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and the Short-Circuiting of Civic Discourse

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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ABSTRACT

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and the Short-Circuiting of Civic Discourse

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On November 9, 2016, Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. No aspect of the campaign was more remarkable than Trump's rhetoric, which ranged from the candid and unexpected to the crude and incendiary. Now, two years later, his rhetoric—and the reasons for its widespread appeal—remain largely opaque, even under examination from proto-fascist or populist lenses. I seek for a partial account of Trump's rhetoric using the concept of antinomic rhetoric coupled with the widespread popular perception of him as similar to an internet troll. In short, I believe it is his *violation* of the conventional standards (*nomoi*) of rhetoric—his "trolling"— that best explains his remarkable rhetoric. Antinomic rhetoric, as I characterize it here, aims at disruption instead of persuasion and employs deception and aggression instead of shared values and rational proofs. By examining a series of rhetorical exchanges between Trump and Senator Elizabeth Warren, I find evidence that his use of antinomic rhetoric derails conversations, dissolves the standards of rational civic discourse, and draws his opponents into unforced strategic errors. These effects contribute to a chaotic environment where more "ordinary" persuasion can take place on territory more favorable to Trump. I also draw broader inferences about Trump's use of antinomic rhetoric in rhetorical exchanges other than the ones analyzed here and inquire into what further questions could be asked to deepen our understanding of Trump's trollery and of antinomic rhetoric in general.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Troll-in-Chief: Donald Trump, Antinomic Rhetoric,

and the Short-Circuiting of Civic Discourse

Introduction

On June 16, 2015, Donald J. Trump announced his candidacy in the 2016 election for

President of the United States. As is customary on these occasions, he gave a brief speech

outlining his political positions and explaining his motives for seeking the presidency. Trump's

speech, however, was anything but customary. He discarded his prepared remarks almost

immediately in favor of an impromptu riff in a conversational style. Even more surprising was

the content of his speech, particularly one line that echoed through news reports:

> When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best . . . They're bringing drugs.
>
> They're bringing crime. They're rapists. (Time)

The speech's chaotic structure and eyebrow-raising statements were a harbinger of the broader

patterns of rhetorical utterance and behavior that came to mark his campaign. He openly mocked

his fellow GOP candidates in the primary process, picking off opponent after opponent in a

fashion that was somehow both surgical and flamboyant. In the general election he made the

criminal investigation and potential incarceration of his Democratic opponent a major pillar of

his campaign. He survived the release of the *Access Hollywood* video, which incriminated him

morally and plausibly even criminally. And in the midst of all of this, he continued to employ

rhetoric that seemed designed to intensify rather than pacify the storm of controversy

surrounding him. In October 2016, one month before the presidential election, a piece in the *New

York Times* described then-candidate Trump's rhetoric as "apocalyptic," "crude," "almost

without precedent," "enrage[ing]," "unnerve[ing]," and perhaps even a "political death wish"

(Martin). And yet, on November 9 of that year, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States.

As apparently crude and unsophisticated as Trump's rhetoric may seem, its success in shaping the political scene in 2016 and beyond mandates that we form a deeper understanding of Trump's rhetoric than merely describing it as apocalyptic, crude, or unnerving. Two years of reflection have given us ample time to begin to understand the impact of Trump's rhetoric on the arc of his political career—yet, two years later, Trump's rhetoric resists analysis. The general contours of Trump's rhetorical style and content are so well known that it is easy to lose a particular utterance in a sea of general attributes—likely including apparent stylistic crudity, blatant evasion and deception, and unblushing impropriety. These are the material facts which are relatively obvious, but finding a deeper explanation of his rhetorical practices has proved less fruitful than we might wish. Fascism and demagoguery are two lenses that have been proposed to explain the notable political success of Trump's rhetoric, but both these theories lack the desired explanatory power.

Political theorist William Connolly identifies Trump as "a skilled rhetorician of a *new* American fascism" (S-29, emphasis in original). Most critics will agree that Trump's policies and rhetoric can be construed as authoritarian, but this explanation leaves something to be desired because it misses the broader rhetorical point. Supposing that the semantic content of Trump's rhetoric is indeed proto-fascist (perhaps with other totalitarian flair, depending on the ideological idiosyncrasies of the one performing the analysis), this does little to explain its effectiveness as rhetorical practice. There is nothing worth explaining about voters choosing a candidate they agree with; if the sum of the matter is that Trump is fascist and American tastes

are fascist then there is nothing worