attend to in their writings. In doing so, it demonstrates how vulnerability, perceived here as the risk of failure and shame, can serve as a mode of rhetorical invention precisely attuned to *kairos*. Furthermore, because Louis C. K. performs this method publicly by practicing with audiences, it also functions as a kind of precarious pedagogy, a model that is less about repetition and more about productive exposure to vulnerability and its possibilities.

Conclusion

Vulnerability is a multidimensional concept within and across disciplines: a condition of living and a lived position, a demanding yet disorienting orientation toward others, an exposure to exteriority and to injury, a welcoming that is often unwelcomed, a giving that is also a given in our shared experiences of the world. Mapping these dimensions in all of their complexity is about as easy as mapping the features of every rhetorical situation that could ever be. However, the complexity of vulnerability should not dissuade us as rhetoricians from attending to its intensities and possibilities. After all,

what would rhetoric be without vulnerability? If not for the potential to be affected, changed, and injured, what potential would rhetoric have?

Furthermore, despite the complexity of the concept, some key themes can be drawn from ongoing studies of vulnerability. On the one hand, "vulnerability" names a fundamental condition of exposure that commits us to social relations and risks before we even realize what's happening. On the other hand, it also names a position embedded within ever-shifting arrangements of material, institutional, social, and rhetorical power. Because vulnerability is simultaneously universal and unequal, it must be managed from one situation to the next, and often through rhetorical means. With that in mind, I propose that rhetoric, premised as it is upon vulnerability, functions as a system for managing our vulnerabilities to and through discourse. Whether we are trying to enact social change or defend ourselves against accusations and appeals, we are always already caught up in a vulnerable sociality that we each experience differently. Furthermore, insofar as it is tied to the management of perceptions, identities, and communities, rhetoric participates in the distribution of recognition and resources, precariously positioning us in relation to one another and thereby making some positions more vulnerable than others. Finally, even when we are not *acting* rhetorically, we nonetheless experience our rhetorical vulnerability in the call to *respond*. Thus, rhetoric is defined not only by available means, but also by our own availability and the concern that attends to it.

CHAPTER II
THE ARTISTRY OF OUTRAGE:
THE RHETORIC OF THE WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH

…what force does language have? How can it impact actions? What effects does it produce (one of which may be 'meaning')?
—John Muckelbauer, *"Rhetoric, Asignification, and the Other"* (239)

The concern for vulnerability at the heart of rhetoric is not merely something that is implied or expressed in the pages of scholarship. Insofar as rhetoric is dependent upon a vulnerable sociality and oriented toward others in pursuit of rhetorical effects like persuasion, this concern for vulnerability is already deeply embedded within all rhetorical practices. For example, anyone who is interested in persuading an audience or prompting social action must be attuned to that audience's shared and diverse vulnerabilities—the ways in which they can be moved by language (and other forces). A rhetor might ask, "What actions or appeals will generate the responses that I am hoping for? How receptive would my audience be to such actions or appeals? How can I make them more receptive to persuasion? What risks would my actions entail, and are they worth the effort?" In this way, the concern for vulnerability is not just something that rhetoricians *think about*; it is also something that rhetors *act on*, something that foregrounds all rhetorical action. Therefore, if we can perceive rhetoric as a system for exposing and managing our vulnerabilities to and through discourse, then we should be able to analyze how rhetorical agents manage vulnerability in specific contexts through their actions. Importantly, this management of vulnerability does not have to be explicitly addressed or acknowledged by rhetors in order to be a concern. In fact, many rhetors would likely avoid calling too much attention to their rhetorical strategies or to the vulnerabilities that make such strategies effective. Thus, to illustrate this concern for vulnerability in action, it may be

helpful for us to consider a kind of rhetoric that defies traditional sensibilities and demands a great deal of attention.

Here, I turn to the hate speech of the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), an unaffiliated congregation of anti-LGBTQ Christian activists in the United States who have attracted a great deal of attention through their provocative protest rhetoric. Despite the congregation's small size (about forty members in 2011), the WBC has developed an internationally acknowledged rhetorical enterprise that includes picket protests, online videos, legal briefs, weekly sermons, and press releases ("You Are Still Alive"; *GodHatesFags.com*). The international impact of the WBC's rhetorical work can be attributed to a wide range of factors, including their highly provocative rhetorical tactics and savvy digital presence, making the WBC a controversial but powerful case study in the use of available means. However, although the WBC embraces rhetoric and technology as means for spreading their anti-LGBTQ message, they also reject traditional versions of rhetoric in favor of a less communicative and more provocative kind of discourse, which I call "trolling rhetoric." In contrast to traditional rhetoric, which stresses the importance of communication, trolling rhetoric does not concern itself primarily with the communication or construction of shared meaning (i.e., the signifying operation of rhetoric); instead, it prioritizes the generation and perpetuation of responses from vulnerable audiences, even if those responses are provoked through an offensive or outrageous act like a funeral protest or an hate-filled text. In this way, trolling rhetoric highlights what John Muckelbauer has called the "asignifying operation" of rhetoric, which is primarily concerned with the force of language and the effect that it has upon others (*The Future* 17-8).

Given the controversy surrounding the church and its hateful rhetoric, it may seem strange to suggest that the WBC takes up a concern for vulnerability through its rhetorical practices. However, I would argue that the WBC's concern for vulnerability is not only noticeable, but noticeably complex. To make my case, I propose the following readings of the WBC's rhetoric. First, the church's hate speech attempts to manage vulnerability as a position by framing themselves as a vulnerable group of social pariahs, dehumanizing the LGBTQ community, and rejecting the grievability of the deceased. Second, the church's trolling rhetoric loudly exposes vulnerability as a fundamental condition by provoking audiences into responding with offense and outrage, thereby disrupting communication and the sharing of meaning. Through their use of trolling rhetoric, the WBC's demonstrators accomplish two important goals linked to rhetoric: first, they exercise a kind of power over audiences that stems from our loss of control in the face of offense; and second, they gain a considerable share of one of the most valuable resources in our networked society—attention. To foreground my analysis, I will begin by providing background information on the WBC and reviewing the attention that they have already received in scholarship.

The Westboro Baptist Church: Background Information

Originally founded in 1955 by its late leader and pastor, Fred Waldron Phelps, the WBC—which describes itself as a "Primitive Baptist" church, though the Primitive Baptist community has openly rejected them—has become notorious for its members'

inflammatory anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and their controversial public protests.[13] They

describe these protests on their website as such:

> WBC engages in daily peaceful sidewalk demonstrations opposing the homosexual lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth. We display large, colorful signs containing Bible words and sentiments, including: GOD HATES FAGS, FAGS HATE GOD, AIDS CURES FAGS, THANK GOD FOR AIDS, FAGS BURN IN HELL, GOD IS NOT MOCKED…. (*GodHatesFags.com*)

In addition to "peaceful sidewalk demonstrations," the WBC also protests at numerous

events across the country, including at the funerals of celebrities, gay rights activists,

fallen soldiers, murder victims, and individuals who died from AIDS

(*GodHatesFags.com*). One of the WBC's more infamous protests occurred in 1998 at the

funeral of 21-year-old Matthew Shepard, a gay college student who was beaten by two

men and bound to a split-rail fence along the side of the road in Laramie, WY, where a

passing cyclist discovered his body after mistaking the dying student for a scarecrow

("Matthew's Story").[14] A few years later, the WBC reentered the controversy over

Shepard's murder when they protested the dissolution of two Greek organizations at

Colorado State University, which had rather tastelessly included a scarecrow adorned

with gay slurs on one of their homecoming floats while Shepard lay dying in a hospital

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[13]I should note that the WBC rhetoric is not just anti-LGBTQ. The WBC's homepage, *GodHatesFags.com*, includes links to the church's various other websites, including *GodHatesIslam.com*, *GodHatestheMedia.com*, *GodHatestheWorld.com* (originally *GodHatesSweden.com*), *JewsKilledJesus.com*, *BeastObama.com*, and *PriestsRapeBoys.com*.

[14] The WBC has also maintained a page on their website titled "Perpetual Gospel Memorial to Matthew Shepard," where an image of Shepard appears wrapped in flames, and a counter records the number of days he's "been in hell." The WBC asserts that they do "not support the murder of Matthew Shepard…However, the truth about Matthew Shepard needs to be known. He lived a Satanic lifestyle" (*GodHatesFags.com*). Members have also created a "Matthew Shepard Monument" dedicated to "Matthew Shepard's Entry into Hell," which they intend "to erect in Casper City Park as a solemn Memorial that God Hates Fags & Fag-Enablers" (*GodHatesFags.com*).

bed (Cobb, *God Hates Fags* 1-2). According to Jason Marsden, executive director of the Matthew Shepard Foundation in Denver, Colorado, the widely perceived offensiveness of the protests surrounding Shepard's murder and the ensuing trials propelled the WBC into the media spotlight, which has shone on them numerous times since (Morton).

More recently, in 2006, the WBC protested at the funeral of a fallen marine, Matthew Snyder, which prompted the Snyder family to sue the church for damages. The resulting legal battles culminated in a landmark decision by the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) in March of 2011, when eight of the nine justices ruled to protect the WBC's rhetoric and demonstrations from state-sanctioned censorship under the penumbra of the First Amendment. One year after SCOTUS handed down its decision, Congress passed *The Honoring America's Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act of 2012*, which included a not-so-subtle response to the WBC that would prevent demonstrators from picketing military funerals two hours before and after the service; it would also require demonstrators to remain at least three-hundred feet away from grieving families, literally creating a border within which the WBC's protests would not be tolerated.

As these public and political responses suggest, the WBC's rhetorical displays are not infrequent or isolated incidents. In fact, demonstrators from the WBC schedule regular protests of this sort across the country, publishing announcements and press releases on their homepage, *GodHatesFags.com*, and arriving at their legally approved protest sites with shirts and placards reading "God Hates Fags" and "Thank God for IEDs [improvised explosive devices]," among several other extreme statements. Their protests are the subject of frequent reports from both local and mainstream media outlets,

including NPR, CNN, NBC, and Fox News. What's more, the church claims to have conducted more than 52,169 protests of this sort since June of 1991 (*GodHatesFags.com*). Their ongoing activities have prompted profiles, critiques, and denouncements from various sources, including a BBC documentary titled *The Most Hated Family in America* and a series of contentious lawsuits (Theroux).

At the local level, counter-protest groups, including Angel Action and the Patriot Guard Riders, have organized to retaliate against the WBC by using various rhetorical tactics at protest sites to divert attention away from the church's demonstrators (Roy). At the international level, the governments of both Canada and the United Kingdom have banned members of the WBC from setting foot on their soil ("Church members enter Canada"; Leach). In the United States, the WBC's ongoing demonstrations, as well as its members' long and still growing record of homophobic assertions and condemnations, have prompted the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups across the nation, to describe the WBC as "arguably the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America" (Southern Poverty). Even members of the Knights of the Southern Cross, a Virginia-based branch of the Ku Klux Klan, felt compelled to counter-protest against the WBC at Arlington National Cemetery during Memorial Day services in 2011 (Ure).[15]

Adding to these controversies over their rhetorical tactics and messages, the WBC's members do not balk at the accusation that they preach hate to the public. In fact, responding to the question "Why do you preach hate?" posted on their website, the WBC

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[15] The KKK members at the counter-protest opposed the WBC's "anti-troop message" (Ure). The WBC demonstrators replied to their criticism by arguing that the "'Bible doesn't say anywhere that it's an abomination to be born of a certain gender or race'" (Ure). Ironically enough, Fred Phelps, the leader of the WBC, was once a civil rights attorney until he was disbarred in Kansas for perjury in 1979 (Southern Poverty).

provides this answer: "Because the Bible preaches hate. […] What you need to hear is that God hates people, and that your chances of going to heaven are nonexistent, unless you repent" (*GodHatesFags.com*). The WBC's hate-oriented rhetoric can be thematized around several political issues, including sexuality, free speech, religious liberty, military policy, and national security (Brouwer and Hess). However, at the heart of the WBC's rhetoric is their belief that America's growing tolerance for homosexuality has invited God's wrath upon the nation. To support their claims, they cite wars (including the war in Iraq), disasters (including the BP Oil Spill), and epidemics (including AIDS) as apparent proof. A painfully concise summary of their core belief appears in bold letters at the end of their more recent press releases: "We've turned America over to the fags; they're coming home in body bags" (*GodHatesFags.com*).

One important yet troublesome aspect that distinguishes the WBC from other rhetorically savvy hate groups is their dismissal of persuasion as an ultimate goal. Unlike many religious groups, the WBC does not espouse any interest in converting new followers to their cause; on the contrary, the WBC's leaders openly reject persuasion as a rhetorical aim, and this disinterest is grounded in their theology. According to Nate Phelps, the estranged son of Fred Waldron Phelps who left his family's church when he turned eighteen, the WBC's theology is modeled after Calvinism, particularly the belief that God has already "preordained who would be saved, and who would be damned" (Phelps, "The Uncomfortable Grayness").[16] In his speech to the American Atheists

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[16] The WBC has confirmed their Calvinist influences on their homepage. In the online "Manifesto of Westboro Baptist Church," they describe themselves as "a TULIP Baptist Church," with "TULIP" standing for the five points of Calvinism: "Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints" (*GodHatesFags.com*).

Convention in 2009, Nate Phelps explained that because of their emphasis on predestination, the WBC's rhetoric is not necessarily premised upon making persuasive appeals to personal salvation or redemption:

> This doctrine is very important to understanding the Westboro Baptist Church. My father, and those who follow him, are <u>not</u> preaching to try to convince people of their truth. Unlike street evangelists, who are trying to convert people, my father has no intention of converting anyone, since conversion is impossible. You're either chosen, or you're not. (Emphasis in original)

To support his assertion about the WBC's theology, Nate Phelps tells the story of an interview conducted with his father in the mid-90s by Rich Buhler, a Christian radio host. During the interview, Buhler proposed that Phelps's message was unlikely to inspire new followers to join his cause. Fred Phelps replied, "'That's not the test! The test is fidelity in preaching!'" (qtd. in Phelps). The WBC's general disinterest in persuasion and conversion has also been acknowledged by some academic scholars, who have also expressed concerns about how to respond to the WBC in lieu of traditional rhetorical appeals (Fletcher; Roy).

To be fair, the WBC's own published statements offer a more complex vision of their theology and its relation to persuasion. For example, the WBC answers several "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQs) on their website to clarify their beliefs to outsiders. In response to the first question, "Who are you, what do you do, and why do you do it?" members of the WBC affirm their Calvinist influences, including their belief in predestination, and they refer to "God's Elect" in response to several other questions, a phrase that is suggestive of predestination (*GodHatesFags.com*). However, in response to the question "What are you trying to accomplish?" the WBC answers:

> First, our goal is to preach the Word of God to this crooked and perverse generation. By our words, some will repent. By our words, some will be condemned. […] Second, our goal is to glorify God by declaring His whole counsel to everyone. Third, we hope that by our preaching some will be saved. As Jude said, on some have compassion, making a difference, but others save with fear. (*GodHatesFags.com*)

The suggestion that its members' words may influence the mindsets of their audiences (either through compassion or fear, both rooted in pathos) indicates that the WBC is at least partly interested in modes of persuasion. However, in response to the next question, "Have any homosexuals repented as a result of your picketing?" the WBC echoes Fred Phelps's reported emphasis on "fidelity in preaching" by asserting that their ultimate goal is the delivery of their message, not the conversion of new followers: "Christianity is not a game, consisting of who can get the most people to repent. Our job is simply to preach, and by the foolishness of our preaching, we hope that people will be saved" (Phelps; *GodHatesFags.com*).

Of course, the idea that the WBC's rhetorical displays may actually persuade some individuals of their message does not necessarily contradict their avowed disinterest in converting new members (*GodHatesFags.com*). In response to another FAQ, "Do you ever pray for the salvation of those who you feel are condemned?" the WBC answers: "To the extent that we are ever instructed to pray for any other than those who make a profession to this faith, it is in recognition that they may be God's elect who have not yet received the call to grace" (*GodHatesFags.com*). In other words, according to the WBC, only "God's Elect" will receive the "call to grace," and the compelling nature of that call lies with God, not with members of the WBC. In their own words, the WBC explains: "And you will not serve God, unless and until he draws you to him. And if he draws you, you will not be able to resist. […] Your best hope is that you are among those he has

chosen" (*GodHatesFags.com*). Salvation, then, comes not from any rhetorical appeals that the WBC might make, but from the absolute appeal of God's grace, which is afforded only to His elect via predestination. For those who are not blessed with God's grace, no earthly appeal will ever be enough to achieve salvation; thus, instead of seeking to convert new followers and redeem their souls, the WBC simply seeks to spread its "truth" about God's everlasting hatred as far and wide as possible. If there is any use for persuasion among church members, it is primarily for those already hoping to join the church's ranks. As Joe Taschler and Steve Fry wrote in a profile of Fred Phelps for the *Topeka Capital-Journal* in 1994, "To join Westboro Baptist, prospective members must convince the congregation they believe they are among the chosen few to be saved." A few have actually done so. Furthermore, those who are born into the WBC are not necessarily among those chosen few; defectors are shunned by the church and cut off from all family ties for the rest of their lives.

At this point, it would be tempting to attempt a much broader analysis of the WBC's political agendas. However, my reasons for summarizing the WBC's doctrinal statements at length here are not to preface a revelatory analysis of their theology, their politics, or their secret motives. Ultimately, it is impossible to know for certain the honest intentions of every member of the WBC, let alone those of the entire congregation, except through recourse to their public statements. Furthermore, although there is still much that can still be said about the WBC's theology, my goal in this chapter is not to focus on the metaphysical aspects of the church's doctrine. Instead, I want to examine the WBC's words and deeds as a rhetorician, an analyst trained in the art of deciphering contexts, discovering the available means of persuasion, and analyzing the effects of

language. To that end, I think it is important for us to contextualize the WBC's rhetoric in terms of how they view their own rhetorical practices, especially if their aims do not match the aims of traditional rhetoric.

On that note, even if we contextualize the WBC's rhetoric in their own words, we are still faced with a few impasses if we attempt to analyze their rhetoric through recourse to traditional models of persuasion and identification. Although the WBC is certainly not the first group to exercise offensive rhetoric in public venues, they are unique insofar as they disavow any organized interest in converting new followers or enlarging any sense of community. At the same time, they also stand out for embracing their designation as producers of hateful rhetoric, proudly yet problematically establishing an unsympathetic ethos for themselves. In other words, although demonstrators from the WBC use conventional rhetorical means (such as public protest and letter-writing) to spread their message, they do so without assuming persuasion, conciliation, or identification as their primary rhetorical aims. Of course, any instance of rhetoric carries with it the potential to persuade, and the WBC's rhetoric is no exception. In fact, Steve Drain, a one-time filmmaker who now produces the church's media, joined the WBC in 2001 after he experienced a change of heart during the production of his documentary about the church, titled *Hatemongers* (Kendall). However, even if the WBC's rhetoric carries with it some potential for persuasion, that potential frequently becomes overshadowed by the WBC's provocation of audiences. This opens up an important question for rhetoricians: What can we make of the WBC's rhetoric if it is not aiming to generate conviction or community by changing audiences? I contend that we can begin to develop a fuller understanding of their rhetoric by attending to the concern

for vulnerability that lies at the heart of their rhetorical practices. Even if the WBC's demonstrators dismiss Aristotelian persuasion or Burkean identification as goals, they nonetheless manage vulnerability through their discursive acts, specifically by rejecting the humanity and grievability of others while also appealing to their own vulnerability. Furthermore, the WBC's provocative rhetoric painfully exposes the vulnerable sociality that foregrounds rhetoric as the art of affecting others.

On a more personal note, I am also summarizing the WBC's beliefs here to avoid simply demonizing its members from the perspective of an offended outsider. As a self-identified gay man who has confronted homophobia in a number of different contexts, I have to admit upfront that I agree with the Southern Poverty Law Center's designation of the WBC as an "obnoxious and rabid" hate group with a homophobic agenda and an offensive *modus operandi*. However, presuming offense without first examining the broader context in which that offense takes place would be a grave mistake for any rhetorical analysis. "Offensiveness" as a rhetorical concept is not something that can be isolated within a single exigency or applied unequivocally to a particular group or activity. I do not mean to suggest that offense does not really happen, or that anyone's experience of offense is more or less valid. Rather, I contend that when offense *does* happen, it always happens *rhetorically*: as a complex confluence of exigencies and constraints, which are shaped by our varying relations to discourse, difference, and power. There is nothing wrong with responding to the WBC with offense, outrage, criticism, or even protest; in fact, these responses are necessary counterpoints that constitute sustained democratic engagement. However, if we hope to respond to the WBC's rhetoric with any sense of clarity or responsibility, especially if we are among

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those offended by the WBC, we must be willing to suspend our judgment (at least initially) and take the WBC at its words.

Of course, this analytical and vulnerable approach to the WBC is *much* easier said than done, in part because the WBC tests the tolerable limits of difference and democracy in contemporary culture. On a personal level, I have a very difficult time restraining my impulse to judge whenever I see the words "God Hates Fags" and similar sentiments featured prominently on the WBC's placards and webpages, partly because of my vulnerable position as a gay man. No matter how much research I do or how much context I cautiously examine, I cannot dismiss my experience of being offended by their rhetoric, their demonstrations, and even their presence in public life. In other words, I have to put myself into a precarious position whenever I write about the WBC, exposing myself to their messages, giving an account of my own vulnerability, and finding a way to respond. However, as difficult as this ongoing process of exposure, accountability, and response may be, I argue that it is a necessary one for understanding and responding to rhetorics of shock and offense. To believe that we can somehow examine such rhetorics from an extreme outsider's position, removing any risk of being offended or provoked, is to pretend that we can somehow excuse ourselves from relations of power and difference—from the vulnerable sociality that make such rhetorics possible. As comforting as this hope for invulnerability and objectivity may be, it is impossible. Even if we are not the ones performing or experiencing a particular offense, we cannot simply extract ourselves from the discursive, social, and political configurations upon which offensive rhetorics are grounded. Furthermore, even if we are not the ones targeted for offense, the potential for rhetoric to offend is rooted in our vulnerability to rhetoric

itself—its power to move us, to identify us, and even to injure us—and this vulnerability can never be suspended.

There is another reason why critical reflection and suspension of judgment are vital for any analysis of the WBC—perhaps especially for any analysis of the WBC. As performance scholar John Fletcher has argued, the WBC's members do not simply reject persuasion as a political goal; their rhetorical practices present a "stoppage to thought" in our critical, democratic processes. Fletcher explains:

> [Fred Waldron] Phelps provokes reaction, criticism, and distancing while deactivating critical reflection. The Westboro Baptist Church's protests are troublesome not because their side will "win"—the US isn't likely to adopt an "execute all fags" policy. It's rather that Phelps's stance is too easy to fight, that he makes one's democratic commitments a matter of facile performance: rev your motorcycle, don your angel wings, write an essay about how hateful he is, and pat yourself on the back for your democratic tolerance. It's easy to play the melodramatic hero—the dashing activist, the penetrating critic—when you have a melodramatic villain. (23)

Here, we may begin to see one possible effect of the WBC's rhetoric. Rather than activating critical literacies through their rhetorical practices, the WBC's extreme rhetoric actually winds up *de*-activating critical literacies, forcing their respondents and opponents to find other means for challenging them, such as blocking their protests or parodying their style. These methods are valuable responses in their own right, and I will analyze some of them later. For now, however, I think it is important for us to acknowledge that one possible means for challenging the WBC is by engaging in the kind of critical reflection that their rhetoric tries to subvert. If the WBC does reject traditional models of persuasion and identification in their discursive practices, then we as rhetoricians must reflect further on what else their rhetoric may reveal to us and how it may demand another kind of response.

The WBC in Rhetorical Studies

Despite the WBC's growing prominence in contemporary public affairs, as well as its members' frequent appearances at public venues across the country, relatively scant attention has been paid to the WBC and its activities within rhetorical studies. Although lawsuits brought against the WBC have prompted a number of published arguments from legal scholars, especially regarding the church's constitutional rights to free speech and freedom of assembly, rhetorical scholarship has been rather slow to respond to the WBC.[17] In recent years, rhetoricians such as Michael Cobb have offered extended analyses of the WBC's rhetorical practices, while others such as Heather Roy, Daniel C. Brouwer, and Aaron Hess have examined a range of responses to the WBC. However, even with the work these scholars have produced, analyses of the church's actual rhetorical practices are still surprisingly limited.

In his 2006 book *God Hates Fags: The Rhetorics of Religious Violence*, which explicitly references the WBC's most infamous meme in its title, Michael Cobb offers the WBC's protest rhetoric as an example of how religious rhetoric (even in its most extreme and violent forms) inflects much of American discourse. Although he does not spend many words on the WBC beyond the initial pages, Cobb's analysis of religious rhetoric illustrates how the language of "God Hates Fags" proliferated by the church does not represent an isolated sample but draws upon a much broader discourse about American

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[17] See, for example, Chelsea Brown's "Not Your Mother's Remedy: A Civil Action Response to the Westboro Baptist Church's Military Funeral Demonstrations," published in the *West Virginia Law Review* (2009), and Joseph Russomanno's "'Freedom for the Thought that We Hate': Why Westboro Had to Win," published in *Communication Law & Policy* (2012). Both of these articles address the legal qualifications and ramifications of the WBC's protests, though Brown's article also focuses on legal responses to the WBC.

society and the politics of inclusion. In other words, although we may dismiss the WBC as a bunch of religious extremists, their language nonetheless echoes a kind of rhetoric has been used since the days of the Puritans to establish American communities at both the local and national level. Advancing this point, Cobb argues that "[s]trong religious words about an uncomfortable topic such as queer sexuality not only unite sexually conservative people across economic classes, ethnicities, and races, but are part of a tradition of collective rhetorical expressions about what it means to be an 'American'" (6). He further suggests that the violence written into these religious rhetorics is not merely a contemporary expression of conservative values; rather, it is rooted in the ways that early Americans constituted community through discourse. "Religious language," he writes, "has always been part of the strongest, united descriptions of American communities, with roots that are puritanical, constitutional, and persist today, even as the country has become increasingly respectful, at least nominally, of religious diversity" (7).

Cobb highlights the jeremiad, in particular, as a genre that showcases how rhetorics of religious violence have served to constitute an ongoing sense of American identity and community.[18] Used prominently in the seventeenth century by the Puritans as a "fast-day sermon," the jeremiad "harped on the lapses in religious devotion and practice in a community that had originally been founded as a city upon the hill, as one nation under God" (7). Rhetorically speaking, the jeremiad (re)established authority by "naming the spiritual crises at the origin of national decay—and those origins could then be

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[18] The history of the jeremiad as a rhetorical genre did not begin with American public discourse. However, Cobb's analysis usefully highlights the importance of the jeremiad in the history of American public discourse.

expelled, at least rhetorically" (7). Of course, to expel something rhetorically is not the same as expelling something materially. Cobb acknowledges this with a counterpoint:

> But the act of repeating the expulsion…the act of condemning and lamenting the sins that have appeared in a community that was no longer as religious as it thought it once was, evoked a nostalgia that reconstituted the society as one with nobler origins. Such nostalgia was a comfort that could fuel and strengthen the religious ties of a majority rule that inevitably would become more secular as the colony became colonies, and eventually a nation. (8)

Given these features, it is relatively easy to see how the rhetoric of the jeremiad, with its moral overtones and nostalgic pathos, continues to inflect our national discourse, not only in the rhetoric of the WBC, but also in more mainstream rhetorics like those employed by the Religious Right and the Tea Party movement. Of course, it would be unfair to argue that mainstream conservative rhetoric is no different from the hate speech used by the WBC. However, as Cobb's title suggests, the extreme rhetoric of the WBC derives from the same rhetorical tradition that has marginalized queer sexuality for religious and nationalistic purposes throughout American history. Even if we dismiss the WBC's extremist tactics, we cannot so readily dismiss the religious language that connects their rhetoric to a broader cultural history.

Importantly, Cobb's analysis of anti-gay religious language in the U.S. provides rhetoricians with a framework for historicizing the rhetoric of the WBC rather than simply dismissing it as obnoxious or extremist. However, although Cobb titles his book after the WBC's most infamous meme, he does not spend much time elaborating on the church's specific rhetorical practices or the ways in which their practices compare to longstanding forms of rhetoric. Even if the WBC uses the structure of the jeremiad in many of their protests, the off-putting style of those protests is not likely to cultivate any

sense of community beyond the walls of the church. Furthermore, if the rhetoric of the jeremiad is designed to cultivate a constitutive pathos of nostalgia, then the WBC seems to reject that design in favor of provoking an alienating pathos of outrage. Granted, this move may be constitutive in other ways; for example, if the WBC represents an in-group of God's elect opposing the heretical out-group of everyone else, then the purpose of their jeremiad-like protests may be the reconstitution not of national bonds but of their own internal bonds. Nonetheless, if the jeremiad's rhetorical power is rooted in nostalgia and identification, then the WBC's alienation of audiences puts them at odds even with the rhetorical tradition they repeat.

Other rhetoricians have studied the WBC's rhetoric indirectly by examining the ways in which audiences respond to or counter their practices. For example, in 2007 Daniel C. Brouwer and Aaron Hess published an analysis of military blogs responding to the WBC. As Brouwer and Hess demonstrate, military bloggers (or "milbloggers") have struggled to make sense of the WBC's rhetoric, especially their protests at military funerals, and this struggle can be traced through milbloggers' attempts to reconstitute ideologies and identities that the WBC rhetorically disrupts. Importantly, Brouwer and Hess's analysis reveals how Fred Phelps and the WBC are framed differently by different audiences. In the case of milbloggers, for example, Phelps is framed primarily "as an antiwar or antimilitary provocateur" who test the extreme limits of free speech (71). Unfortunately, this framing tends to elide the WBC's anti-gay mission, and "doing so warrants underinterrogation of the role of sexualities in the constitution of the military, citizenship, and the nation" (71). Furthermore, as Brouwer and Hess write, problems with framing the WBC are not limited to milbloggers:

> More generally, scholars and citizens alike err significantly in dismissing the WBC as ''evangelical camp'' or the ''Phelps Family Freak Show,'' for the WBC successfully exposes key ideological tensions in contemporary U.S. politics. Expressed as antagonisms, these tensions involve freedom of speech and freedom of religious expression, enactments of citizenship, injustice in the justice system, and disciplined military bodies out of control. (71)

Brouwer and Hess's argument here resonates with John Fletcher's claim that the WBC tends to frustrate critical literacies, both for civilians and for academics. Although the Phelps family and their followers repeat a number of ideological tensions through their actions, their polarizing style and intense language make them easy to demonize and then dismiss with a great deal of outrage and a great deal less thought. Such gestures of dismissal are not likely to foster any sense of critical reflection or community among the WBC's opponents. In fact, as Brouwer and Hess point out, even if the WBC is framed as a common enemy by different groups, this does not necessarily generate solidarity among those groups. On the contrary, differing frames can ignore the ways in which various groups encounter the WBC, repeating and maintaining ideological divisions rather than complicating or resolving them.

Like Brouwer and Hess, Heather Roy approaches the WBC's rhetoric indirectly by analyzing reactions to the church's public displays. In her 2012 analysis of nonverbal rhetorical responses to the WBC, Roy focuses on the rhetoric of Angel Action and the Patriot Guard Riders, two counter-protest groups that use winged angel costumes and motorcycle-engine noise respectively to block the WBC at protest sites visually and audibly. She writes that because the WBC's demonstrators "employ unusual rhetorical strategies, knowing how to respond to such acts without adding to the church's media attention creates a rhetorical dilemma for counter-protestors, an exigency shaped by the

violent, visual, and religious rhetoric they seek to undermine" (247). With this in mind, Roy borrows Kevin DeLuca's term "image events" to describe how the WBC utilizes a disruptive form of visual rhetoric:

> The vulgar words and visual images combine to evoke intense emotion from observers, forestall reasoned discourse, and make deliberation impossible. Attempts to engage WBC protestors, moreover, risk giving them what they seem to want: a reaction, and preferably a violent reaction that will guarantee additional media coverage. (247).

The WBC's rhetoric, then, engineers a double-bind: it captivates audiences with intense words and imagery but closes off any space for critical intervention. Working within this double-bind, counter-protestors cannot rely on communicative exchanges to resist the WBC's rhetoric; instead, they must find ways to interrupt their rhetoric before it can captivate audiences. Roy dubs these tactics "*appropriation[s] of image events* because [Angel Action and the Patriot Guard Riders] are responding to the rhetorical problem by shifting the focus and attention away from the WBC and onto their groups with the use of nonviolent image events" (248).

Importantly, Brouwer, Hess, and Roy illustrate how responses to the WBC can inform our understanding of the church's rhetoric as well as expand our options for critical engagement. For example, by focusing on how military bloggers "make sense" out of the WBC's provocative rhetoric, Brouwer and Hess reveal how critical reflection and community-building are impeded by the church's hate speech. Similarly, by focusing on the work of counter-protestors, Roy highlights how opponents of the WBC have attempted to frustrate their nontraditional rhetorical aims. Interestingly enough, these indirect approaches to the WBC can be read as a kind of performative analysis insofar as they refocus attention away from the WBC, enacting a resistance to their attention-

grabbing rhetoric. However, by focusing on reactions rather than the rhetorical effects that generated those reactions, Brouwer, Hess, and Roy stop short of questioning what we as rhetoricians might learn directly from the WBC's rhetorical practices. This is not to say that their analyses are flawed; on the contrary, analyses like these help us to interpret the complex dynamics of the WBC's rhetoric. However, if we are to develop a fuller understanding of their rhetoric, we cannot simply approach the WBC from a counter-angle. We must analyze their practices directly.

If academic rhetoricians are not readily engaging with the WBC, this may be due in part to the impasses presented by the church's nontraditional rhetoric, which tends to reject sympathetic relations and alienate audiences. For several millennia, rhetoricians have stressed the importance of exercising persuasive potential thoughtfully and appropriately for the sake of managing audience expectations and promoting action. As David Fleming and Jonathan Hunt have argued, the study of rhetoric has long been linked to a moral-pedagogical tradition of propriety, quality, and good character, aspects that feature prominently in the classical rhetorical theories of Cicero, Quintilian, and several others. Echoing Cicero, Fleming describes this longstanding view of rhetoric as "the *study of speaking and writing well*, a historically prominent and remarkably consistent program of instruction involving both theory and practice and aimed at the moral and intellectual development of the student" (172; emphasis in original). In other words, rhetoricians have a long and storied interest in the cultivation and reproduction of responsible rhetors and responsibly used rhetorics. However, nontraditional rhetorics of offense challenge this program by shirking typical appeals to appropriateness, prompting us to acknowledge the normative rules only insofar as we see them violated. Offensive

rhetorics are therefore not easily reconciled with the rhetorical tradition's moral-pedagogical heritage, making it that much more difficult for rhetoricians to glean any value from such examples. In his study of profanity in the rhetorical tradition, Jonathan Hunt explains how this heritage may actually restrict the field:

> From classical Greece to first-year composition, our disciplinary purpose has been defined in normative and pedagogical terms—in other words, we study not "writing" but "writing *well*," and "well" is understood at least partly in a moral sense. This is not to suggest that we should abandon our pedagogical heritage, but rather to claim that it limits unnecessarily our field of study. (2)

In other words, for reasons linked to our field's long interest in civil and civic life, the rhetorical tradition tends to marginalize offensive rhetorics in favor of more deliberative and decorous models of persuasion. If this is true, then it is perhaps no wonder why the field has tended to avoid the hateful and offensive rhetoric of the WBC. This is not to say that the field has shied away from analyses of nontraditional or agitative rhetorics; even a cursory glance through the field's journals and archives proves otherwise. However, the WBC's rhetoric is not simply nontraditional or agitative. By rejecting persuasion in favor of provocation and embracing an ethos of open hatred, the WBC has essentially cast off any notion of "speaking or writing *well*," a philosophy of rhetoric that defies more accepted philosophies of rhetoric.

To be fair, even if the WBC's philosophy of rhetoric does not follow the same logic as the Aristotelian-Ciceronian tradition, this does not mean that their tactics are without comparison in rhetorical history. Indecorous and uncivil rhetorics are as old as the rhetorical tradition itself. However, under the auspices of the "good man speaking well," such tactics have tended to be ignored or rejected by rhetoricians since the early days of the tradition. For example, Kristen Kennedy, in her analysis of the rhetorical

tactics employed by Cynic philosophers during the classical era, suggests that, in contrast to the civil rhetoric endorsed by Aristotle and Cicero, Cynic rhetoric was actually characterized by confrontation and incivility. She writes:

> The Cynic rejects decorum by adopting incivility as a means of speaking out on issues of social and political importance to often unwilling audiences. Cynic rhetoric stages *kairotic* moments when dissensus, rather than consensus, becomes the goal of the speaker in imploring an audience to self-scrutiny and action. […] Therefore, to understand the Cynics' significance, we need to suspend our support for a rhetoric of reason and decorum and lend an ear to the rhetorical possibilities of noise. (26)

As Kennedy points out, "noisy" rhetorics like these have tended to be silenced under the feet of the "good man speaking well," and the rhetoric of the Cynics was no exception. "The implications of this counterstatement within the rhetorical tradition," she writes, "are evident in the simple fact that little is known-or left-of the Cynics, unless we look to the ways in which incivility and interruption are and have become an effective discursive means to an ethical or political end" (26). Kennedy's analysis resonates with Fleming's and Hunt's claims that the rhetorical tradition privileges not "rhetoric and writing" per se, but "*good* rhetoric and writing," where "good" is generally defined in terms of reason, decorum, and deliberation. Given this sensibility, it may seem that the only way to analyze the WBC's rhetoric using traditional models is by casting it as "*bad* rhetoric and writing," as examples of what *not* to do rhetorically, or as something that must be made sense of and then subverted.

However, even if we reject the WBC's rhetorical tactics, the fact remains that their use of available means such as public protest, parody videos, and sermons filled with invective and condemnation demonstrates a unique kind of rhetorical savvy, defying our traditional rhetorical sensibilities while simultaneously exposing something

fundamental about rhetoric—specifically, the role that vulnerability plays in rhetorical practices. In order to illustrate how the WBC exposes and manages vulnerability using rhetoric, I will attempt in the sections that follow a two-fold analysis. First, I will draw upon the study of hate speech to examine their rhetoric as a hate stratagem designed to frame the church as a marginalized "in-group," dehumanize the LGBTQ community, and rhetorically conquer both the living and the dead. I will then suggest that their non-persuasive rhetoric complicates such an analysis. Finally, I will examine their rhetoric in comparison to a still-developing genre—trolling.

Hate Speech and Hate Stratagems

Given the WBC's unapologetic appeals to hate, it is relatively easy to classify their rhetoric as hate speech. Furthermore, this classification provides a useful lens for analyzing the WBC's management of vulnerability through rhetoric. However, applying the term "hate speech" to any discourse is not as simple as it seems. As a genre of public discourse linked to the spread of enmity and hostility, hate speech has always been closely linked to the rhetorical management of vulnerability. As a term, however, "hate speech" has, over the last century, been applied to a still growing number of discourses, carrying with it an expanding range of connotations. As legal historian Samuel Walker explains, "Historically, hate speech has been referred to by several terms," including "race hate" during the 1920s and "group libel" during the 1940s (8). Other relevant terms include "assaultive speech" and "fighting words." The various terms applied to this genre at different times within the last century help to contextualize the diverse concerns that have been raised regarding the freedom and limits of offensive or injurious language in the United States. In addition, the evolution of these terms illustrates how hate speech as

a genre has expanded over the years to include ever more categories targetable for the exercise of harmful language, including race, ethnicity, sex, gender, religion, sexual orientation, mental health, and bodily capabilities.

But regardless of which terms are applied to the genre, hate speech and its many controversies are bound together by the idea that some forms of language are harmful, that they make others vulnerable and exploit that vulnerability. This idea is evident in the Supreme Court's now-famous 1919 ruling in the case of *Schenck v. United States*, in which then-justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote:

> Words which, ordinarily and in many places, would be within the freedom of speech protected by the First Amendment may become subject to prohibition when of such a nature and used in circumstances as *to create a clear and present danger* that they will bring about the substantive evils which Congress has a right to prevent. (Emphasis added)

Though Holmes's argument for the regulation of speech has been subject to a great deal of scrutiny and reconsideration over the years, its underwritten presumption that some language can be harmful continues to appear in American jurisprudence, such as in the 2011 case of *Snyder v. Phelps*.[19] Outside of the court system, language theorists have also spent considerable time and energy establishing a link between speech and harm. Consider, for example, Charles R. Lawrence III, Mari J. Matsuda, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw's definition of assaultive speech from their 1993 collection *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*: "This is a book about assaultive speech, about words that are used as weapons to ambush, terrorize, wound, humiliate, and degrade" (1). Although these scholars metaphorically treat assaultive words as weapons, their analyses suggest that this treatment is more than

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[19] For more on the case of *Snyder vs. Phelps*, see Chapter III, "Strategic Vulnerability: Decorum in Response to Trolling Rhetoric."

just a metaphor. Language, they argue, carries with it some definitive capacity for harm, which can provide grounds for regulation.

If language does carry a capacity for harm, then it should be possible to trace that harm back to a condition of vulnerability relevant to language studies. However, this tracing is not as simple as it seems, since the exact nature of harm through language is still widely contested in hate speech studies, as Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan point out in their introduction to *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*, published in 2012. Maitra and McGowan divide theories about the nature of harmful speech into two categories: (a) "causal" theories, which focus on how language can actively cause harm by "persuading" audiences, "conditioning" audiences, and encouraging audiences to imitate harmful behavior; and (b) "constitutive" theories, which focus on how language itself can constitute a harmful act through its utterance (6). On the topic of constitutive theories, Maitra and McGowan further suggest that "speech can harm not just directly, such as by causing fear and anxiety in its targets, but also somewhat indirectly, by affecting the positions of groups to which those targets belong within the social hierarchy" (7). In this way, language can not only inflict harm by exploiting a condition of vulnerability, but it can also enhance that vulnerability by putting certain others into more precarious positions.

Striking a similar note in his 2012 commentary on American speech regulations, legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron argues that the proliferation of hate speech actually harms the dignity and quality of life for individuals and groups. He writes:

> [T]hese [harms] include not just a heightened prospect of violence and discrimination, but also a jolting failure or undermining of the assurance that people need to rely on: the assurance that they can go about their daily

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> life and their ordinary business without fear of being denigrated and excluded as subhuman or second-class citizens. (160)

Waldron's argument here, like Maitra and McGowan's before, highlights in the study of hate speech what I have called vulnerability as a position. It also resonates with Judith Butler's claim that our frames of recognition (and their impact on social hierarchies) make some individuals more vulnerable than others to violence and oppression. Although all people share a condition of vulnerability to words and acts, some people—particularly those on the margins of society—are made more vulnerable insofar as their positions within the social order are actively marginalized through language (among other forces). Hate speech, as a genre that not only attacks targets but also makes targets more open to attacks, thus functions as a strategy for the rhetorical management of vulnerability, albeit one with frequently destructive consequences.

This link between hate speech and harm has not been ignored within rhetorical studies, where exposure to the threat of linguistic violence has troubled scholars for centuries. In fact, although some may prefer to isolate hate speech's injurious effects from other uses of language, hate speech seems to confirm not only rhetoric's link to vulnerability but also its capacity for (mis)managing and exploiting that vulnerability. For example, the idea that hate speech can persuade or condition audiences to embrace harmful beliefs and behaviors clearly connects with the rhetorical tradition's interest in the potential for persuasion. Similarly, the idea that hate speech can manage vulnerability by influencing social hierarchies and ideologies connects with contemporary rhetoric's investment in politics, community, and (dis)identification. Given these links, it is not surprising that rhetoric should be a valuable framework for interrogating and explaining the complex dynamics of hate speech.

However, framing hate speech as a *rhetorical* genre also proves problematic when one considers how it compares to less antagonistic genres of discourse. This is not to say that the field is at a loss for describing the language of hate. In fact, one of our most explicit descriptions of hatred comes out of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, where the philosopher attempts to distinguish hatred from anger:

> Now anger comes from things that affect a person directly, but enmity [hatred] also from what is not directed against himself; for if we suppose someone to be a certain kind of person, we hate him. And anger is always concerned with particulars…while hate is directed also at types…One who is angry might feel pity when much has befallen [the person he is angry at], but one who hates under no circumstances; for the former wants the one he is angry at to suffer in his turn, the latter wants [the detested class of persons] not to exist. (2.5.30-32)

Aristotle's description of hate appeals is still cited in rhetorical analyses of hate speech, especially his observation that hatred is targeted at groups. However, although Aristotle's *Rhetoric* sets a valuable precedent for understanding the language of hate, contemporary rhetoricians also point out that modern hate speech differs from more traditional rhetorics of decorum and deliberative reasoning.

Rita Kirk Whillock addresses this problem in her 1995 analysis of anti-LGBTQ rhetoric by distinguishing between rhetorical *strategies* and rhetorical *stratagems*. She writes that an "argumentative strategy might be viewed as a discourse involved with the clash of reasoning, supported by emotional appeals and designed to induce compliance" (32). A stratagem, on the other hand, is a more deceptive maneuver, "'an artifice or trick in war for deceiving and outwitting the enemy, a cleverly contrived trick or scheme for gaining an end'" (Gove, qtd. in Whillock 32). Whillock writes:

> Rather than seeking to win through adherence to superior reasoning, hate speech seeks to move an audience by creating a symbolic code for violence. Its goals are to inflame the emotions of followers, denigrate the

designated out-class, inflict permanent and irreparable harm to the opposition, and ultimately conquer. (32)

Whillock's definitions underscore an essential link between rhetoric and violence; in fact, she goes so far as to suggest that rhetorical strategies are a form of "symbolic warfare" (32). Furthermore, her distinction between strategies and stratagems echoes both ancient and recent arguments about the separation of "good" and "bad" rhetoric, or philosophy and sophistry, or rhetoric and "rhetrickery" (Booth 11). In these ways, Whillock situates hate speech within a nexus of intersecting concerns about rhetoric; at the same time, she also proposes that hate speech is not fully comparable to rhetorics based on reasoning, since hate speech favors negation over negotiation.

The hate stratagem, according to Whillock, operates partly by constructing and normalizing negative stereotypes. These (dis)identificatory gestures polarize discourses and communities, setting the stage for the marginalization of out-groups and the usage of hate speech. "Once perceptions like these take root," she writes, "struggles for dominance occur. Such struggles rarely result in a negotiated settlement" (34). On the contrary, these struggles often lead to the persecution of others by exploiting an "us-them" mentality. Echoing Aristotle, Whillock further suggests that the hate stratagem pursues annihilation, enhancing the vulnerability of out-groups by putting them in positions cut off from empathy and social value. Ironically, this enhancement of vulnerability often corresponds to appeals by the in-group to their own vulnerabilities. For example, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric today frequently cites the safety of children, the sanctity of marriage, and the Christian heritage of the United States as things that are put at risk by advances in gay rights. These appeals imply (or sometimes assert) that the vulnerability of institutions like

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traditional marriage and the traditional family trump the vulnerability of LGBTQ individuals, who are often described in threatening terms.

In addition to the creation of stereotypes, Whillock's hate stratagem is also characterized by four rhetorical moves. First, the rhetor attempts to establish a sense of commonality in the audience (or in-group) by "inflaming" their emotions (36). The sense of in-group vulnerability mentioned above is one such resource for this move, since it allows the rhetor to direct the in-group's anxieties against the out-group (37-8). Second, the rhetor must "denigrate the out-class" by framing the group as a source of evil, thereby "displacing responsibility for a person's problems and selecting a suitable scapegoat" for the exercise of the in-group's hostility (39, 41). This move enhances the vulnerability of the out-group by calling the audience to recognize them in stereotypical and often subhuman terms. Third, the rhetor exploits this vulnerability to inflict "permanent and irreparable harm" upon the out-group, such as by assassinating their characters and sabotaging their potential for response (42-3). "By utilizing hate speech, Whillock writes, "the rhetor attempts to subvert opposing arguments and to narrow the valid argumentative ground on which opponents might construct a claim" (46). Finally, the rhetor attempts to "conquer" the out-group by negating their social (and sometimes their physical) existence (44). The damage resulting from these four moves can be long-lasting, and the hatred that fuels them often becomes self-perpetuating. Furthermore, since hate appeals pursue negation and subvert attempts at rational argument, "restorative persuasion" becomes an almost impossible response to such appeals (46).

Whillock's hate stratagem continues to be adapted by scholars and analysts as a model for understanding the rhetorical tactics of hate speakers. One recent example of

this adaptation is Michael Waltman and John Haas's 2011 book *The Communication of Hate*. Through their framing of hate speech as a genre, as well as their analyses of nativist rhetoric and the spread of online hate, Waltman and Haas expand on Whillock's hate stratagem to argue that hate speech is characterized not only by the politicization of social difference and the demonization of out-groups, but also by attempts to capitalize on the outcast experiences of historically oppressed groups, such as racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities (34-6). Furthermore, they contend that hate speech frequently exploits "superficial message processing" (like stereotypes and fallacies) in order to elide crucial information or subvert critical faculties of audiences (42). Like Whillock, then, Waltman and Hass propose that hate speech rejects complex reasoning in favor of consolidating in-groups, alienating out-groups, and routing criticism.

By examining the harmful nature of hate speech as well as its generic features, we can begin to analyze how rhetors (mis)manage vulnerability through their usage of hateful rhetoric. As Whillock, Waltman, and Haas suggest, hate speech operates in part by constructing social and cognitive screens—Judith Butler might even call them "frames"—that actively incite audiences and demonize others (*Frames of War* xiii). This process typically involves (a) the provocation of audiences' negative emotions, such as fear and loathing; (b) the demonization of an identifiable, and often stereotyped, out-group; (c) the rejection of negotiation in favor of negation; and (d) the channeling of animosity toward the out-group. The final result of this process is that out-groups are frequently (a) harmed through dehumanization, discrimination, and even violence; and (b) put into precarious positions where their social value is effectively erased and their vulnerabilities are consequently intensified.

In these ways, hate speech, when effective, can simultaneously inflict harm upon its victims *and* render those victims more prone to the continued infliction of harm. In other words, it can exploit vulnerability (as a condition) and enhance vulnerability (as a position) at once. It is worth noting, however, that hate speakers do not simply exploit or enhance the vulnerabilities of the out-group. By positioning the out-group as a threat, hate speakers also exploit the real or perceived vulnerabilities of the in-group, grounding their hateful sentiments in a sense of unwelcomed exposure. Furthermore, by building stereotypes, politicizing differences, and subverting critical reasoning, hate speakers often attempt to make their audiences more receptive to hate appeals. Thus, hate speakers manage not only the vulnerabilities of out-groups targeted for negation, but also the vulnerabilities of the in-group targeted for persuasion—i.e., their openness to language. As a result, whether hate speech is successful or not from one situation to the next, its use nonetheless represents an attempt by hate speakers to manage vulnerability through a remarkably strategic use of language.

The Hate Stratagems of the WBC

Returning to the rhetoric of the WBC, it may seem relatively easy to analyze how the words and actions of the church's demonstrators might match the aforementioned criteria for identifying strategic uses of hate speech. Given their hate-filled messages and offensive public protests, the WBC's rhetorical activities are certainly *hateful*, and even the church's own members appear willing to acknowledge this point. However, although the WBC expresses hatred with neither ambiguity nor irony, this does not necessarily mean that their rhetoric fits easily into the framework that rhetoricians have presently designed for analyzing hate speech as a genre. To be clear, this is not to say that the

WBC's rhetoric is not hateful or harmful. But as scholars have suggested, the use of hate speech in the context of rhetoric involves more than just the verbal or visual expression of hate; it also involves affecting others.

The hate stratagem serves as a case in point here. As Whillock, Waltman, and Haas describe it, the hate stratagem operates by separating in-groups and out-groups so that the in-group is conditioned to dominate the out-group. This separation, however, is accomplished largely by *persuading* audiences to identify with the hate speaker through the provocation of negative emotions and the demonization of the out-group. Similarly, although Whillock distinguishes between strategies and stratagems by defining their means (reason vs. emotions) and their ends (deliberation vs. victory) differently, she still assumes that the use of rhetoric, hateful or otherwise, is primarily a persuasive endeavor. Of course, there is nothing controversial about framing hate speech as a rhetorical genre by focusing on its persuasiveness, given the field's longstanding interest in persuasive possibilities. However, treating hate speech primarily as a *persuasive* genre in rhetorical studies does raise an important question: what do we make of hateful rhetoric that does not pursue persuasion as its primary goal?

The rhetoric of the WBC thus appears to be a rather awkward case for rhetorical studies even in the context of hate speech. Although their words and actions certainly do carry the *potential* for persuasion, insofar as all rhetoric does, the WBC has made it clear that they are not interested in converting new followers to join their in-group of haters. Their practices bear out this mindset; instead of adjusting their messages into tailored "appeals" and calling audiences to identify with them, the WBC's demonstrators actively attack audiences and embrace an unsympathetic ethos. In a sense, rather than following

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the model of the hate stratagem by convincing an in-group to ostracize an out-group, they instead denigrate all of their audiences as out-groups, thereby ostracizing themselves from those whom they might otherwise persuade.

To be fair, even if the hate stratagem is not *entirely* applicable to the WBC's rhetoric, some of its generic features are certainly apparent. Although the WBC expresses no overt interest in enlarging their congregation, they nonetheless frame themselves as an in-group set against a daunting number of out-groups. The "us-them" mentality appears, for example, on their FAQ page in response to the question "Why do you picket soldiers' funerals?" The WBC offers the following reply:

> They [soldiers] were raised on a steady diet of fag propaganda in the home, on TV, in church, in school, in mass media—everywhere—the two-pronged lie: 1) It's okay to be gay; and, 2) Anyone saying otherwise, like the WBC, is a hatemonger who must be vilified, demonized, marginalized into silence. Therefore, with full knowledge of what they were doing, they voluntarily joined a fag-infested army to fight for a fag-run country now utterly and finally forsaken by God who Himself is fighting against that country. (*GodHatesFags.com*)

The WBC then goes on to mention a bombing of the church's property that occurred on August 20, 1995, an incident about which the church has archived considerable documentation on their website. The attack, according to the WBC, incited God's wrath against their enemies: "When America thus became WBC's terrorist, God became America's Terrorist" (*GodHatesFags.com*). The language employed in these sections illustrates a sense of in-group solidarity in at least three ways. First, it separates the church and its members from those whom they claim are "raised on a steady diet of fag propaganda." Church members, then, are presumably not exposed to this diet of indoctrination. Second, it frames members of the WBC as a persecuted out-group, separated not only from those who support the LGBTQ community but also from those

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who "vilify," "marginalize," and "silence" them. Third, it suggests that, although the WBC does not profess to know precisely who has been saved or damned, God has become "America's Terrorist" partly in retribution for the harm done to them during the bombing incident. This argument puts the WBC in a "protected" position within their cosmic hierarchy, in contrast to their status as social pariahs within mainstream culture. A similar expression of the WBC's in-group mentality appears in response to the question "Are you a sinner?" on their FAQ page. "Of course I'm a sinner," one member of the WBC responds, explaining further that the "difference between me and a defiant, practicing homosexual, is grace" (*GodHatesFags.com*). The mention of grace in this case corresponds to the WBC's theology of predestination, whereby those with grace (i.e., the in-group/WBC) are saved by God's mercy while those without grace (i.e., the out-group/soldiers/homosexuals/etc.) are damned by God's wrath. By essentializing this difference in theological terms, church members suggest that they themselves are among God's Elect, the ultimate in-group of Calvinism.

In addition to establishing in-group solidarity, the WBC also enacts the hate stratagem by demonizing (sometimes literally) those whom they perceive to be out-groups working against them. In the previously quoted sections, for example, the description of the United States as a "fag-run country" forsaken by God expresses both anti-gay and anti-American sentiments, which are made all the more apparent whenever the WBC protests at the funerals of soldiers and LGBTQ activists. Furthermore, as the links on their homepage indicate, the targets of the WBC's ire are not limited to gays and their American allies; Muslims (*GodHatesIslam.com*), Jews (*JewsKilledJesus.com*), Catholics (*PriestsRapeBoys.com*), President Barack Obama (*BeastObama.com*), the

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media (*GodHatesTheMedia.com*), and even the world (*GodHatesTheWorld.com*) are also presented as targets for ostracism by the WBC.

However, the out-groups most clearly and frequently targeted by the WBC are the LGBTQ community and its allies. One of the most obvious examples of this targeting is the church's frequent use of the word "fag," both at their homepage (*GodHatesFags.com*) and at their regular protests. According to the WBC's own members, their use of the slur is not arbitrary, but intended to identify those who fuel God's ire:

> We use the word "fag" as a contraction of the word "faggot" or "fagot." The word "faggot" means "a bundle of sticks or twigs, especially when bound together and used as fuel." A "fag" is a firebrand. A "fag" is used for kindling - it fuels fire. "Fag" is a metaphor used in the Bible, for example, in Amos 4:11 (where it is translated "firebrand" in the KJV). Just as a "fag" fuels the fires of nature, so does a sodomite fuel the fires of hell and God's wrath. We do not use the word "fag" in order to engage in childish name-calling. Rather, we use it because it is a metaphor chosen by the Holy Ghost to describe a group of people who BURN in their lust one toward another, and who FUEL God's wrath. (*GodHatesFags.com*)

Despite their attempts to justify the slur in their rhetoric, the WBC's constant use of "fag" nonetheless alienates LGBTQ people and their allies (whom the church labels "fag-enablers"). This language, in turn, creates and perpetuates an "us-them" mentality, which advances the operation of the hate stratagem by dehumanizing the out-group, literally framing the LGBTQ community as little more than kindling.

Finally, the WBC's rhetoric mirrors the hate stratagem by seeking to harm and conquer the enemies they vilify, both overtly and subtly. One of the most obvious examples of this attempt at rhetorical conquest appears prominently on their homepage, a video (or "sign movie," as they call it) titled "Death Penalty for Fags." As the title implies, the video attempts to argue that, in accordance with Biblical law, homosexuals and their allies are due to be killed "under the authority of a government." In the process

of making this argument, the video also recaps a mailing campaign from 2002 in which the WBC sent postcards to media outlets, members of Congress, and even the President of the United States claiming that God would annihilate any nation that did not impose capital punishment upon homosexuals. Although the WBC contends that this penalty comes directly from God and not from their own personal hostilities or grudges, their prominent endorsement of such a penalty represents a desire on their part to both socially and physically erase the existence of homosexuals within the world, the most permanent form of harm and conquest possible.

A more subtle attempt at rhetorical conquest is the WBC's controversial practice of protesting at funerals, a practice that negates the social existence not only of the living, but also of the dead. When church members' used funerals as platforms for their messages, they attract a great deal of attention by capitalizing on the grief experienced by mourners; but at the same time, they also effectively erase the social value of the deceased by rejecting their grievability. Judith Butler explains this connection between grief and the value of life when she writes:

> Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters. […] Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. Instead, "there is a life that will never have been lived," sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost. The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life. (*Precarious Life* 14-5)

In other words, the grief that we attach to a lost life is not only an expression of pain and vulnerability, but also a confirmation of the social significance possessed by the life lost. In this way, grievability functions as a condition for perceiving a life as valuable. But when that grievability is rejected by the WBC's funeral protests, the value of the life that

would be grieved is attacked, if not annihilated. The deceased, then, become another kind of out-group for the WBC, stripped of both their physical and social existence. As strange as it may seem, the WBC thus attempts to conquer not only the living but also the dead through their rhetorical practices.

In these ways (establishing an in-group, demonizing out-groups, and attempting to conquer both the living and the dead), the WBC's activities do seem to fit quite clearly into the model of the hate stratagem. Where the comparison ends is, ironically enough, at the stratagem's beginning. According to Whillock, Waltman, and Haas, the hate speaker who uses the stratagem must begin by "inflaming the emotions" of the in-group; these emotions are then used to promote identification among the in-group's members while simultaneously framing the out-group as a source of evil. Certainly, the WBC's rhetoric serves as a prime example of how hate speakers can provoke intense emotional reactions from audiences. However, whereas the rhetoric of the hate stratagem is designed to make audiences more *receptive* to hate appeals, the rhetoric of the WBC is designed to *attack* audiences through hate appeals. Furthermore, whereas the hate strategist inflames the audience's emotions against an out-group, the WBC inflames their audiences' emotions against themselves, subverting their own potential for persuading others of their claims. These differences *do not* mean that the WBC's rhetoric has absolutely no potential for persuasion; it is entirely possible for their messages to find some sympathy in contexts where the LGBTQ community is already marginalized. However, they *do* mean that persuasion becomes a far less likely effect.

Nowadays, it is extremely unlikely that the United States will ever enact the "death penalty for fags" endorsed by the WBC. Furthermore, with public opinion swiftly

shifting in favor of gay rights, the WBC's harsh anti-gay extremism is unlikely to garner much sympathy from American audiences. With that in mind, it may seem easy enough for rhetoricians to simply dismiss the WBC as a bunch of extremists who continue to use bad rhetoric badly. However, I argue that dismissing the WBC would be a mistake for rhetoricians, not only because it would ignore the ways in which the church continues to insert itself into public consciousness, but also because it would ignore how the WBC's activities can inform our understanding of rhetoric's fundamental link to vulnerability and its management. When the WBC protests, they may defy our traditional rhetorical sensibilities, including our perceptions of hate speech, but they are still attempting to manage vulnerabilities to and through language. And even if their rhetoric does not help to put LGBTQ individuals into more dangerous social positions, it still demonstrates a remarkable attunement to another kind of vulnerability—the exposure of audiences to the many effects of language. After all, persuasion is not the only effect of language. That being said, it might behoove us at this point to compare the WBC's rhetoric to a different kind of discourse, one that has been managing vulnerability and defying traditional rhetorical sensibilities for several years now.

<div align="center">Trolling Rhetoric</div>

Anyone who has ever read the comments section on a blog or YouTube video has probably crossed paths with a troll at one point or another. The term "troll" is perhaps most commonly understood as a reference to mythical goblin-like creatures, such as the fairy tale trolls who live under bridges and menace goats. However, in modern American and digital parlance, the term also refers to two very different but comparable activities: (1) the practice of fishing by dragging a baited lure behind a boat and waiting for a bite,

and (2) the practice of posting distracting or inflammatory comments to an online community, such as a forum or blog, in order to provoke a response (Herring et al. 372).[20] The origins of this activity can be traced back to Usenet forums, where trolling played out as what Judith Donath calls "a game about identity deception" (43). Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab describe this game as such:

> The troller tries to write something deceptive, but not blatantly so, in order to attract the maximum number of responses. […] In the context of Usenet…a highly successful troll is one that is cross-posted to, and responded to on, many different newsgroups, thereby disrupting multiple groups with minimum expenditure of effort. (372-3)

Herring and her coauthors offer three valuable criteria for identifying trolling messages in online forums: (1) "Messages from a sender who appears outwardly sincere"; (2) "[m]essages designed to attract predictable responses or flames"; and (3) "[m]essages that waste a group's time by provoking futile argument" (375). These messages are thus crafted as a kind of discursive bait, dropped strategically into the sea of information. Originally, the trolling game functioned in much the same way as an inside joke, distinguishing those who are "in-the-know" from those who are inexperienced or excluded (Schwartz). As one web guide to trolling puts it, "If you don't fall for the joke, you get to be in on it" (Spumante). For trolls, the rhetorical aim is to lure vulnerable media-users into exposing their naiveté or sensitivity, thereby disrupting the flow of

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[20] I should note here that some differentiate between "trolling" (the act of posting distracting comments to bait naïve readers) and "flaming" (the act of posting inflammatory comments to generate outrage). However, as Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab point out, "In practice…trolling and flaming often merge, in that in both cases there is intent to disrupt the ongoing conversation, and both can lead to extended aggravated argument" (372). For this chapter, I use the term "trolling rhetoric" to refer to both distracting and inflammatory language designed to disrupt critical literacies and garner attention.

communication, subverting trust among networked interlocutors, and sometimes going so far as to induce outrage or actual harm.

Since the days of Usenet, however, trolling has evolved from an online game of deception and provocation into a political-rhetorical style of public discourse. Consider, for example, a recent case of public trolling with political consequences. On February 3, 2013, the same day that Super Bowl XLVII drew national media attention (along with millions of viewers) from across the United States, Todd Kincannon, former executive director of the Republican Party of South Carolina, posted the following comment to his personal Twitter account (@ToddKincannon): "This Super Bowl sucks more dick than adult Trayvon Martin would have for drug money." This inflammatory comment, with its explicitly racist and homophobic overtones, was not a hoax, as Kincannon himself admitted after the tweet went viral. More disturbingly, it was not an isolated incident, but one of a series of tweets that Kincannon posted during and after the Super Bowl. Many of these tweets expressed similar sentiments. For example, in response to another Twitter user (@coreybking), Kincannon replied: "Hey what's the difference between Trayvon Martin and a dead baby? They're both dead, but Pepsi doesn't taste like Trayvon." Not all of Kincannon's offending tweets included references to Trayvon Martin, but several were racially charged. For example, in response to the power failure that blacked out half of the New Orleans Superdome shortly after the beginning of the game's second half, Kincannon tweeted: "It hasn't been this dark in the Superdome since all those poors occupied it after Hurricane Katrina."

As one might expect, public outrage and condemnation quickly followed on the heels of Kincannon's tweets, with numerous responses posted and circulated on social

media networks. Given the controversial nature of the incident, responses ranged from whole-hearted support (Todd: "that's why I like you Todd, balls of pure steel") to shock (Caplan: "Did you really go after a murdered teenager? Why go there? Do you have kids, if so, then why would you hurt parents this way?") to criticism (XXX: "Right to free speech isn't a right to speak without criticism or being called out for racism") to retaliatory insult (Dawn: "Really? You're going to go after a 17yr old murder victim – have fun on that fast train to hell you destined for!"). Some even questioned the authenticity of Kincannon's account, with one respondent (XXX) replying, "I'm really hoping this is a troll account."

The day after the incident, news outlets picked up the story, and Kincannon was invited to respond to the backlash via phone on *HuffPost Live*. When asked to explain why he would post something so insensitive knowing that it would spark public outrage and political controversy, Kincannon replied:

> One of the things I like to do on Twitter is, I'll tweet something that's inflammatory or borderline crazy sounding, just for fun. And I enjoy watching people go nuts. And one of the best things about it is that if you say something that's borderline offensive, or that is offensive, the people that attack you and say just the awfulest [sic] things about you, they do the very thing that they accuse you of. […] I guess you could call it kind of high-profile trolling, but it definitely worked. ("Todd Kincannon")

Alyona Minkovski, Kincannon's interviewer on *HuffPost Live*, agreed that his actions qualified as a kind of trolling, and she wondered why he would invoke the case of Trayvon Martin, who was shot dead in 2012 by George Zimmerman under controversial circumstances, in such a way that would be explicitly offensive. Kincannon's self-defense hinged on two arguments: (1) that the Trayvon Martin case was unnecessarily politicized, and (2) that free speech in the U.S. should not be censored or punished just

because of public outrage ("Todd Kincannon"). By describing his actions as a "kind of high-profile trolling" and attaching his offensive tweets to a *kairotic* political agenda, Kincannon suggests that the uses of trolling now extend beyond games of online deception and provocation. In contrast to what we normally perceive as the basic goals of political rhetoric (consensus and/or social action), Kincannon used his words to "get a rise" out of his audience and garner as much attention as he could. If this was indeed his rhetorical aim, then it seems rather obvious that he succeeded, at least within the increasingly small window of time afforded him by the nonstop news cycles.

Kincannon's Twitter-baiting is not the only recent example of trolling's expansion into the political sphere. Shortly after the Sandy Hook shooting of 2013, when twenty first-graders and six adults were shot dead on school grounds by a mentally unstable intruder, Wayne LaPierre, the director of the National Rifle Association (NRA), responded to demands for increased gun control by arguing that the only solution to gun violence is *more* guns, not fewer. His comments were quickly followed by videos from the NRA suggesting that Obama's two daughters had no greater right to armed security than any other child in America. Backlash against LaPierre and the NRA included criticism from liberal pundit Rachel Maddow, who described the NRA's tactics as a form of trolling. She further elaborated on her show:

> Trolling is a key part of the conservative-entertainment/media business model. These guys say stuff all the time that they do not intend to be persuasive. They're not trying to explain something, or bring people along to their way of thinking; they're just doing something to attract attention, and hopefully condemnation and outrage from the mainstream, and particularly from liberals. They want to offend you. They seek to offend you. That is the point. (Grossman)

Of course, Maddow's argument that trolling features prominently in conservative rhetoric ignores the fact that trolling is not attached to any single ideology or affiliation. I doubt one would have to look far for instances of trolling by liberals; in fact, Maddow's own commentaries may include several such examples. Even so, Maddow's comments, like Kincannon's Twitter-baiting, showcase how trolling has become woven into the fabric of our public discourse. For better or worse, trolling is now more than just an online game coordinated by digitally (and rhetorically) savvy media-users; it is also a rhetorical style of its own in American politics and public life.

Still, it may seem strange to suggest that modern-day trollers are rhetorically savvy, especially since their goals are so contrary to what rhetors and rhetoricians tend to pursue (like meaning-making). To be sure, the rhetorical sensibilities that academically and professionally trained rhetors typically hone to construct meaning and prompt decision-making are not similarly valued by trollers. However, even if trollers pursue different goals, they nonetheless demonstrate a remarkably precise sense of *kairos* and a sharp (or even piercing) awareness of their audiences' vulnerabilities. Consider, for example, how one web guide to trolling explains the "design issues" that a troller must take into account to achieve optimal effectiveness.

> The experienced troller spends time carefully choosing the right subject and delivering it to the right newsgroup. With trolls, delivery is just as important as the subject. Start the troll in a reasonable and erudite manner. You have to engage your readers' interest and draw them in. Never give too much away at the start - although a brief abstract with hints of what's to come can work wonders. Construct your troll in a manner to make it readable. Use short paragraphs and lots of white space. Keep line length below eighty characters. Use a liberal amount of emphasis and even the occasional illustration. A good rule of thumb is that as your troll becomes more and more ludicrous put extra effort into the presentation – this keeps the mug punter confused. Let confusion and chaos be your goal. (Spumante)

Several parallels with the rhetorical tradition are already evident in these guidelines. The anonymous author's emphasis on "choosing the right subject" and "delivering it to the right newsgroup" bridges two of the five classical canons of rhetoric: invention and delivery. Although the author is focusing here on online trolling, these bridges (and the trolls living beneath them) are noticeable in political trolling as well; if "delivery is just as important as the subject," it is little wonder why the combination of Trayvon Martin, social media, and the Super Bowl would have proven so opportune for Todd Kincannon. Similarly, the anonymous author's insistence that the troller must choose the right subject ("right" being a relative term) echoes Aristotle's system for selecting effective *topoi* to suit the rhetorical situation. Finally, mentions of "manner" (from "reasonable," "erudite," and "readable" to increasingly "ludicrous") link trolling to the canons of arrangement and style, with the principle of decorum largely subverted.[21] These parallels suggest that, as difficult as it may be for rhetoricians to admit, modern-day trolling is built upon the same principles as the rhetorical tradition itself.

Where the parallels end is, oddly enough, at the end. Whereas traditional rhetoric is oriented toward conviction and action, trolling is oriented toward attention and re-action. Furthermore, whereas traditional rhetoric stresses the importance of decorum and sympathy in the design of any rhetorical act, trolling rejects such concerns in favor of simply securing a response. In a strange yet telling way, trolling represents the darker side of Aristotle's definition of rhetoric; it uses whatever rhetorical means are available without limiting its tactics in the interest of propriety. While considering the *telos* of

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[21] For more on decorum in the context of trolling rhetoric, see Chapter III, "Strategic Vulnerability: Decorum in Response to Trolling Rhetoric."

trolling, it may be helpful at this point to distinguish between *deceptive* modes of trolling and *offensive* modes of trolling (or flaming).[22] As stated in the above guide, deceptive trolling generates "confusion and chaos" by tricking media-users into becoming entertainment for seemingly sincere trollers. Offensive trolling, on the other hand, generates chaos by openly attacking audiences, thereby provoking negative emotions like anger and terror. Borrowing the language of traditional rhetorical theory, we might describe the difference in this way: deceptive trolling is an *ethos*-driven rhetoric that tries to generate and then subvert the troller's sincerity, while offensive trolling is a *pathos*-driven rhetoric that tries to incite audiences through aggressive and sometimes violent language. This distinction does not mean that deceptive trolling and offensive trolling are mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they often overlap. It simply means that they work at different registers to achieve their goals.

Where deceptive and offensive trolling converge is in their subversion or outright rejection of *logos*, a move that also marks a point of divergence from the rhetorical tradition. In contrast to Aristotle, whose oft-cited notes on rhetoric stress the importance of treating *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in balanced measure appropriate to the occasion, trollers express no interest in actually advancing deliberation through balanced appeals. If anything, trollers design their rhetorical appeals to create imbalances, interfering with the critical literacies that make *logos*-driven rhetoric possible. In doing so, they achieve their goals of gaining attention and disrupting communicative exchanges within discourse communities. Thus, although trollers exercise many of the same principles that form the

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[22] Given the homophobic connotations of "flaming," and the fact that deception and offense frequently merge in cases of trolling, I prefer to use "trolling" as a generic term for both deceptive and offensive modes.

core of the rhetorical tradition rehearsed by academics, they apply those principles to ends that would likely have Aristotle and Cicero turning over in their graves. If I may once again borrow the language of traditional rhetorical theory, trolling (both online and in public) could therefore be defined as "an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of [provocation]" (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1).

I would like to point out here that my definition of trolling makes no mention of the troller's intentions or any common goal. Although trolling may have originally developed as a game of online deception for the amusement of an in-group of trollers, the reality today is that there are as many reasons for trolling as there are active trollers. For example, in 2008, a group of trollers hacked the website of the Epilepsy Foundation, filling the forums with images and links that could potentially induce seizures. The attack generated ethical debate even within the trolling community, with one troller, Jason Fortuny, arguing that it was justified; in a profile for the *New York Times*, he stated, "'Hacks like this tell you to watch out by hitting you with a baseball bat. […] Demonstrating these kinds of exploits is usually the only way to get them fixed" (Schwartz). Reflecting on his own motives for trolling, Fortuny explained in heroic terms that he hopes to "'find people who do stupid things and then turn them around'" (Schwartz). "'It's not that I do this because I hate them," he explained further; "I do this because I'm trying to save them" (Schwartz). Fortuny's explanation, as well as the debate surrounding the attack, highlights the difficulty in linking trolling to any common cause. (Was it for amusement? Was it meant to expose dangers and vulnerabilities?) No matter how it all started, trolling has now become a complex and dynamic discourse with an increasing number of accessible venues, and there is no central organizing principle

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behind it. Tracing any act of trolling back to a common goal (especially in an age where so much can be written behind a screen of anonymity) may be just as futile as attempting to win an argument with a troll. Therefore, to describe a rhetorical action as an example of trolling is not to suggest that the action is linked to any presumed motive or agenda shared among all trollers. While some trollers may certainly be looking for laughs online, others may be attempting to spread their message, exploit an opening in a system, or inflict harm without any sense of irony.

Therefore, in order to frame trolling as a rhetorical genre without attaching a characteristic *motive* to it, it may be helpful for us to focus instead on the characteristic *effects* of trolling. Whether deceptive or offensive, trolling generally pursues three goals as markers of success: (a) to secure the uptake of the trolling message, (b) to disrupt the flow of information and communication, and (c) to claim as much attention as possible for as long as possible. Securing the uptake can be done either by generating a temporary façade of sincerity or by provoking audiences into reacting intensely and emotionally. Either tactic, when successful, leads to the subversion of *logos* and the de-activation of critical literacies, which disrupts communication and makes "restorative persuasion," as Whillock phrases it, a futile gesture for response (46). Finally, if the troller is persistent or savvy enough, the effort can perpetuate itself by exploiting economies of attention like public media (Lanham, *The Economics*). When all of these goals are met, a troller can thereby produce a scenario in which audiences are compelled to respond indefinitely yet rendered incapable of finding a resolution.

Ultimately, then, what distinguishes trolling from other rhetorical genres is that it is not (or not primarily) a *meaning-making* activity. Instead of drawing audiences into a

shared system of signification, identification, and negotiation, trolling attempts to simply provoke responses and claim attention for as long as conceivably possible. The quality of the response is less important (if at all) to the success of a trolling message than the gesture of response itself. To be fair, some trollers may attempt to connect their trolling to meaningful issues, such as Kincannon's invocation of the Trayvon Martin case, or hackers' attempts to expose vulnerabilities in online systems. These connections can even help a trolling message to sustain attention. However, even when trolling messages do include meaningful "content," their disruption of communication makes the sharing of this content secondary to the message's other effects.

These features of trolling raise important questions for rhetorical studies. If it does not advance communication, deliberation, or identification, then what sense can we make of trolling as a *rhetorical* genre? Or, to put it another way, how can trolling even function rhetorically without making meaning? To be sure, the rhetorical tradition has long been connected to the production and interpretation of meaning, often through its pursuit of social action or consensus. However, even if rhetoric does involve meaning-making (or *signifying*) activities, this does not necessarily mean that rhetoric is limited to the act of making meaning. On the contrary, as John Muckelbauer has argued, "rhetoric might very well indicate a dimension of language that is irreducible to the entire apparatus of signification" ("Rhetoric, Asignification" 239). For Muckelbauer, what sets the study of rhetoric apart from other studies of language is not so much questions of meaning, but questions of force and effects (239). Rhetoric, in other words, is less about reproducing or transmitting a signified content and more about making a message forceful in a way that would generate a desired outcome, such as persuasion. Muckelbauer explains this point

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by separating the "communicative" (or "signifying") operation of language from what he calls its "persuasive" (or "asignifying") operation:

> An act of communication…endeavors to reproduce, as accurately as possible, the proposition in the mind of its audience. Hence, communication responds to the preexisting proposition as if that proposition were primarily a meaning, as if it were, above all, an identifiable content that can be reproduced. […] An act of persuasion, on the other hand, is not primarily a signifying operation…Rather than attempting to identically reproduce the proposition as a meaning in the mind of its audience, persuasive rhetoric attempts to make the proposition compelling, to give it a certain force. (*The Future* 17)

Persuasion as an asignifying operation is thus "interested in provoking the proposition's effects rather than facilitating its understanding" (18). Or, to put it another way, persuasion focuses on "*what the proposition does*" rather than "*what the proposition is*" (18; emphasis in original). Muckelbauer is careful to point out that communication and persuasion are not completely separate from one another in their operations; in fact, they often coincide in the pursuit of a particular rhetorical goal. "But the fact that these two dimensions exist in close proximity," he writes, "does not indicate that they are the same" ("Rhetoric, Asignification" 239).

Thus, if we are to understand trolling as a rhetorical genre, it may require us to acknowledge that, despite rhetoric's "proximity" to meaning-making activities, its first and foremost concern is with the exertion of forces and the production of effects (239). It may also require us to acknowledge that, insofar as rhetoric deals with forces and effects, it must also deal with our vulnerability to those forces and effects. As Nathan Stormer observes in his study of language and violence, "The capacity to impose derives from the capacity to be affected" (188). So, even if trollers do not facilitate understanding, they

nonetheless reveal, through their disruptions, how rhetoric is premised upon both the awareness and the management of vulnerability.

One last critical feature of trolling as a rhetorical genre is worth mentioning here—audience awareness. As a system for exposing and managing vulnerability to and through language, rhetoric depends upon an acute knowledge of one's audience to achieve any desired effect. This is especially true in the context of trolling, since trollers typically have two audiences: those who recognize the trolling effort and those who do not. One guide to online trolling describes the difference:

> It is trollers that you are trying to entertain so be creative – trollers don't just want a laugh from you they [*sic*] want to see good trolls so that they can also learn how to improve their own in the never ending search for the perfect troll. The other audience is of course the little people in those newsgroups that you are attacking. Get to know them. Every newsgroup has its smartarse who will expose your troll if given half the chance. (Spumante)

Although the above passage specifically focuses on online deceptive trolling, it still offers insight into the rhetorical sensibilities of the genre. On the one hand, if a trolling effort is going to be successful, it must be attuned to the context out of which it is trying to provoke a response, and this requires an awareness of audience that would be familiar to rhetorical studies. On the other hand, if a trolling effort *is* successful, it effectively divides the audience into an in-group (of those who recognize the effort) and an out-group (of those who do not). This separation of audiences can also be applied to cases of offensive trolling; if successful, an offensive trolling effort divides the audience into an out-group (of those who are offended) and an in-group (of those who recognize the effort and therefore respond differently).

This split sensibility in the art of trolling can easily be read as a kind of rhetorical training. After all, as the trolling guide's anonymous author writes, "trollers don't just want a laugh from you they [*sic*] want to see good trolls so that they can also learn how to improve their own in the never ending search for the perfect troll" (Spumante). However, this obvious form of rhetorical training also coincides with a more subtle (and rather ironic) kind of rhetorical training for trolling's audiences. Unlike hate speech—which separates in-groups and out-groups based on signified differences, such as race, gender, sexuality, nationality, and so on—trolling separates in-groups and out-groups based on how audiences read and react to the effort. Therefore, those who learn how to identify a trolling message can join the in-group and respond differently. "If you don't fall for the joke," writes the trolling-guide's author, "you get to be in on it" (Spumante). Trolling can thus function as an aggressive yet effective form of rhetorical training whereby audiences learn how to manage their own vulnerabilities to language and its effects. Or, as troller Jason Fortuny puts it, "'it's like a pitcher telling a batter to put on his helmet by beaning him from the mound'" (Schwartz).

In summary, trolling (deceptive and offensive, online and in public) is an *ethos*- and *pathos*-driven rhetorical genre that operates by (a) securing the uptake of a message through any available means, (b) disrupting communication through the subversion of *logos*, and (c) perpetuating and aggravating responses to sustain attention. In doing so, trolling exposes and exploits vulnerabilities to language while simultaneously compelling audiences to recognize and manage their own vulnerabilities. Importantly, these effects do not have to be attached to a particular motive or agenda in order for a rhetorical act to qualify as trolling, since trolling today has no central organizing principle or goal. Thus,

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even a rhetorical action designed to do real harm can qualify as trolling if it focuses on perpetuating responses rather than making meaning.

The Trolling Rhetoric of the WBC

Trolling may therefore provide a valuable perspective for reading and interpreting the rhetoric of the WBC. If we attempt to analyze the church's language mainly as a *signifying operation*—that is, as a mode of language that makes meaning in concert with audiences—we will continue to have difficulty reconciling the church's non-persuasive approach with more traditional models of rhetoric. If, however, we can analyze their language mainly as an *asignifying operation*—that is, as a mode of language designed to secure uptake, exert force, and provoke effects—we can begin to see how their work is tuned to a unique rhetorical register that exposes and manages audiences' vulnerabilities in order to perpetuate the spread of their message. With that in mind, I argue that the success of the WBC's rhetoric derives not from the persuasiveness of their hate speech, but from the provocativeness of their trolling.

Offense serves as one of the WBC's primary methods for securing the uptake of their messages across various contexts. When church members picket military funerals, verbally attack audiences, and publish or display content with lines such as "God Hates Fags" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers," they give their messages a distinctive and provocative rhetorical force, which thereby produces intense reactions from audiences. To be sure, these reactions are not generally sympathetic, and the chances that they would result in mass persuasion are notably slim (at least within the United States). But even if church members fail to persuade anyone of their claims, they nonetheless achieve a certain measure of success simply by captivating audiences and compelling responses.

Church members further secure public attention for their activities by publishing regular press releases to their homepage, in which they announce their plans and protests. By doing so, they attempt to attract additional media coverage for their messages. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, writing in response to the WBC's arguments defending their protests as free speech, suggests that this method allows the church to offset their small size by claiming a disproportionate amount of publicity:

> This strategy works because it is expected that respondents' verbal assaults will wound the family and friends of the deceased and because the media is irresistibly drawn to the sight of persons who are visibly in grief. The more outrageous the funeral protest, the more publicity the Westboro Baptist Church is able to obtain. (*Snyder v. Phelps*)

As an example, Justice Alito cites one recent instance in which the WBC announced plans to picket the funeral of a young girl killed during Jared Lee Loughner's shooting spree at a Tucson supermarket in 2011. Outrage made the announcement headline news for a brief period, and in return for canceling the protest, the WBC was given airtime to spread their message (*Snyder v. Phelps*; Santa Cruz and Mehta). Though the WBC's plans quickly cycled out of focus, the announcement nonetheless resulted in national exposure and an additional platform for church members' trolling.[23] Thus, rather than making the WBC more dismissible, the offensiveness of their press and protests actually made them more noticeable, at least for a while.

In addition to securing uptakes and provoking responses, offense also functions as one of the means by which the WBC exercises a kind of social power in disproportion to their small size. When an offense is "taken"—i.e., when something does actually offend

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[23] This was not the first time the WBC received airtime in return for canceling a protest. In 2006, the church was granted fifty-five minutes on a national radio program to spread their message in return for not protesting at the funerals of five Amish girls who had been shot dead in their schoolhouse (Steinberg).

someone—that offense exposes the vulnerability of the offended party, shattering their illusions of personal sovereignty and security. Author J. M. Coetzee, in one of his essays on censorship, argues that this uptake of offense thus represents a rearrangement of power relations: "Taking offense is not confined to those in positions of subordination or weakness. Nevertheless, the experience or premonition of being robbed of power seems to me intrinsic to all instances of taking offense" (3). Coetzee goes on to suggest that when those in positions of weakness compel those in positions of strength to "take offense," they put the strong "at least momentarily on the same footing as the weak" (3). So when a small congregation like the WBC compels leaders, communities, and even nations to take offense in response to their rhetoric, they loudly yet subtly compromise the secure positions of those in power.

After the WBC secures the uptake of its trolling, audiences are then divided (tentatively) into an "out-group" and an "in-group" based on the nature of their responses. Those in the out-group respond intensely and emotionally by expressing their grief, outrage, and injury; those in the in-group respond by criticizing the WBC's overbearing tactics and dismissing them for their extremism. Despite these differences, however, both audiences end up participating in the WBC's subversion of *logos*. In the case of the out-group, *logos* is subverted by the intensity of the negative *pathos* provoked, which interferes with critical reflection and communication. In the case of the in-group, *logos* is subverted by the critique of the WBC's *ethos*, their extremism and opportunism, which makes them easy to isolate and ignore as a cultural anomaly. In both cases, the audience's critical literacies are effectively shut down by the church's trolling rhetoric, and any

attempts at responding with superior reasoning or restorative persuasion are rendered, figuratively and literally, meaningless.

As long as these responses continue to proliferate, the WBC's trolling rhetoric continues to succeed, at least insofar as success is defined by trolling. However, securing public attention over an extended period of time is not an easy task, especially in our hyper-mediated age of nonstop distractions. The WBC thus perpetuates its presence in public consciousness by using three tactics: (a) making their offensive protests frequent events, (b) connecting their protests to *kairotic* moments and topics, and (c) exploiting media for additional coverage. According to their homepage, the WBC has conducted 52,169 protests since June of 1991, and they continue to post regular press releases announcing future protests day-by-day and week-by-week (*GodHatesFags.com*). By remaining so active both on the web and in the streets, church members sustain some ongoing relevance in public affairs across the country. However, this constant activity can also be a problem for the church. If their protests become relatively "common" events, they risk losing some of their forcefulness and notoriety. To counter this risk, the WBC often links their protests to socially significant events (like funerals and memorial services) and timely topics (like the attacks on 9/11 and the 2011 Tucson shooting). Through these appeals to *kairos*, or opportunities within the present moment, the WBC revitalizes its messages and recovers some relevance that it may have lost over time. Beyond those moments, the WBC utilizes media systems (like the Internet, syndicated radio, and the never-ending news cycle) to exploit any other additional opportunities for publicity. The aforementioned controversy over their planned protest of a funeral service

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following the 2011 shooting in Tucson is one example of both their attempts to seize *kairotic* moments and their attempts to expand their media presence.

When church members' trolling efforts succeed, the WBC claims a sizable, if not disproportionately large, share of one of the most valuable resources in the digital age—attention. According to sociologist Charles Derber, "Who gets attention—in individual face-to-face encounters and in institutional arenas like the family or the workplace—is closely linked to social power and illuminates the status hierarchy of society" (10). In other words, those who have more attention also have more social power and value. This social value derives in part from attention's economic value, i.e., its finite distribution in a world full of distractions. As described by Richard Lanham, the modern attention economy is a social (and rhetorical) phenomenon that has developed in tandem with the twentieth century's burgeoning information economy. But whereas the information economy generated even greater quantities of information, the attention economy has not increased the amount of attention available. Lanham explains that "information is not in short supply…[w]e're drowning in it. What we lack is the human attention needed to make sense of it all. […] Attention is the commodity in short supply" (*The Economics* xi). Those who exploit the attention economy, like trollers, may not increase their material advantages (though some, like the WBC, do this as well), but they do gain other advantages by taking up more space in public and private consciousness.[24] So when a trolling effort secures and sustains attention, it does more than succeed; it profits.

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[24] It is possible, of course, for a successful troller to profit materially. For example, in the 2011 case of *Snyder vs. Phelps*, the plaintiff suing the WBC for protesting at his son's funeral was at one point ordered to pay $16,510 in legal damages to the church (Gregory).

In these ways, the WBC's trolling rhetoric achieves its ends not by constructing a shared meaning or identity, but by provoking audiences into responding to their words and actions with attentive outrage. Their measure of success is, ironically enough, a kind of futility, an endless yet unproductive proliferation of discourse that succeeds not by being resolved but by remaining unresolvable. The more audiences attempt resolution, the more they participate in the proliferation of the church's trolling rhetoric. And even if audiences' dismiss them for their extremism and indecorum, the WBC still succeeds at sabotaging *logos*. Thus, what audiences are left with is a rhetoric of sheer responsivity, divested of *logos* and amplified to the nth degree.

Conclusion

The drama that unfolds in response to the WBC's rhetorical practices plays out like a subversion of Kenneth Burke's famous parlor, where the "interminable discussion" has lost its tenor but remains "vigorously in progress" (110-11). Given this apparent futility of responding to the WBC, it may seem as if the church's rhetoric has little to offer rhetorical studies. However, even if the WBC does not exemplify any discursive models with which academic and professional rhetoricians would be likely to identify, the fact remains that their rhetorical practices expose something fundamental about rhetoric—the vulnerability and responsivity that makes it all possible. Whether we read the WBC's rhetoric as non-persuasive hate speech or successful public trolling, we can perceive how the church's provocative discourse exploits and intensifies the "underivable provocation to response" described by Diane Davis and others (*Inessential Solidarity* 14). In the hands and mouths of the WBC's trollers, the force of language, rather than its meaning, becomes the key rhetorical factor.

Furthermore, even if the WBC's rhetoric is provocative without persuasion, this does not mean that productive responses are therefore impossible. If the WBC calls us to respond in ways that are difficult (or maybe impossible) to resist, then the question becomes: How might we respond differently? Some have attempted to curtail the WBC's rhetoric by citing codes of decorum, while others have sought out non-legal methods of resistance. Ultimately, though, the answer may lie in the nature of trolling rhetoric itself, particularly its division of audiences into in-groups and out-groups based on the nature of their responses. By training audiences to manage their vulnerabilities to discourse, the practice of trolling rhetoric may actually include the possibility for its own subversion. If this is true (and I would argue that it is), then what the WBC may offer to rhetorical studies is, ironically enough, a kind of rhetorical education.

CHAPTER III
STRATEGIC VULNERABILITY:
DECORUM IN RESPONSE TO TROLLING RHETORIC

Style defines situations, tells us how to act in them. […] We return to our emphasis on the self-consciousness shared by writer and reader. In society, it is called manners; in literature, decorum.

—Richard Lanham, *Style: An Anti-Textbook* (178)

The ongoing proliferation of hateful trolling rhetoric from the WBC, as well as others, presents rhetorical studies with a number of challenges. Not only does trolling rhetoric explicitly manage vulnerability in ways that defy more traditional sensibilities, but it also raises an inevitable yet difficult question for rhetorical theory and practice: how do we respond? There is no simple answer available, as the controversy surrounding the WBC suggests, and this is by design. After all, a response is precisely what trolling rhetoric is after. Faced with these challenges, many of the WBC's opponents, especially those offended by their funeral protests, have responded by appealing to a shared code of civility and public decency. These appeals, which echo centuries of rhetorical theory going all the way back to the civic rhetorics of Aristotle and Cicero, attempt to disrupt the WBC's most offensive activities by invoking one of the oldest and most fundamental concepts in rhetorical studies, a concept that Walter H. Beale has described as "the most rhetorical of rhetorical concepts"—decorum (168).

Since the classical era, decorum has functioned as a principle for adapting words, texts, and even bodies to particular situations through recourse to social conventions and normative sensibilities of propriety. In this way, decorum has long provided rhetors with a socially situated, civic-minded, and ethically oriented code for rhetorical agency. However, in the context of trolling rhetoric, decorum is largely subverted as a code for agency since trollers are willing to use any means necessary to provoke a response from

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audiences, even if that means violating decorum. To be fair, this does not mean that trollers have no sense of decorum. On the contrary, many trollers demonstrate a keen awareness of decorum when they violate conventions *in order to* provoke audiences; furthermore, their violations often activate or enhance awareness of decorum as a code for agency. For example, when the WBC protests at military funerals with signs that read "Thank God for Dead Soldiers" and "Thank God for IEDs," they draw media attention to their messages by aggressively promoting hatred where most audiences would expect solace. At the same time, by publicly violating the norms of funerary decorum that work invisibly to honor the dead and protect mourners, the WBC also calls attention to the conventions that they are transgressing. Thus, trolling rhetoric does not erase decorum as a principle for action; rather, it actively exposes our conventions and expectations by undermining them from the outset, revealing the designs through which decorum subtly and strategically conditions our rhetorical agency.

However, to more fully understand the function of decorum in the context of trolling rhetoric, I argue that we should treat it not only as a (subverted) code for rhetorical agency, but also as a strategy for managing our rhetorical vulnerabilities. When decorum functions as a principle for acting appropriately (or inappropriately), it serves an *agential* function within rhetorical theory and practice. By "agential," I mean that it typically takes agents and their agency as its central focus or starting point. By and large, rhetorical theory—both classical and contemporary—tends to treat decorum as a culturally and circumstantially sensitive code for appropriate and effective rhetorical agency, such as in the above epigraph where Richard Lanham argues that style (and through style, decorum) "tells us how to act" in situations (*Style* 178). It is not my goal in

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this chapter to argue against this agential function of decorum or to reject the importance of agency in defining our major concepts; rather, my goal is to consider how indecorous forms of rhetoric (like trolling rhetoric) draw our attention to the oft-ignored flipside of decorum as strategic agency—decorum as strategic vulnerability.

When trollers like the WBC's protestors violate decorum, they provoke audiences and critics into an awareness of decorum's agential function. After all, outrage over the WBC's insensitivity toward grieving audiences is at least partly rooted in a common assumption that rhetorical agency *should* be conditioned by communal and circumstantial norms of propriety. "The WBC can express themselves freely," some might argue, "but not at a funeral." In fact, this particular argument played out in a recent Supreme Court case that challenged the WBC's right to use funerals as a platform for their protests. In the end, the case of *Snyder v. Phelps* (2011) came down to a decision about whether or not any constitutional limits could be placed on the WBC's rhetorical agency. However, even if rhetorical agency formed the crucial core of the case, decorum and vulnerability were also central to the arguments posed. Insofar as decorum was invoked *in response* to the WBC's management of vulnerability through rhetoric, opponents presented decorum not only as a code for *acting* rhetorically, but also as a strategy for managing how we are *acted upon* rhetorically. In other words, they framed decorum not only in terms of its agential function, but also in terms of its managerial function.

In this chapter, I examine how the concept of decorum has been framed in terms of its agential and managerial functions by both classical and contemporary rhetoricians. I then link this framing to a perceptual bias in the field, one that treats agency as having more value than patience, passivity, and vulnerability. Finally, I analyze the case of

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Snyder v. Phelps in order to illustrate how opponents of the WBC have invoked decorum as a strategy for managing vulnerability as well as agency.

Decorum in Rhetorical Studies

In both classical and contemporary rhetorical theory, the term "decorum" carries with it a double connotation. On the one hand, it refers to a context-specific set of principles and instructions that rhetors are expected to follow when selecting subjects and styles in accordance with ever-shifting social conventions. On the other hand, it also refers to the rhetorical intelligence that informs those principles, an attunement to the social relations and realities that foreground any instruction concerning appropriateness. Acknowledgement of these two connotations is important because, as Robert Hariman observes, "Although this intelligence can often be reduced to a catalog of rhetorical techniques, it operates more as a sensibility which is never encompassed by technique alone" ("Decorum, Power" 155). Hariman further describes this coupling of instruction and attunement as both a "sociology" and a "process of invention" that "provided both the major stylistic code for verbal composition and the social knowledge required for political success" ("Decorum, Power" 152; *The Artistry* 181). Striking a similar note, Ethan Stoneman argues that decorum functions as both "the *technical* sets of conventions found in the rhetorical handbooks of antiquity and a *nontechnical* understanding of the social relations that influence and are reflected in any particular instance of decorous speech or behavior" (132; emphasis added).

According to both Hariman and Stoneman, this dual understanding of decorum is rooted in classical rhetorical theory. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle famously describes appropriateness (*to prepon*) as a technical but essential virtue of style (*lexis*): "Let the

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matters just discussed be regarded as understood, and let the virtue of style be defined as 'to be clear'…and neither flat nor above the dignity of the subject, but appropriate" (3.2.1). Aristotle's student Theophrastus later formalized these Aristotelian virtues of style into correctness, clarity, propriety, and ornamentation. For Aristotle, who discusses the concept of *to prepon* mainly in terms of style, appropriateness refers to a sense of proportionality and opportune usage, a strategic principle for adapting the emotion, character, and subject matter of a speech to the constraints and expectations of a given situation (3.7.1). This notion of appropriateness aligns with Aristotle's ethical philosophy of the mean, or finding what he calls the "mean condition between two vices, one resulting from excess and the other from deficiency…" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a). By connecting the study of style to an understanding of virtue, balance, and timeliness, appropriateness, even as a technical concept, inflected stylistics with an ethically oriented awareness of the social order.

However, although Aristotle's complex discussion of *to prepon* and style is well remembered in rhetorical studies, many scholars agree that the most comprehensive and expansive treatment of technical and nontechnical decorum comes from the works of Cicero.[25] For example, Stoneman argues that "Cicero's notion of decorum expanded on the appropriate so as to include a second, higher-order function":

> In addition to laying down the conventional rules of composition, decorum, [Cicero] argued, acted as a system governing any particular configuration of the appropriate. In effect, Cicero's uptake of decorum amplified the Greek sense of appropriateness, moving the focus from a concern with the rules of rhetorical adaptation to a more abstract awareness of the arbitrary social codes that shape any particular arrangement of propriety. (131-2)

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[25] For example, see Fantham (1984), Deem (1995), Hariman (1992, 1995), and Leff (1990).

In contrast to the more technical notion of *to prepon* put forth by the Greeks, Cicero gestures to a much broader application of decorum as a nontechnical principle for action. This is not to say that Cicero dismisses the technical aspects of decorum; rather, he expands the scope of decorum to include not only speech making but also the overall composition of social life. In *Orator*, for example, Cicero writes, "In oration, as in life, nothing is harder to perceive than what is appropriate. The Greeks call this *to prepon*; let us call it *decorum* or 'propriety'…The universal rule, in oratory as in life, is to consider propriety" (20.70-71). Cicero further remarks that decorum applies to "action as well as words, in the expression of the face, in gesture and in gait" (20.74). His expansion of decorum into broader social relevance is also made evident in *On Obligations*, where he contends, "This concept of the fitting [decorum] is to be observed in every act and every word, and also in every movement and posture of the body" (1.126). Cicero's treatment of decorum as an overarching principle of alignment with social constraints is characteristic of his humanism, which combined "formal, strategic, aesthetic, and indeed moral concerns in the all-embracing concept of decorum" (Beale 169). From this Ciceronian perspective, decorum functions not only as a code for rhetorical adaptation, but also as a code for social, political, and ethical adaptation.

These technical and nontechnical perspectives on decorum continue to inform scholarship in contemporary rhetorical studies. For example, in his study of political style, Hariman suggests that Cicero refigures decorum as both a stylistic intelligence and "a political intelligence requiring an active process of interpretation and flexible standards of evaluation" (Hariman, "Decorum, Power" 155). He further contends that Cicero's humanistic approach enhances the significance of decorum, such that its

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nontechnical aspect "lies close to what it means to be human and is the conjunction of such essential concepts of government as order, restraint, and the presentation of a public self" (155). Following this line of thought, Hariman proposes three defining features of decorum as a rhetorical-political sensibility:

> Broadly defined, decorum consists of: (a) the rules of conduct guiding the alignment of signs and situations, or texts, and acts, or behavior and place; (b) embodied in practices of communication and display according to a symbolic system; and (c) providing social cohesion and distributing power. (156)

Echoing Cicero, Hariman synthesizes both the technical ("rules" and "alignment") and nontechnical ("social cohesion" and "power") aspects of decorum, advancing a theory of textual, ethical, and political appropriateness that applies not only to the arrangement of words and gestures but also to the arrangement of self, others, and society. Furthermore, by melding rhetoric, politics, and propriety, Hariman proposes that "the study of a code of etiquette can be a study of the political experience of those who are *regulated* by that code" (155; emphasis added). Here, Hariman makes an important yet often understated point: insofar as it conditions rhetorical agency, decorum functions not only as a mode of invention and action, but also as a mode of regulation.

Stoneman takes up this point in his review of decorum scholarship when he suggests that as "an architectonic force of social composition and as a complex of differentiated communicative patterns, decorum sustains social order through the creation and interiorization of decorous modes of subjectivity" (133). Drawing upon Hariman's politicization of decorum as well as Foucault's theory of subjectivization, Stoneman proposes that decorum names a "principle of social order" as well as "the means of augmenting one's rhetorical sensibility" through instruction "in how to coordinate one's

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communicative habits with the behavioral norms inhering in the social ordering of bodies and speech" (133). Insofar as decorum is aligned with this social ordering, it serves not only an *agential* function, through instruction and coordination, but also a *managerial* function, through discipline and regulation. Furthermore, since decorum reflects the ideologies of the middle and upper classes, decorous sensibilities do not reflect an "egalitarian principle of distribution" (Stoneman 133). Rather, they "reproduce a world of distinct classes maintained largely by heredity" wherein "higher responsibilities have been assigned to the class with the higher character…" (Hariman, "Decorum, Power" 153). Kathryn Flannery, in her historical analysis of literacy and style, highlights this managerial function of decorum through her discussion of nineteenth-century pedagogues who believed that "to each group or class is assigned an appropriate style, an appropriate way to use language. To step outside the appropriate bounds is to risk disruption" (93). Like Hariman and Stoneman, Flannery proposes a definition of decorum that accounts for this management of the social order:

> Having learned the style appropriate to his social station, this cultivated member [of society] will thus be content with his place and will be less vulnerable to "political agitators" who would point out inequities between those who walk on foot and those who ride in carriages. […] Thus the rhetorical concept of decorum reveals itself most clearly as a principle of class stability and control. (99)

The work of decorum, then, extends far beyond technical training in the appropriate use of available means. Expansive in scope, yet subtle in operation, decorum structures and codifies the social order by disciplining agents and adjusting their actions in accordance with predictable conventions and unpredictable contingencies. In other words, decorum coordinates *and* regulates agency simultaneously.

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Other commentaries on decorum in contemporary rhetorical theory tend to repeat this expansion of the concept, though they also tend to focus on its agential function while implying or assuming its managerial function. James Baumlin, for example, argues that writing studies must move beyond its overly technical notions of decorum and redefine the concept as "a harmony among the words and worlds of self and other, dynamically conceived" (181). He also suggests that decorum works as a counterpart to *kairos*, aligned with "a sensitivity toward time, opportunity, and audience, and toward the effect of one's words on audience" (178). For Baumlin, who applies the concept to writing pedagogy, decorum provides rhetoricians and compositionists with an ancient yet effective method for teaching writing as a social process; he explains that "a concern for decorum turns the writer's attention not simply to his own ideas and interests and text, but also to the world he must inhabit with others" (178). Importantly, Baumlin writes that "the harmony [decorum] pursues is not given in the world, but must be created in the process of writing," such that both writer and reader construct a "coherent world image" that can be shared (178-9). However, insofar as this decorous image must be shared by both writer and reader, it requires the writer to respond and adapt to the social order that sustains perceptions of coherence. In other words, the principles of decorum that inform harmony's creation are already rooted in the prior ordering of texts and bodies. Thus, although Baumlin stresses the agential function of decorum by focusing on the actions of the writer, he also implies the managerial function of decorum by pointing to the ways in which the writer's agency is already conditioned.

Like Baumlin, Michael Leff approaches decorum by treating it primarily as a code for rhetorical agency and coherence. Furthermore, like Hariman, Leff describes

decorum as a kind of situational intelligence attuned to one's environment: "That is, it works to align the stylistic and argumentative features of the discourse within a unified structure while adjusting the whole structure to the context from which the discourse arises and to which it responds" ("The Habitation" 62). Given these elements, Leff argues that decorum "best describes the process of mediation and balance connected with qualitative judgment," echoing Aristotle's notion of the mean (62). Finally, he defines decorum as "a principle for action that accounts for the adaptive power of persuasive discourse" and "also establishes a flexible standard for assessing the intrinsic merit of a rhetorical product" (62). In order to apply decorum pragmatically to theories of argumentation and judgment, Leff emphasizes its agential function in his definition ("a principle *for action*," he writes); however, through this emphasis, he also implies its managerial function (62). By pointing out that decorum is an "adaptive" principle, he situates agents in a position of always responding to rules, norms, and conventions that precede their agency. This adaptive aspect is necessary because decorum cannot be grounded in absolutes or formalized into a stable set of instructions; instead, it always exists only in relation to situations. "Decorum has no substantive stability across situations," Leff writes, "since it represents a constantly moving process of negotiation" (62). Working within this process, rhetorical agents are put into a precarious position, one that requires them to be both active and responsive, both managing and managed by the protean precepts of decorum. Since agents must adapt to the constraints of any situation, decorum's managerial function is already implicated by its agential function.

To say that decorum serves both an agential function and a managerial function is not to say that these two functions are mutually exclusive. As prior scholarship suggests,

any principle for decorous action is also a principle of response to a broad yet unstable set of conventions. And since these conventions work to reproduce regimes of thought and action, they manage responses in ways that are likely to protect and perpetuate those regimes. However, although the managerial function of decorum implicates agency in its operation, it also implicates the frequently ignored flipside of agency—vulnerability. In other words, in addition to managing *how we act*, decorum also manages *how we are acted upon*, conditioning our exposure to language by disciplining the use of language. Thus, the managerial function of decorum becomes both a code for exercising rhetorical agency and a strategy for managing rhetorical vulnerability.

Decorum and Agential Bias

By differentiating between the agential and managerial functions of decorum, I mean to point out not only that these functions are not identical, but also that the attention they receive in scholarship is not identical. I further contend that this disproportion represents a much larger perceptual bias in the field, one that assigns more value to rhetorical *agency* than to rhetorical *patiency* and *vulnerability*. Consider, for example, how the rhetoricians discussed above describe decorum as both an abstract and applied concept. The technical version of decorum advanced by Aristotle and others treats it as a handbook-concept designed to train rhetors in coordinating their speeches (which must be delivered) to conventions, while the nontechnical version advanced by Cicero observes decorum "in every *act* and every word, and also in every *movement* and posture of the body" (2000, I.126; emphasis added). Hariman describes decorum as "the rules of *conduct* guiding the alignment of signs and situations, or texts and *acts*, or *behavior* and place…" ("Decorum, Power" 156; emphasis added). Baumlin contends that the

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"harmony" perceived through decorum "must be *created* in the process of writing" (178-9; emphasis added). And Leff defines decorum as "a principle *for action* that accounts for the adaptive power of persuasive discourse" ("The Habitation" 62; emphasis added). These added emphases are not meant to point out flaws in these scholars' arguments or observations; rather, they are meant to suggest that the concept of decorum is more frequently applied to the conscious work of rhetorical *agents* than it is to the managed positions of rhetorical *patients*.

If rhetoricians have tended to focus on decorum's agential function—i.e., how it guides the adaptation of available means to convention and circumstance—it may be partly due to the rhetorical tradition's pedagogical heritage, which has provided a basis for developing many important concepts within the field.[26] For example, even if Aristotle and Cicero differ in their applications of the concept, they nonetheless theorize decorum within the context of instructing and improving one's rhetorical skills. Similarly, both Baumlin and Leff frame decorum as a principle for training rhetors' sensibilities in order to improve their capacities for composition and argumentation.[27] These instructional approaches to decorum are insightful and practical, as relevant to our communication practices now as they were during the Classical Era. However, while these approaches focus our attention on how decorum *orients us* toward others through our actions, they also potentially elide the ways in which decorum *orients others* to and through our

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[26] See Jonathan Hunt's "From *Cacemphaton* to Cher: Foul Language and Evidence in the Rhetorical Tradition" (2012) and Jeffrey Walker's *The Genuine Teachers of This Art: Rhetorical Education in Antiquity* (2011) for more on the rhetorical tradition's pedagogical heritage.
[27] For another example, see Joseph Williams's *Style*, especially his final chapter on "The Ethics of Style."

actions. In other words, when decorum becomes an action-oriented concept, it runs the risk of ignoring the other side of action—patiency.

I take the term "patiency" from the work of the late American philosopher Soran Reader, whose work usefully highlights the (over)emphasis on agency that tends to inflect the Western intellectual tradition.[28] Reader labels this tendency "agential bias," noting that "abject features of human life like suffering, weakness, vulnerability, constraint, dependency seem to get very little philosophical attention"; although these aspects "shape the lives of persons so profoundly," they are generally ignored by theories of subjectivity and personhood in favor of more active concepts like agency ("The Other Side" 579). Reader further contends that this agential bias extends beyond the realm of philosophy and into cultural ideologies:

> [Agential bias] is a vast invisible structure which pervades our culture. It says: when I am an agent, I am, I count. But when I am passive, incapable, constrained, dependent, I am less a person, I count less. The bias is so strong and so deep, that even compassionate thinkers strongly committed to acknowledging dependencies and meeting needs, still think our political task must be to 'enable' anyone who is passive, suffering, subject to necessities, etc. to get a bit more agency, and to become, thereby, more of a person. (580)

It is important to note here that Reader's critique of agential bias is not also a critique of agency *per se*. Certainly, when individuals and groups are able to express themselves and take action, there is much to be appreciated. What Reader objects to is instead the conflation of agency with personhood and social value, which leads us to "presume that

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[28] Reader cites Aristotle as the source of her terminology, particularly the terms "agent" and "patient." However, I think that a caveat is called for here. "Agent" and "patient" come up in translations of Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics* to refer to actors and those acted upon. However, Aristotle himself never coined any special term for "agent" or "patient"; both terms are inventions of translators. Much thanks to Dr. Michelle Zerba for her insight on this translation issue.

people are, people count, only when they are agents, so that if persons are passive, incapable, constrained or dependent, society's duty is to help them back to agency and personhood" ("Agency, Patiency" 200). She therefore defines "patiency" as "the silenced and 'othered' aspects of personhood, which are passive, but nonetheless as inalienable and central to personhood as 'agency' is commonly assumed to be" (200). Although agency is often conflated with personhood in Western thought, patiency, according to Reader, represents a more universal and mutual dimension of social life, one that is all too frequently marginalized or ignored.

Taking up Reader's theory, I would argue that agential bias is evident not only in Western philosophy, but also in rhetorical studies, as the aforementioned emphasis on decorum's agential function implies. There is, of course, no shortage of commentary on agency in the field, nor is there any doubt about the value that the field assigns to agency and its conceptualization.[29] In fact, Marilyn Cooper, in an article published in *College Composition and Communication* in 2011, even goes so far as to insist that "[i]ndividual agency is necessary for the possibility of rhetoric," as assertion that I find both agreeable and yet indicative of the enormous weight that agency carries throughout the field. Adding to this weight is the field's general distrust of passivity, which is often associated with powerlessness and defenselessness. Michelle Ballif, for instance, has written about rhetorical theory's tendency to marginalize audiences by treating them as purely passive receivers of rhetorical actions. In response, Ballif makes this recommendation:

> In contradistinction, I would suggest that we attempt to reconceive the rhetorical situation, by re-engendering, or, rather, transgendering the speaker/audience couple as a hermaphrodite, as a con/fusion of Hermes,

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[29] In addition to Cooper, see Geisler (2004), Turnbull (2004), Greene (2004), Lundberg and Gunn (2005), Campbell (2005), and Wallace and Alexander (2009).

the god of messages, and Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in an attempt, thereby, to identify what audiences want, speculate on the ways in which they can resist the speaker's desire, and suggest we should further investigate how this bizarre, transgendered coupling could invigorate rhetorical theory and current composition pedagogical practices. (52)

Ballif's argument for transgendering the speaker-audience (i.e., active-passive) relation is a productive one for the field, but her attempt to rewrite the relation also assumes that the passive position possesses little value of its own. By proposing a "con/fusion" of these rhetorical roles, she attempts to give audiences a kind of "restorative agency" that would make them more "valuable" in rhetorical situations. Thus, although she challenges the marginalization of audiences in the field, she does so by marginalizing the condition of patiency and vulnerability that characterizes audiences.

I do not mean to suggest here that the field's interest in agency is misguided or unnecessary, nor am I hoping to supplant agency with patiency. There is a definite need in rhetorical studies for complex theories of agency and its conditions, as Marilyn Cooper makes clear. I only mean to suggest that one of the fundamental conditions for agency is the patiency—or vulnerability—that lends agency its conceptual and material value. After all, as Nathan Stormer writes, "The capacity to impose derives from the capacity to be affected" (188). Thus, if we want to develop complex theories of agency, we cannot do so by ignoring the other side of rhetorical agency, nor can we ignore this other side in our discussions of important rhetorical concepts. Therefore, if Walter Beale is right to describe decorum as "the most rhetorical of rhetorical concepts," then we should not focus our attention on decorum's agential function without attending in equal measure to its managerial function—i.e., the ways in which decorum orients us toward others, others toward us, and all of us toward language (68). With that in mind, I turn now to a recent

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Supreme Court case in which decorum was crucial for analyzing not only the agency of rhetors, but also the vulnerabilities of their audiences.

<div align="center">Responding to the WBC: The Case of Snyder v. Phelps (2011)</div>

Responding to the WBC and their hate-filled trolling rhetoric is difficult. The more church members' antagonize audiences and out-groups, the more they fuel their rhetorical enterprise by attracting publicity, subverting critical literacies, and provoking ever more responses. Without recourse to traditional models of rhetorical engagement, opponents of the WBC, such as Angel Action and the Patriot Guard Riders, have had to become inventive in their strategies for resistance (Roy). Responses like these illustrate how the WBC's rhetoric has complicated the dynamics of our public discourse. They also illustrate how the work of rhetoric is closely linked to the management of vulnerability.

If the WBC manages the vulnerabilities of audiences and out-groups in negative or exploitative ways, then oppositional responses to the WBC can likewise be analyzed in terms of how they (re-)manage vulnerability. For example, by attempting to visually and audibly block the WBC's presence at funerals, Angel Action and the Patriot Guard Riders put themselves in the position of "protecting" mourners from the WBC's rhetorical harassment. Similarly, by attempting to divert public attention away from the WBC's protests, they interfere with the uptake of the church's trolling rhetoric, protecting not only mourners at funerals but also other audiences who might be "exposed" to the church's activities through media. Implicit in these strategies is the idea that the WBC makes audiences vulnerable in ways that opponents are not willing to tolerate; hence, counter-strategies opposing the WBC are at least partly designed to re-situate the church's targets into less precarious positions.

A similar concern for vulnerability is expressed in judicial responses to the WBC, especially lawsuits attempting to censor the church's hate speech. For example, when the Phelps clan protested at the funeral of Marine Lance Cpl. Matthew Snyder, a soldier killed in Iraq in 2006, Matthew's father, Albert Snyder, took legal action against the church, claiming that the protesters had intentionally inflicted emotional distress on his family and fellow mourners. Jurors in the case of *Snyder v. Phelps* "held Westboro liable for millions of dollars in compensatory and punitive damages," and the church quickly appealed to the District Court, which reduced the damages but kept the verdict otherwise unchanged (*Snyder v. Phelps*). However, the WBC's next appeal resulted in a reversed decision, with the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals protecting the church's protests on the grounds that their rhetoric addressed "matters of public concern," such as gay rights and national security (*Snyder v. Phelps*). The appellate court also ordered Snyder to pay $16,510 in legal fees to the WBC, a decision that prompted Fox News pundit Bill O'Reilly to comment on the case and offer to pay the fines on Snyder's behalf. Donations from veteran groups more than covered the costs (Gregory).

As the *Snyder v. Phelps* case progressed through the American judicial system, it generated considerable media attention and public scrutiny. The American Civil Liberties Union and NPR, among others, filed amicus briefs in favor of the WBC, while forty-eight attorney generals and several veteran groups filed briefs in favor of Snyder. Finally, the case reached the Supreme Court, and in March of 2011, the justices ruled 8-to-1 in favor of the WBC. With only one justice dissenting, the majority cited the First Amendment as protecting the church's freedom of speech and assembly. Chief Justice John Roberts, writing for the majority, argued that the WBC's words "focused on 'the political and

moral conduct of the United States and its citizens'…and speech of such public concern

is protected by the First Amendment" (qtd. in Totenberg). Furthermore, in his conclusion,

Roberts offered a poetic summary of the ruling that rivals Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*

in its attention to the force of language:

> Speech is powerful…It can stir people to action, move them to tears of
> both joy and sorrow, and—as it did here—inflict great pain. On the facts
> before us, we cannot react to that pain by punishing the speaker. As a
> nation we have chosen a different course—to protect even hurtful speech
> on public issues to ensure that we do not stifle public debate. (*Snyder v.
> Phelps*)

Although Roberts does not use the word "rhetoric" in the majority's decision, his

concluding remarks highlight both the capacity for rhetoric to move audiences and the

capacity for audiences to be moved by rhetoric—*both* rhetorical agency *and* rhetorical

vulnerability. Importantly, Roberts does not justify the ruling by suggesting that the

WBC's rhetoric is not harmful, thereby denying the vulnerability of the Snyder family; in

fact, he forthrightly acknowledges that the harm caused by the WBC's hate speech is

very real. However, by insisting that "[a]s a nation we have chosen a different course…,"

Roberts, along with his allied justices, suggests that being an "American" is a uniquely

precarious position, one that aligns vulnerability to language (including hurtful language)

with responsible citizenship. In this way, the Roberts's court, like many before them and

many since then, responded to the WBC by rhetorically managing vulnerability—not

only for themselves, but also for an entire nation.

Despite the justices' near-unanimous decision, commentary leading up to and

following the case offered little consensus on the issues. Some critics characterized the

WBC's protests as an exploitative attack on private citizens, while others condemned

censorship as a dangerous precedent for the exercise of government power.[30] Even Samuel Alito, the only dissenter among the nine justices, expressed a very different view of the WBC's rhetoric. In his dissenting opinion, Alito described the church's actions as "a malevolent verbal attack on Matthew [Snyder] and his family at a time of acute emotional vulnerability," which inflicted "severe and lasting emotional injury" on Albert Snyder (*Snyder v. Phelps*). He also called attention to the WBC's trolling strategy, noting that the church's small size is offset by their publicity-seeking protests at high-profile events. His fellow justices disagreed, however, insisting that a statement's "arguably 'inappropriate or controversial character…is irrelevant to the question whether it deals with a matter of public concern'" (*Snyder v. Phelps*).

To this day, the WBC features the Supreme Court's ruling prominently at the top of their homepage, alongside two amicus briefs on same-sex marriage (which they label "fag marriage"). There, the ruling functions as both a marker of the WBC's victory in court and a shield protecting their practices against future lawsuits. In another corner of their homepage, the church keeps count of the number of protests they have conducted. With every day that passes, the number rises.

<div align="center">Funerary Decorum as Strategic Vulnerability</div>

Questions of style and decorum were crucial to the case of *Snyder v. Phelps*, as was evident in the Supreme Court majority's assertion that the "arguably inappropriate or controversial character" of a rhetorical act does not necessarily constitute grounds for state-sanctioned censorship (*Snyder v. Phelps*). This section of the ruling was partly a

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[30] For example, see the amicus briefs filed by the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Civil Liberties Union, the John Marshall Law School, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, Senators Harry Reid and Mitch McConnell, and forty-nine attorneys general from the United States.

response to an earlier (2007) decision by a jury, which found the WBC's conduct to be "outrageous" and awarded Snyder $10.9 million in damages (*Snyder v. Phelps*; Gregory). The difference between the jury's and the justices' opinions is stark, but no matter how great the difference is between them, both arguments illustrate how decorum underwrote many of the arguments against the WBC.

These appeals to decorum throughout the case derived in part from the particular type of rhetorical act under scrutiny—funeral picketing. Court documents made this point clear. For example, in an amicus brief filed in favor of Snyder in June of 2010, nearly a year before the Supreme Court's ruling, the attorneys general for forty-eight states and the District of Columbia wrote that funerals are "ancient cultural and common law traditions of honoring the dead and protecting the privacy of mourners"; they also described the WBC's tactics as "psychological terrorism that targets grieving families" (1-2). This same logic appeared in another amicus brief filed around the same time by Harry Reid, Mitch McConnell, and forty other members of Congress:

> In our nation, as in nearly every culture and religious tradition, proper burials play a crucial role in helping the bereaved mourn the dead. The disruption of a funeral interferes with the necessary emotional process of grieving, and thus can inflict severe psychological and even physical distress on the bereaved. In recognition of the vulnerability of mourners, American Courts have long recognized a "right" to a decent burial. (4)

Although the term "decorum" does not appear in the text of either brief, the logic of decorum—tradition, proper disposition, and ethical sensitivity to *kairos*—pervades the documents, such as when the attorneys general argue that the Supreme Court "has already recognized the unique and important nature of funerals, *their special solemnity*," or when the senators and their allies point out that both Congress and forty-six states have passed "constitutional *time, place, and manner regulations* [to] protect private families [of

mourners] while leaving open ample alternative channels for public protest and political debate" ("Brief for the State of Kansas" 7; "Brief of Senators" 10; emphasis added).

Importantly, however, these documents do not emphasize the agential function of decorum, except insofar as the WBC is framed as violating burial rites/rights. Rather, the managerial function of decorum—particularly its role in "protecting" mourners—comes to the forefront of the argument. When the *amici curiae* ("friends of the court," who file amicus briefs) favoring Snyder describe funerary decorum, they stress the importance of a proper burial for the well-being *of the bereaved*, as illustrated in the above quote from Reid and McConnell's brief. They thereby situate mourners—those who are acted upon by the WBC—as the central figures of concern for decorum's operation, not the agents from the church (who have already shirked decorum by picketing). Thus, in addition to being a code for coordinating rhetorical agency, decorum in the case against the WBC becomes a code for managing rhetorical vulnerability.

Furthermore, this "protective" managerial function of decorum serves not only mourners but also the one mourned, by ensuring that the grievability of the deceased is confirmed and enacted without subversion. As I argued in Chapter II, the WBC's hate speech attempts to rhetorically conquer the dead as well as the living by treating the dead as unworthy of grief, thereby attacking or eliminating the social value of the life that was lost. So when the WBC protests at funerals and proclaims to mourners "God Hates You" and "You're Going to Hell," they interfere not only with "the necessary emotional process of grieving," but also with the system set in place to preserve dignity of the deceased from any further harm. Thus, although the amicus briefs against the WBC focus

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on the rights of mourners, they also implicitly make a case for protecting the grievable positions of the dead through decorum.

Conclusion

Although decorum is frequently framed in agential terms by rhetoricians, placing rhetorical agents at the center of its operation, funerary decorum seems to require a somewhat different frame for analysis. When the exigency of the rhetorical situation is grief and loss, and when the audience subjected to rhetoric is already visibly, viscerally vulnerable, decorum serves not only as a code for rhetorical action, but also as a code for rhetorical passion—a strategy for managing vulnerability when audiences are at their most exposed and disrupted. It is little wonder, then, why the legal responses to the WBC's funeral picketing invoked decorum as a kind of defense strategy. Ultimately, what the case of *Snyder v. Phelps* teaches us as rhetoricians is that decorum, one of the oldest and "most rhetorical" concepts in the tradition, has always included within its conventions and theories an implicit (and sometimes explicit) concern for vulnerability (Beale 168).

In the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling, however, decorum is unlikely to serve as an effective counter-strategy against the WBC for future legal challenges. When the 8-to-1 majority handed down their decision, they addressed not only the Snyder family and the WBC, but also the entire nation, calling on Americans to accept some measure of vulnerability to the slings and arrows of contemporary public discourse. Left without recourse to legally imposed silence, those who challenge the WBC must now rely on other, more *rhetorical* tactics to resist the church's rhetoric.

CHAPTER IV
COMPOSING HOLES:
REDACTANCE AS RESISTANCE TO HATE WRITING

I composed the holes.

—Ronald Johnson, *Radi os*

The above epigraph comes from Ronald Johnson's prefatory note to his1977 poem *Radi os*, a highly altered version of an 1892 edition of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It refers to Johnson's unusual method for generating the poem: redaction, or rewriting by excision. In other words, Johnson's poem was a literal "re-vision" of Milton's classic epic, in which vast sections of verse were redacted from the original text. But instead of intervening in the text by filling the empty spaces left between omitted passages, Johnson kept the redacted spaces blank, creating what Johnson himself described as "a Blakeian visual page and a new Orphic text of my own" (qtd. in "Ronald Johnson"). Johnson's method later inspired another poet, Austin Kleon, to use the same method on newspapers. And Kleon's methods went on to inspire activists, who applied the method to the WBC's hate writing as a mode of rhetorical resistance.

The poems created by these activists circulated, and then proliferated. Soon enough, they began appearing at counter-protests. For example, on January 5, 2011, the WBC announced plans to protest at American University in Washington, D.C. The press release posted to the church's website, which was recirculated through hyperlinks in news stories and blog posts reporting on the protest, described the university as a "fag-infested, pervert-run" institution, where "hateful parents" and "brutish teachers" have "broken the moral compasses" of American children. The WBC's mission, according to this press release, was to show "God's truth" to the university's students so that they could not "plead ignorance any longer." Almost immediately, students and activists

Figure 1: Blackout poems at American University (photo from Culp-Ressler)

initiated counter-protest plans to challenge the WBC's rhetorical display and overshadow

their appearance on campus. Just over a week later, on January 14, four demonstrators

from the WBC arrived at their appointed site across the street from the university, where

they were confronted by approximately 1,000 counter-protesting students, according to

university officials. Some students carried signs that read "God Hates Hoyas" and "God

Loves Orgasms," subverting the WBC's language with broken repetitions. Other students

focused their attention on a capella performances and speeches from student leaders

celebrating diversity (Zeman).

These rhetorical displays were accompanied by poetry readings featuring verses

that had been composed by redacting the WBC's hate-laced press releases. Physical

copies of these "blackout poems" were also displayed on campus grounds during the

counter-protest (visible in the above image). Through a traditional Aristotelian lens, these

events can be read as serving classic epideictic functions through their inclusion of

ceremonial discourse (speeches from student leaders) and displays of public values. Through the lens that I have been developing throughout this project, they can also be read as strategies for managing vulnerability to the WBC's rhetoric. Like the counter-protests organized by Angel Action and the Patriot Guard Riders, the counter-protest at American University focused on challenging the WBC's trolling rhetoric by diverting attention away from the church's message and activities, thereby draining the WBC of one of its most valuable rhetorical resources.

In this chapter, however, I would like focus attention on the blackout poems created from the WBC's own writings. Although these redacted texts played an important role in American University's counter-protest, their production and circulation predated the WBC's announcement by several months, and their rhetorical recirculation through online media outlets is still ongoing. In fact, the continued recirculation of these texts across many different contexts has become one of the defining rhetorical features of this emerging activist genre. In the sections that follow, I offer a framework for understanding these practices of redaction and recirculation as forms of rhetorical resistance rooted in the citationality of language. In doing so, I argue that redaction and recirculation serve as strategies for managing audiences' vulnerabilities not only to speech, but also to writing. I then apply this framework to actual texts by closely analyzing a selection of blackout poems inspired by the *God Loves Poetry* (GLP) movement, an online initiative that invites activists to challenge the Westboro Baptist Church's rhetoric by "composing holes" in the church's hate-filled documents. Ultimately, I contend that *redactance*, or redaction and recirculation as rhetorical resistance, is a postmodern form of epideictic rhetoric designed to challenge hate writing by illustrating how texts can be repurposed

and recirculated so that they address audiences differently. Rhetorical tactics such as these can be especially useful in contemporary American contexts, where strong free speech protections often compel those targeted or offended by expressions of hate to rely on rhetorical action rather than legal action.

The Citationality of Language

Before analyzing the poems of the GLP movement, it is important to understand what I mean by the "citationality" of language. To that end, it is also important to understand the concept of "performative" language, which was first proposed by John Langshaw Austin during his William James Lectures, delivered at Harvard University in 1955 and later compiled under the title *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin begins these lectures with an ironic assertion: "What I shall have to say here is neither difficult nor contentious; the only merit I should like to claim for it is that of being true, at least in parts" (1). The irony of this "non-difficult, non-contentious" introduction is made all the more apparent when, two paragraphs into the lecture, Austin notes the all-too-difficult contention that will trouble his argument: "It has come to be commonly held that many utterances which look like statements are either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the facts" (2). Austin's proposal challenges longstanding assumptions about language that had been (and continue to be) reproduced and codified throughout philosophy and linguistics: "It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a 'statement' can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (1). In other words, Austin addresses the oft-repeated assumption that the "proper" function of language is its communicative or signifying operation. In response

to this tradition, he proposes a new concept for language studies, which he dubs the "performative" (6-7).

According to Austin's initial framework, the "performative utterance" is a type of pronouncement—or speech-act—that literally *does* something in the process of being spoken rather than just representing what has been done. These utterances cannot be judged in terms of their relation to reality since they necessarily change some state of affairs in reality. As such, performatives are categorically and functionally opposed to the "constative utterance," a statement serving the traditional function of communicating meaning in a manner that either reports or (mis)represents extra-linguistic matters. Because performative utterances, such as christenings, marital vows, and contractual agreements, do not operate on the assumption that they refer to preexistent facts and external forms, they cannot be described in terms of how accurately they signify. So Austin suggests that in order for a performative to be successfully enacted, and thereby felicitous, appropriate circumstances and conventional procedures must be satisfied (14). For example, in order for a marital vow to be felicitous, it must be said in the context of an authentic marriage ceremony, complete with the required number of witnesses and an official authorized to sanction the marriage. Also key to the performance is intentionality: if the speakers do not actually wish to marry, then the performance is unhappy. Should any of these prerequisites be left unfulfilled, the performative may be declared infelicitous: a "Misfire," if the speech act lacks an appropriate context, or an "Abuse," if the speech act is not sincere (14-19).

As the lectures unfold, Austin continually frustrates the seemingly obvious distinction between the language of "meaning" and the language of "doing." Shortly after

introducing this fundamental framework, he notes that performatives can be either explicit or implicit (32-3). In other words, it is possible for an utterance to be performative even if it does not clearly express a command, promise, threat, or other action. These implicit performatives introduce a new problem to Austin's scheme: performative utterances may fail to achieve their intended effect if they are not *taken up* by an audience (36). Of course, failed performatives like these can be interpreted as ineffective or incomplete uses of convention; however, they can also be interpreted as "Misunderstandings," or failures of uptake (33). In the case of a missed uptake, Austin explains, "it would be a special kind [of Misunderstanding], concerning the force of the utterance as opposed to its meaning. And the point is not here just that the audience *did not* understand but that it did not *have* to understand…" (33-4). Although this statement is mentioned only in passing, it nonetheless marks a space in Austin's analysis for a new linguistic factor, one that resonates with rhetoric as the management of vulnerability: the idea of performative language as force.

Interestingly enough, throughout his lectures, Austin appears to make himself vulnerable by risking the possibility that his theory might fail.[31] Thus, this offhand mention of force in language begins to rupture his distinction between "constative versus performative." To what extent might we say, for example, that constative utterances have performative implications, or vice versa? By the end of the fourth lecture, Austin troubles his whole theory by giving an example of this ambiguity: "Just as the purpose of assertion [saying "it is" and "it is not"] is defeated by an internal contradiction (in which we assimilate and contrast *at once* and so stultify the whole procedure), the purpose of a

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[31] In this way, Austin's method during the lectures resembles the "weird ethic" of Louis C. K. described by James Brown, Jr.

contract is defeated if we say "I promise and I ought not" (51). It seems, then, that Austin is "stultifying" his own procedure by simultaneously assimilating and contrasting the modes of language he previously established.

Austin then breaks into a new framework by dubbing (i.e., performing) a new concept: "The act of 'saying something' in this full normal sense I call…the performance of a locutionary act..." (94). Importantly, Austin limits his analysis, "for simplicity," to cases of speech, a dismissal that will not go unnoticed (114). Still, this new concept of the locution allows him to propose another pair of key concepts: the illocution and the perlocution. As Austin explains, the illocution is the "performance of an act *in* saying something," while the perlocution is the production of "certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons…" (99-101). In the process of defining these concepts, Austin again troubles his analysis by bringing the criterion of intentionality into question. Whereas illocutionary acts are distinguished by their consciously directed force, perlocutionary acts are effects of utterances; as such, they are not tied to the intentions of any speaker. Austin thus concedes the possibility that language can produce force and generate effects regardless of the speaker's (and the audience's) will.

By the end of the lectures, Austin has not entirely succeeded at securing his own framework or cleanly demarcating the different types of utterances and their forces. Furthermore, his citation of hypothetical performatives, lifted from their "appropriate circumstances," is (at least in part) what leads Judith Butler to describe *How to Do Things with Words* as "an amusing catalogue of such failed performatives" (16). Amusing or not, Austin's theoretical propositions, as well as the citations and failures he performs in the

process of making them, have provoked much criticism, including a response to his dismissal of writing from Jacques Derrida.

There are several parallels between Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and Derrida's "Signature, Event, Context." Both works were originally presented as lectures, Austin's in 1955 and Derrida's almost two decades later. Both present a theory that, through an extended process of inquiry, eventually breaks down, leading each thinker toward a new approach to performativity. And both works partly enact the theories that they present to listeners (though Derrida's performance is best appreciated when also considering the written form of "Signature, Event, Context"). However, the importance of Derrida's presentation derives not from the way that he parallels or advances Austin's argument, but from the breaking force that he demonstrates.

If Austin's starting place is the question of whether or not all language is composed of signifying statements, then Derrida's is the question of signification itself. He begins by asking what the word "communication" communicates, taking up (as Austin did) a traditional model of language: "I have been constrained to predetermine communication as a vehicle, a means of transport or transitional medium of a *meaning*, and moreover of a *unified* meaning" (1). This transfer model of language, according to Derrida, depends upon the homogeneity, or presence, of the meaning when transferred, and so he offers his first breaking point:

> If *communication* possessed several meanings and if this plurality should prove to be irreducible, it would not be justifiable to define communication a priori as the transmission of a *meaning*, even supposing that we could agree on what each of these words (transmission, meaning, etc.) involved. (1)

A typical response to Derrida's concern about transmission-based communication and the inherent plurality of meaning, especially from rhetorical scholars, is an appeal to context similar to the one made by Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. According to Austin, the qualities of an utterance cannot be identified without taking into account the total speech situation in which an utterance is made. In other words, language changes with context, and so the most efficient method for understanding an utterance is to examine the constraints and exigencies that negotiate its effects. For contemporary rhetoricians, this line of reasoning is so familiar that it has practically become a default on the question of meaning. As rhetoricians, then, our presumed goal should be to describe the contingent patterns that frame any given context and its meanings. So the question becomes: what are the constraints that determine context, and how do we identify them from one moment to the next? It is at this point that Derrida intervenes, turning the question from meaning to conditions of possibility: "Is there a rigorous and scientific concept of *context*? Or does the notion of context not conceal, behind a certain confusion, philosophical presuppositions of a very determinant nature?" (2-3).

In response to these questions, Derrida takes into account one of Austin's major dismissals from *How to Do Things with Words*. In his ninth lecture, Austin considers the fact that an illocutionary act is by necessity a locutionary act, since speaking words also requires making "certain more or less indescribable movements with the vocal organs" (114). To this point, Austin attaches an important, but easily overlooked, footnote: "Still confining ourselves, for simplicity, to *spoken* utterance" (114). Despite Austin's interest in the complexity of any given utterance, he still tries to constrain his theory of performativity by focusing exclusively on instances of speech, leaving writing to be

either assimilated into speech or ignored outright. This constraint repeats a longstanding assumption in philosophy writing is vehicle for speech, or dead speech. If communication is the transmission of meaning, achieved primarily through spoken exchange, then writing is involved only insofar as it adds a new temporal and spatial dimension to this transmission, extending the conversation without altering it. Effective writing, under the rubric of transfer-based communication, should ideally erase itself as a medium in order to reproduce meaning (4). If an idea communicated in writing is not equivalent to its original conception, then the failure to communicate is in the writing, perceived as a medium that decontextualizes the message rather than assimilating it. The written form, then, becomes another means for extending the presence of interlocutors and their (no longer) present context.

To counter this mindset, Derrida proposes two anomalies, introduced into philosophy through writing: the absence of the author and the rupture of context. For any written sign to be readable, it must be able to operate in the absence of its original encoder and decoder. Derrida dubs this the "iterability" of writing:

> To be what it is, all writing must, therefore, be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence, it is a rupture in presence…inscribed in the structure of the mark. (8)

In other words, the possibility of absence and ambiguity is *written* into signs; it inheres in the structure of writing. Furthermore, if writing must be readable to function, even in the absence of its original context, then it must possess a "breaking force" that allows it to be written into a different context: "This breaking force is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text" (9). For example, the previous quote from "Signature, Event, Context" functions as writing only insofar as it can be inserted into the context of

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this chapter, even though its original context—along with Jacques Derrida himself—has long passed: "No context can entirely enclose it. Nor any code, the code here being…its essential iterability (repetition/alterity)" (9).

With that, Derrida turns Austin's simplistic dismissal of writing on its head. Ultimately, he contends that all language is necessarily iterable, or *citational*, able to be "cut off, at a certain point, from its 'original' desire-to-say-what-one-means and from its participation in a saturable and constraining context" (12). "Every sign," he writes, "linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written…can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in doing so it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" (12). Of course, Derrida is careful to note that his proposal does not erase context from the construction of meaning; it simply withholds the totalizing effect of Austin's "total speech situation," providing for a plurality of contexts while also dislodging the performative from the intentions of the speaker or writer. Thus, Derrida reclaims writing from its simplistic relation to speech by illustrating the written-ness of all language.

Echoing Derrida's uptake of Austin, Judith Butler, in *Excitable Speech*, applies the citationality of language to the study of hate speech, pornography, and state-ordered censorship. In doing so, she offers one of her earliest theorizations of vulnerability to language, which she calls "linguistic vulnerability" (1). According to Butler, subjects (or subjectivities) are constituted through language, and this "formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power" (2). She links this formative power to the process of interpellation described by Louis Althusser, the moment when one is brought into social existence by

being "called" or "named" by another. If offensive language like hate speech has the capacity to harm us, she writes, then that "linguistic injury appears to be the effect not only of the words by which one is addressed but the mode of address itself, a mode…that interpellates and constitutes a subject" (2). Insofar as we are exposed to and interpellated through language, it may seem like there is little space for responding productively to instances of linguistic injury. However, Butler suggests otherwise, writing that "the injurious address may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails, but it may also produce an unexpected and enabling response" by "inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call" (2). This "enabling vulnerability," as Butler dubs it, is possible due to the citationality of language.

Butler opposes censorship and speech regulations on the grounds that such moves over-determine language, presuming that words and signs always transfer the same (offensive) meaning into any given context. In other words, acts of censorship inscribe a stabilized offense into every iteration, repeating and sustaining one context across all contexts. Rejecting this approach, Butler insists that, because offensive words (like all words) are citational, they have a breaking force that ruptures the temporal and spatial boundaries of the rhetorical situation. Thus, hate speech does not (have to) preserve its original meaning in every given context of its use. Of course, recognition of words does require recognition of prior uses, "but not in any absolute sense"; Butler explains that "the present context and its apparent 'break' with the past are themselves legible only in terms of the past from which it breaks. The present context does, however, elaborate a new context for such speech, a future context, not yet delineable and, hence, not yet precisely a context" (14). It is this new not-yet-delineable context that Butler treats as the

most productive response to hateful and offensive discourse. If language—including hateful language—is citational, then it can never be over-determined across contexts. Instead, it must, like its users, always risk vulnerability to failure and transformation.[32] This possibility for re-signification makes another form of resistance possible, one not rooted in legally imposed silence: "The interval between instances of utterance not only makes the repetition and resignification of the utterance possible, but shows how words might, through time, become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes" (15). For Butler, it is this uncontrollable, "ex-citable" aspect of language that allows words and signs to be reframed and re-identified in opposition to denigration and marginalization (15).

Within rhetorical studies, Derrida's and Butler's theories of citationality continue to be cited (ironically enough) by scholars.[33] Bruce McComiskey, for example, takes up Derrida's argument in "Signature Event Context" in order to propose what he calls "graffitic immemorial discourse," or "postmodern epideictic rhetoric" (89). Unlike traditional epideictic rhetoric of praise and blame, which reproduces "the norms of the dominant class…to maintain hegemonic power formations an repress the desire for liberation among marginalized classes," graffitic immemorial discourse functions as a mode of epideixis that subverts dominant discourses through citationality:

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[32] For more on the vulnerability of language itself in Butler's work, see George Shulman's "On Vulnerability as Butler's Language of Politics: From Excitable Speech to Precarious Life."

[33] In addition to McComiskey, see E. Johanna Hartelius and Jennifer Asenas's "Citational Epideixis and a 'Thinking of Community': The Case of the Minuteman Project." Hartelius and Asenas argue that citationality provides rhetoricians with a way of rereading hate speech as epideictic rhetoric without recourse to the autonomous, humanist author who takes sole responsibility for hate speech. They write: "If epideixis is a citation…the way to challenge ethically unsound praise and blame is to seek rupture in repetition" (376).

> The practice of postmodern epideictic rhetoric (graffitic immemorial discourse) is precisely this practice of citation or quotation, this practice of removing graph(it)ic signifiers from their existing contexts and inserting them into alternative, subversive contexts. Postmodern epideictic rhetoric constructs subversive meaning…in two ways: first, by transplanting signifiers into alternative contexts, subverting either the signifiers or contexts or both; and second, by arranging signifiers into fragmented, oxymoronic collage-contexts, subverting by comparison each signifier's claim to Truth. (94)

As an example, McComiskey cites an annual event at Purdue University in which female students "compete to become homecoming queen" (95). Part of the competition includes posters spread throughout the campus featuring the candidates. Each year, a local business (the Lafayette Discount Den) creates a collage out of the posters, "a compilation of body parts from a dozen or so different posters…" (95). According to McComiskey, this collage subverts the meaning of the pageantry, taking "the most beautiful graph(it)ic signifiers…and compil[ing] them into one grotesquely fragmented graph(it)ic signifier with no identifiable referent, no discernible graffitic signified" (95-6). Thus, unlike the praise-seeking epideictic rhetoric of the posters, which uses the citationality of signs to re-present beauty, the graffitic immemorial discourse of the Lafayette Discount Den uses citationality to disrupt the smooth operation of representation.

Because it is citational, language derives its meaning from its prior uses and repetitions; however, since these repetitions always occur with a difference (different speaker/writer, different audience, different context, and so on), language also derives its risk of failure from that same citationality. What this means is that our vulnerability to language is not (always) disabling; rather, as Butler suggests, it can be an enabling condition, a non-negative potential aligned with Richard Marback's rethinking of vulnerability as more than something to be averted. Although we are made available to

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language through our always prior vulnerability, language is also made available to use through its "written-ness," such that we are exposed not only to the force of language but also to the possibility of responding differently.

<div align="center">God Loves Poetry: Redacting Hate Writing</div>

Awareness of the citationality of language is not limited to philosophers and rhetoricians, and the *God Loves Poetry* (GLP) movement is a case in point. The movement began when Kevin Cobb and Andres Almeida, a gay couple from south Florida, started a blog titled *God Loves Poetry*, where they took the WBC's press releases, redacted them with black markers, and published the blacked-out texts as encouraging and gay-friendly poems. According to the website's "About" page, the purpose of GLP is to "demonstrate that everyone has the ability to manipulate negativity by using just a little bit of creativity," such as poetic redaction. "The act of redacting the documents," writes Andy Carvin for *NPR*, "subjugates and subsumes Westboro's texts *literally blacking them out*, leaving seemingly innocuous bits of words and phrases that go completely against the church's rhetorical intentions." From 2010 to 2012, many such blackout poems were posted to the blog, a process that publicly recirculated the WBC's offensive documents without reproducing the church's intended meanings and rhetorical effects. Although the most recent entry (as of this writing) was posted on October 25, 2012, the blog's archive of poems is still available online.[34] These poems exemplify Butler's claim that language, even at its most offensive and discriminating, need not be confined to its original intentions or contexts; the breaking force of language enables it to perform otherwise.

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[34] The current homepage of *God Loves Poetry* is godlovespoetry.tumblr.com.

Given the redaction involved in these poems, it may seem like the GLP movement enacts its own kind of censorship against the WBC. However, whereas a Supreme Court ruling against the WBC would have silenced the church and restricted their rhetorical agency, the GLP movement does not attempt to prevent the church from spreading their messages. On the contrary, the movement may actually help the WBC's messages proliferate across an even wider range of contexts. Furthermore, this proliferation means that contributors to GLP risk aiding the WBC in their trolling; after all, one of the goals of trolling rhetoric is to sustain attention by ensuring that the message is repeated, cross-posted, *cited* indefinitely. But even if GLP contributors do reproduce the WBC's words and signs, they do so while illustrating to audiences that the church cannot fully control their own words and signs. In this way, the GLP's rhetoric of redaction functions as a kind of rhetorical training, which tunes audiences not only to language's repetitions, but also to its rhythms, ruptures, and resistances.

We might thus describe the GLP movement as a model of *redactance*, a citational literacy that treats redaction and recirculation as modes of rhetorical resistance. This practice of "composing holes" in texts exposes the vulnerabilities of all participants in a rhetorical encounter, *including* texts, a shared condition of simultaneously being available to others and being able to avail oneself of ruptures in meaning and context. As McComiskey's graffitic immemorial discourse suggests, this practice can therefore serve as an epideictic rhetoric of subversion and resignification. However, insofar as the WBC's trolling rhetoric is not a meaning-making activity in any persuasive sense, the GLB movement's redactance is not so much a subversion of their meaning as it is a
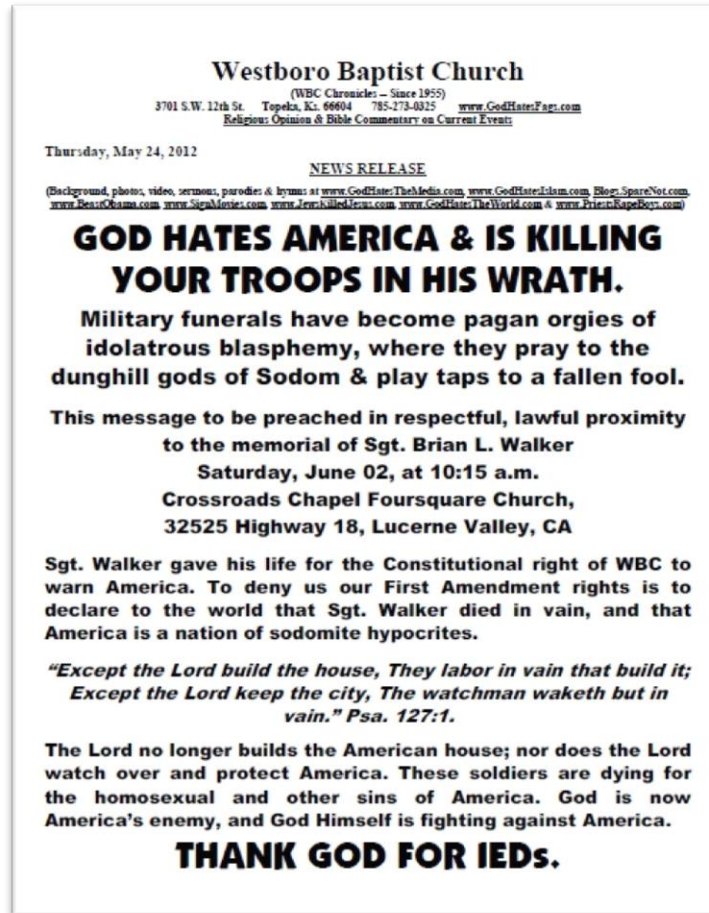
Figure 2: "Westboro Baptist Church to Picket Memorial of Sgt. Brian L. Walker"
subversion of their effects, a textual intervention that interferes with the reproduction of
their hate writing and trolling rhetoric.

Consider the above press release, for example. On Thursday, May 24, 2012, the
WBC posted this press release to its homepage, announcing their intention to protest at
the funeral of Sgt. Brian L. Walker on June 2, 2012. It reads: "Military funerals have
become pagan orgies of idolatrous blasphemy, where they pray to the dunghill gods of
Sodom & play taps to a fallen fool" (*GodHatesFags.com*). They end the announcement
with one of their more infamous one-liners: "Thank God for IEDs." Here, the WBC's
attempts to draw more attention to their protest and message by using offensive language,
rejecting the grievability of the dead, and violating funerary decorum. At the same time,

Figure 3: Blackout poem created from previous press release

they invoke their free speech protections in order to silence potential opposition, placing audiences in a double-bind: provoked into responding yet unable to appeal to reason, decorum, or law.

I came across this press release as I was conducting research on the GLP movement, and so I decided to try my hand at redacting it into a poem (pictured above). The text reads: "God is respectful. Sgt. Walker gave his life for America. Lord watch over and protect these soldiers." Not very poetic, perhaps, but the attempt taught me something about encountering the WBC's hate writing. As a self-identified gay man, I cannot help but feel some degree of pain and disturbance whenever I read one of the

WBC's press releases. These experiences remind me that I am always vulnerable to others and their language no matter how I manage it. However, by reading the WBC's writing as trolling rhetoric and then composing holes into it, I changed my position in relation to the text and its circulation. In doing so, I felt a small amount of catharsis, a sense that my vulnerability to their hate writing was enabling. Instead of perceiving my vulnerability as only negative potential, I began to perceive it as "more than openness to circumstance," as "a making do in the conjoined mental and physical worlds" that the text and I share (Marback, "Unclenching" 60). I was compelled to respond, but I learned to respond differently; I experienced vulnerability as a condition *and* a position.

A recent presentation of mine bore out similar experiences with redactance.[35] When I was invited by a colleague to present on the WBC's rhetoric to graduate students in her classical rhetoric seminar, I decided to bring with me the most recent press release posted to the WBC's homepage. As of this writing, the most recent one announces the WBC's plans to protest at Fort Hays State University in Kansas, and it includes ample denigration of colleges, universities, and their students:

> At Fort Hays State University, the students understand down to their toes that fags are the shizzle! The Fort Hays Office of Diversity makes sure, showing films on fags, e.g. Harvey Milk, that their students dare not lift a voice to speak for God, to wit: GOD HATES FAGS and GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS. How awful is this?! Even in the dark days before God sent a rebellious Israel into the Babylonian Captivity, there was yet a soul that dwelt in Jerusalem at the college, well known for her prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah. When the last of the good kings of Judah found that his evil grandfather had hidden the Book of the Law from the people, such that, like Doomed USA, the people did greatly err because of their lying preachers and leaders, the servants of God on the ground knew to send and seek God at the mouth of this goodly soul

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[35] I am deeply indebted to Dr. Lillian Bridwell-Bowles and the students in her Spring 2014 seminar on Classical Rhetoric for giving redactance a try and allowing me to share their work.

dwelling at the college! This generation cannot find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

The press release includes two graphics ("You Hate Your Kids" and "You Will Eat Your Babies"), and it closes on a blatantly anti-college note as well: "TEACH THAT! Offer PhDs in 'Why God Destroyed Sodom!'"

I brought a copy of the press release and a black marker for each person in the seminar. After showing the students the "Death Penalty for Fags" video posted to the WBC's homepage, I asked everyone how the video made them feel. Some of the reactions were visceral, with one student stating that she felt physically sick watching it. Others were disturbed by the cheery music and bright smiles featured in the video. More than a few of them expressed some shock through word or gesture while they were watching the video. I then passed out the press releases and asked everyone to read it thoroughly. Many expressed similar shock reading the text; a few did not want to finish it. The students, in other words, felt vulnerable to the WBC's rhetoric. Then I passed out the markers. After briefly introducing the GLP movement, I asked everyone to redact the texts into something more meaningful for them. As we all started to compose holes in the press releases, the mood in the room shifted dramatically. One student described the shift as a catharsis, a release of negativity after having been exposed to something that she perceived as violently disturbing.

The resulting poems (Appendix B) represented a wide range of responses, but a few patterns emerged. Many of the seminar students challenged the WBC's interpretation of "Diversity," turning the WBC's epideictic rhetoric of blame into a postmodern epideictic rhetoric of subversive praise. Several also cast the "students" mentioned in the press release as the central figures of their poems. For example:

students understand Diversity makes a soul well known for prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness good kings found that the people knew to send and seek the mouth of this goodly soul dwelling at college! This generation can find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

Another example:

Students understand a rebellious soul spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, good people find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

And another:

At Fort Hays State University, the students understand showing films on Harvey Milk, their students lift a voice to speak for God, to wit God sent a rebellious well known for spirit, When the last of the evil had hidden from the people, because of their lying God on the ground knew to send this goodly soul dwelling at the college! This generation can find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

What had originally been a text in which the WBC attacked students and their institutions thus became a text through which students expressed their positive perceptions of higher education and diversity. By composing holes, the seminar students repositioned themselves in relation to the text, engineering new subject positions unbound by the intentions and exploitations of the WBC. In this way, redactance served as a kind of precarious pedagogy, a subversive form of rhetorical training derived from the WBC's own trolling rhetoric. It was, in other words, a lesson in the rhetorical management of vulnerability.

Conclusion

As I write this conclusion, the WBC is back in the national headlines. But this time, the circumstances are reversed. On March 14, 2014, Fred Waldron Phelps, the notorious founder and leader of the WBC, passed away at the age of 84. Making the event particularly newsworthy was the revelation that, prior to his death, Phelps had been excommunicated from his own congregation, reportedly for advocating "a kinder

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approach between church members" (Fry). As one might expect, word of Fred Phelps's death attracted considerable media attention and a wide range of responses. Lucien Greaves, spokesman for the Satanic Temple in New York, promised to perform a "'Pink Mass'" over Phelps's grave, representing what he called a "'post-mortem homosexual conversion'" (qtd. in Nichols). In contrast, Leigh Johnson, a blogger at *New APPS*, called on the LGBTQ community to "'be quiet a minute'" and try to muster up some modicum of compassion for a fellow human being; she went on to ask "which holes do those of us (who are the remaining among us) try to plug with the dust of those who have passed? How do we make productive use of the loam we have now been given?"

For their own part, the remaining members of the WBC did not express any public grief over their former patriarch's passing. In fact, Shirley Phelps-Roper, Fred Phelps's daughter, stated that the church would not be holding a funeral in his honor, telling CNN, "'We do not worship the dead'" (Burke, "Westboro Church Founder"). However, when the WBC protested at a concert in Kansas City shortly after Phelps's death, they were confronted by a group of counter-protestors across the street holding a sign that read "Sorry For Your Loss" (Hensley). Though the WBC would not acknowledge the grievability of the dead, including their own, the response they were met with confirmed some sentiment of grief even for a man who dedicated his life to the endless repetition and proliferation of hate. In other words, instead of repeating the tactics of the WBC, the counter-protestors responded differently by offering their condolences to church members.

As these recent events illustrate, responding to the WBC is incredibly difficult, especially for those targeted by their hateful trolling rhetoric. What strikes me, however,

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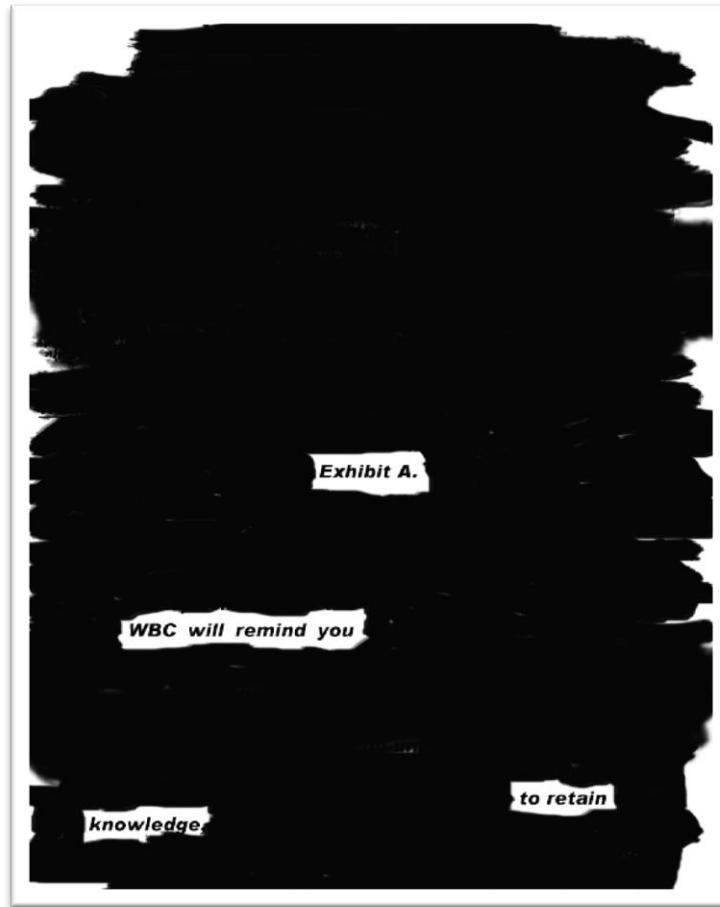
Figure 4: "Exhibit A. WBC will remind you to retain knowledge"

are the rhetorical strategies of those who choose to oppose the church by enacting an unexpected response, subverting the church protestors' own attempts at subversion. Instead of trying to manage vulnerability by "plugging up holes," these responders challenge the church by accepting, or even insisting on, some measure of vulnerability— in other words, by composing holes (Johnson). And this gesture applies not only to speech, but also to writing. As *GodLovesPoetry.com* illustrates, the citationality of language—the vulnerability of language—is not simply the framework for language's operation and our common exposure to its effects; it is also a potential framework for resistance to those very operations. With that in mind, I will conclude this analysis of the

WBC and their responders by offering one last poem currently posted to the *God Loves Poetry* homepage (pictured above), one that echoes (with a difference) the legal language used in the case of *Snyder v. Phelp*s: "Exhibit A. WBC will remind you to retain knowledge" (Cobb).

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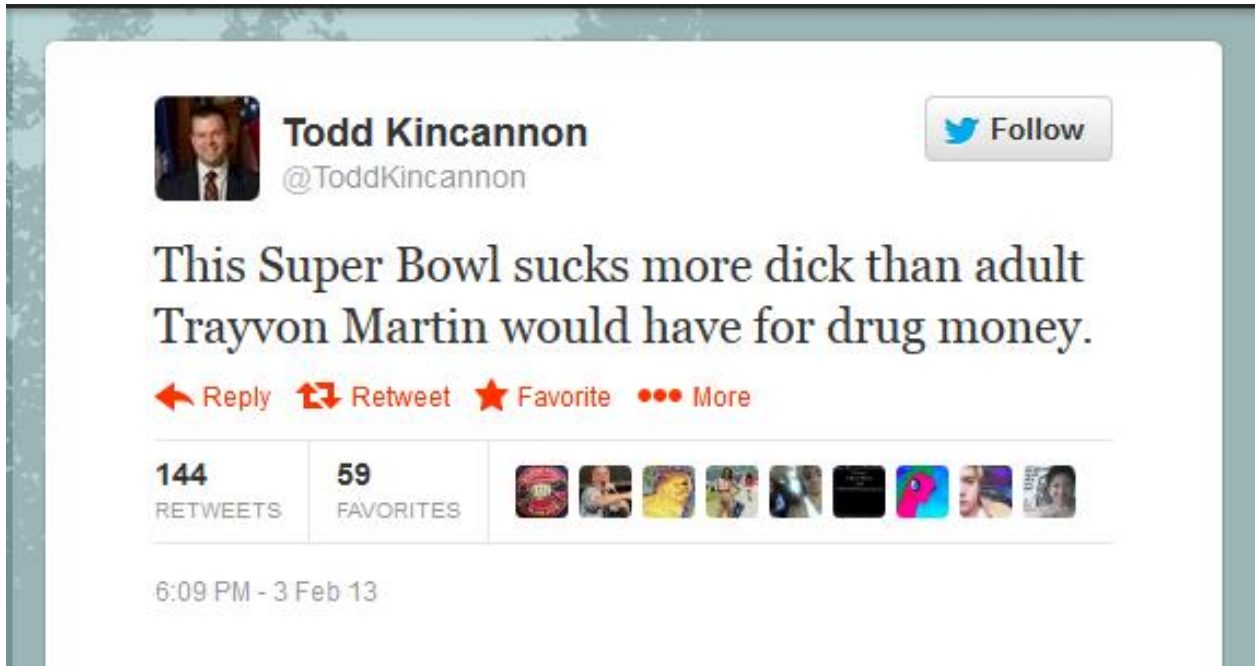
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Todd Kincannon
@ToddKincannon

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This Super Bowl sucks more dick than adult Trayvon Martin would have for drug money.

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144
RETWEETS

59
FAVORITES

6:09 PM - 3 Feb 13

Todd Kincannon
@ToddKincannon

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It hasn't been this dark in the Superdome since all those poors occupied it after Hurricane Katrina.

← Reply ⟲ Retweet ★ Favorited ••• More

26
RETWEETS

13
FAVORITES

6:49 PM - 3 Feb 13

Todd Kincannon
@ToddKincannon

Follow

.@coreybking Hey what's the difference between Trayvon
Martin and a dead baby? They're both dead, but Pepsi
doesn't taste like Trayvon.

1:57 AM - 04 Feb 13

6 RETWEETS

Derrick Todd
@Derricktodd

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@ToddKincannon that's why I like you Todd,
balls of pure steel.

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RETWEETS	FAVORITE
3	1

6:16 PM - 3 Feb 2013

Debbie Caplan
@DebbieCaplanPR

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@ToddKincannon Did you really go after a murdered teenager? Why go there? Do you have kids, if so, then why would you hurt parents this way?

Reply Retweet Favorite More

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6 8
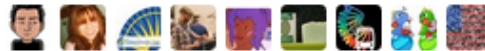
7:05 PM - 3 Feb 2013

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@hjaybee

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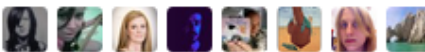
7:16 AM - 4 Feb 2013

Dawn Catherine
@DAWNCATHERINE

Follow

@ToddKincannon Really? You're going to go after a 17yr old murder victim - have fun on that fast train to hell you destined for! #nosoul

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RETWEETS   FAVORITES
6   6

11:52 PM - 3 Feb 2013

XXX
@hjaybee

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@ToddKincannon <--- I'm really hoping this is a troll account

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1

7:11 AM - 4 Feb 2013

APPENDIX B
REDACTANCE POEMS

The following poems were created on April 28, 2014, in Dr. Lillian-Bridwell Bowles's Classical Rhetoric Seminar (Louisiana State University, Spring 2014) and are reproduced here with the permission of her students. These poems were created by redacting the press release "Westboro Baptist Church to Picket Fort Hays State University, at Gross Memorial Coliseum (600 Park Street, Hays, KS) on Saturday, May 17 from 9:15 AM to 10:00 AM," which was posted to *GodHatesFags.com* on April 27, 2014. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Bridwell-Bowles and her students.

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WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH TO PICKET FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY, AT GROSS MEMORIAL COLISEUM (600 PARK STREET, HAYS, KS) ON SATURDAY, MAY 17 FROM 9:15 AM TO 10:00 AM

YOU HATE YOUR KIDS

YOU WILL EAT YOUR BABIES

Lev. 26:27-29

At Fort Hays State University, the students understand down to their toes that fags are the shizzle! The Fort Hays Office of Diversity makes sure, showing films on fags, e.g. Harvey Milk, that their students dare not lift a voice to speak for God, to wit GOD HATES FAGS and GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS. How awful is this?! Even in the dark days before God sent a rebellious Israel into the Babylonian Captivity, there was yet a soul that dwelt in Jerusalem at the college, well known for her prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah. When the last of the good kings of Judah found that his evil grandfather had hidden the Book of the Law from the people, such that, like Doomed USA the people did greatly err because of their lying preachers and leaders; the servants of God on the ground knew to send and seek God at the mouth of this goodly soul dwelling at the college! This generation cannot find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

Inasmuch as Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever, WBC, like the prophets of old, tells you: YOU DO, and WILL eat your children! "Hear ye the word of the LORD... Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, ... and have filled this place with the blood of innocents (4,000 dead babies a day); They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter. ...and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seek their lives: and their carcases will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth. ...And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them." (Jeremiah 19:3-9) TEACH THAT! Offer PhDs in "Why God Destroyed Sodom!"

REPENT OR PERISH - GOD H8S FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!

Westboro Baptist Church

Sunday, April 27, 2014

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At Fort Hays State University, the students understand down to their toes that fags are the chizzel! The Fort Hays Office of Diversity makes sure, showing films on fags, e.g. Harvey Milk, that their students dare not lift a voice to speak for God, to wit: GOD HATES FAGS and GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS. How awful is this?! Even in the dark days before God sent a rebellious Israel into the Babylonian Captivity, there was yet a soul that dwelt in Jerusalem at the college, well known for her prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah. When the last of the good kings of Judah found that his evil grandfather had hidden the Book of the Law from the people, such that, like Doomed USA, the people did greatly err because of their lying preachers and leaders, the servants of God on the ground knew to send and seek God at the mouth of this goodly soul dwelling at the college! This generation cannot find wisdom at their colleges and universities!

Inasmuch as Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever, WBC, like the prophets of old, tells you YOU DO, and WILL eat your children! "Hear ye the word of the LORD... Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, ... and have filled this place with the blood of innocents (4,000 dead babies a day); They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter. ...and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seek their lives: and their carcases will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth. ...And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them." (Jeremiah 19:3-9) TEACH THAT! Offer PhDs in "Why God Destroyed Sodom!

REPENT OR PERISH - GOD H8S FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!

students toes sure lift a awful rebellious soul.
College spirit. found doomed leaders at the mouth of wisdom.

176

WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH TO PICKET FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY, AT GROSS MEMORIAL COLISEUM (600 PARK STREET, HAYS, KS) ON SATURDAY, MAY 17 FROM 9:15 AM TO 10:00 AM

YOU HATE YOUR KIDS

YOU WILL EAT YOUR BABIES
Lev. 26:27-29

At Fort Hays State University, the students understand ... to their low ... the ... The Fort ... Office of ... makes sure, showing them ... students dare not lift a voice ... God, ... GOD HATES FAGS ... GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS ... How awful is this! ... in the dark days before God sent a rebellious ... into the Babylonian Captivity, there was yet a sed... ... Jerusalem at the college, well known for her prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah. When that good ... the good ... king of Judah found that his ... grandfather had hidden the Book of the Law from the people, such that, like Doomed USA, the people too greatly err because of their lying preachers and leaders, the servants of God on the ground knew to send and seek God ... of this godly soul-dwelling at the college! This generation cannot find ... from at their colleges and universities.

Inasmuch as Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever, WBC ... prophets of old tells you, YOU DID and WILL eat your children. "Hear ye the word of the LORD... Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring ... evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned ... unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known ... and have filled this place with the blood of innocents (4,000 dead babies a day); They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind. Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter. And I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seek their lives: and their carcases will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth. And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them." (Jeremiah 19:3-9) TEACH ... Ph.D.'s as Wry God. Destroyed Sodom!

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████████████████████████ students understand ███

█████ Diversity makes ███████

████████████████████████

████████████████████████

███████████████ a soul
███████ well known for

██ prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, ███
good kings ██████ found that ████████

████████ the people ████████

████████████ knew to send and seek ██

██ the mouth of this goodly soul dwelling at ██ college! This generation can██ find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

████████████████████ yesterday, today and for ever, ████████

████████████████████████

████████████████████ Behold, I will bring

████████████████████████

████████████████████████

████████████████████████

████████████████████████

████████████████████████

████████████████ by the
hands of them that seek their lives: ███████ I give ██████

██████ heaven ███████████ I will cause them to ██

████████████████████████

████████████████████ TEACH THAT!

██████████████████

Christie Mills Davidsons

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████ Diversity ████████, showing films on Harvey Milk, ████ their students dare ████ lift a voice to speak ████

████████ days ████████████ rebellious ████████████████, there was yet a soul that dwelt ████████████ at the college, well known for her prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, ██ This generation can ██ find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

██); They have built also the high places ████████████████████ which I commanded ████████████ Therefore, behold, the days ████████████ that this place shall ████ be ████████████████████████████████████ seek their lives: ██ TEACH THAT!

REPENT OR PERISH — GOD H8S FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!

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Lev. 26:27-29

At Fort Hays State University, the students understand down to their toes that fags are the shizzle! The Fort ... Diversity makes sure, showing films of fags, e.g. Harvey Milk, that the students dare not ... voice to speak for God; to wit: GOD HATES FAGS & GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS. How about it, this ... Even in the dark days before God sent a rebellious Israel into the Babylonian Captivity, there was yet a soul ... that dwelt in Jerusalem at the college, well known for her prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah. When the last of the good kings of Judah found that his evil grandfather had hidden the Book of the Law from the people, such that, like Doomed USA, the people did greatly err because of their lying preachers and leaders, the servants of God on the ground knew to send and seek God at the mouth of this goodly soul dwelling at the college. This generation can't find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

Inasmuch as Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever, WBC, like the prophets of old, tells you: YOU DO, and WILL ... "Hear ye the word of the LORD. ...Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, ... and have filled this place with the blood of innocents (4,000 dead babies a day); They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter. ...and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seek their lives: and their carcases will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth. ...And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them." (Jeremiah 19:3-9) TEACH THAT! Offer PhDs in "Why God Destroyed Sodom!"

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students understand

a rebellious soul

Lev. 26:27-29

spirit, prudence, and faithfulness,

good

people,

wisdom at their colleges and universities.

fall

seek

and

TEACH

REPENT OR PERISH - GOD H8S FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!

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WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH TO PICKET FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY, AT GROSS MEMORIAL COLISEUM (600 PARK STREET, HAYS, KS) ON SATURDAY, MAY 17 FROM 9:45 AM TO 10:00 AM

YOU HATE YOUR KIDS

YOU WILL EAT YOUR BABIES Lev. 26:27-29

At Fort Hays State University, the students understand ~~down to their toes that fags are~~ ~~The Fort Hays Office of Diversity makes sure~~, showing films on ~~fags, like~~ Harvey Milk, ~~and~~ their students ~~do not~~ lift a voice to speak for God, to wit ~~GOD HATES FAGS and GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS. How awful is this? Even in the dark days before~~ God sent a rebellious ~~Israel into the Babylonian Captivity, there was yet a soul that dwelt in Jerusalem at the~~ college, well known for ~~her prophetic~~ spirit, ~~prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah~~. When the last of the ~~good kings of Judah found that his evil grandfather~~ had hidden ~~the Scriptures, the Law~~ from the people, ~~such that, like Deuteronomy 28, the people did greatly fear~~ because of their lying ~~preachers and leaders, the servants of~~ God on the ground knew to send ~~and seek God at the mouth of~~ this goodly soul dwelling at the college! This generation cannot find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

Inasmuch as ~~he~~, yesterday, ~~today, and forever, GOD, through~~ ~~prophets of old, tells you~~: YOU ~~have and~~ WILL ~~eat your children!~~ "Hear ye the word of ~~the LORD... Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring~~ evil upon this place, ~~the which whosoever heareth, his~~ ears shall tingle. Because they have ~~forsaken me, and have estranged~~ this place, ~~and have~~ burned ~~incense~~ ~~in it unto~~ other gods, whom ~~neither~~ they ~~nor their fathers~~ have known, ... and have ~~filled this place with the blood of innocents (dead~~ babies ~~today); They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD,~~ that this place shall no more ~~be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of~~ slaughter. ~~...and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that~~ seek their lives: and ~~their carcases will I give to~~ be ~~meat~~ for ~~the~~ fowls of the heaven, and ~~for the beasts~~ of the earth. ...And I ~~will cause them to~~ eat ~~the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend~~ in the siege ~~and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them."~~ (Jeremiah 19:3-9) TEACH ~~THAT!~~ Offer PhDs in "Why God ~~Destroyed Sodom!~~"

REPENT OR PERISH – GOD HATES FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!

(handwritten top left, illegible signature)

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Sunday, April 27, 2014

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At Fort Hays State University, the students ~~are~~ are the shizzle! ~~Fort Hays~~ showing films on ~~Harvey Milk~~, ~~their attempts to~~

YOU WILL EAT YOUR BABIES

YOUR KIDS

~~well known for~~ prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, ~~in the last of~~

~~of this goodly soul dwelling~~ This ~~generation~~ wisdom at their colleges and universities.

Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever, ~~the prophets of old, telling you YOU DO, and WILL eat your children. "Hear ye the word of the LORD... Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, and have filled this place with the blood of innocents (4,000 dead babies a day); They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Topheth, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter ...and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seek their lives: and their carcases will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth. ...And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them." (Jeremiah 19:3-9)*** TEACH THAT! ~~Offer PhDs in "Why God Destroyed Sodom!"~~

~~REPENT OR PERISH: GOD HSS FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!~~

– RJM

Westboro Baptist Church

(WBC Chronicles – Since 1955)

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Religious Opinion & Bible Commentary on Current Events

Sunday, April 27, 2014

NEWS RELEASE

(Background, photos, video, sermons, parodies & hymns at www.GodHatesTheMedia.com, www.GodHatesIslam.com, Blogs.SpareNet.com, www.BeastObama.com, www.SignMovies.com, www.JewsKilledJesus.com, www.GodHatesTheWorld.com & www.PriestsRapeBoys.com)

WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH TO PICKET FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY AT GROSS MEMORIAL COLISEUM (600 PARK STREET, HAYS, KS) ON SATURDAY, MAY 17 FROM 9.15 AM TO 10:00 AM

YOU YOUR KIDS   **YOU WILL YOUR BABIES**   Lev. 26:27-29

At Fort Hays State University, the students understand down to their toes that ~~fags are the chiefet! The Fort~~ ~~...~~ voice to speak for God, to wit: ~~...~~ God sent ~~...~~ a soul ~~...~~ at the college, well known for her prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah. ~~When the last of the good kings... found that his evil grandfather had hidden the Book of the Law from... such that like Daniel and his people, diligently inquiring of their dying... and teachers, the servants~~ of God on the ground knew to send and seek God at the mouth of this goodly soul dwelling at the college! ~~The generation cannot find wisdom at their colleges and universities.~~

Inasmuch as Jesus ~~Christ is the same,~~ yesterday, today and for ever ~~...~~ ~~prophets of old... the you...~~ YOU DO, and WILL ~~...your children.~~ "Hear ye the word of the LORD... Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; ~~Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known,... and have filled this place with the blood of innocents (4,000 dead babies a day). They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings~~ unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, ~~that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter. And I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seek their lives: and their carcases will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth. ... And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them." (Jeremiah 19:2-9)~~ TEACH THAT! Offer PhD's ~~in "Why God Destroyed Sodom".~~

REPENT OR PERISH - GOD H8S FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!

Westboro Baptist Church

~~WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH TO PICKET FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY, AT GROSS MEMORIAL COLISEUM (600 PARK STREET, HAYS, KS) ON SATURDAY, MAY 17 FROM 9:15 AM TO 10:00 AM~~

YOU ~~EAT YOUR~~ YOUR KIDS

YOU WILL EAT YOUR BABIES
Lev. 26:27-29

~~At Fort Hays State University, the~~ students understand ~~down to their toes that fags are the abomb! The Fort Hays Office of Diversity makes sure, showing films on fags, e.g. Harvey Milk, that their students dare not lift a voice to speak for God, so that GOD HATES FAGS and GOD HATES FAG ENABLERS.~~ How awful is this?! ~~Even in the darkest prophets, God sent a rebellious Israel into the Babylonian Captivity, there was yet a soul that dwelt in Jerusalem at the college, well known for his prophetic spirit, prudence, and faithfulness, named Huldah. When the last of the good kings of Judah found that his evil grandfather had hidden the Book of the Law from the people, such that, like Deemed USA, the people did greatly err because of their lying preachers and leaders, the servants of God on the ground knew to send and seek God at the mouth of this goodly soul dwelling at the college.~~ This generation cannot find wisdom at their colleges and universities.

Inasmuch as ~~Jesus Christ is the same,~~ yesterday, today and for ever, ~~WBC, like the prophets of old, tells you. YOU DO, and WILL eat your children! "Hear ye the word of the LORD. Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel; Behold, I~~ will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. ~~Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, ... and have filled this place with the blood of innocents (4,000 dead babies a day); They have built also the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of slaughter. ...and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies, and by the hands of them that seek their lives: and their carcases will I give to be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth. ...And I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they shall eat every one the flesh of his friend in the siege and straitness, wherewith their enemies, and they that seek their lives, shall straiten them." (Jeremiah 19:3,9)~~ TEACH THAT! ~~Offer Chum in ~~ Why God Destroyed Sodom?~~

~~REPENT OR PERISH – GOD H8S FAGS & FAG ENABLERS!~~

VITA

David J. Riche grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana. After Hurricane Katrina, he relocated with his family to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 2007, he earned his Bachelor of Arts in English from Loyola University New Orleans, where he also worked as an undergraduate tutor and writing fellow for their Writing across the Curriculum program and published in two of their undergraduate journals. He began his graduate studies at LSU in 2007, joining the English Department as a graduate teaching assistant. During his time at LSU, he has taught several writing and general education courses, presented at multiple local and national conferences, tutored students in the writing center, served as the assistant writing program administrator, and consulted with educational leaders as an extern for the Iberville Parish School District. In 2011, he helped coordinate the Council of Writing Program Administrators' national conference in Baton Rouge. He has also won several teaching awards at LSU, including the English Department's Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award, the English Graduate Student Association's Sarah Liggett Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the LSU Alumni Association's Teaching Assistant Award.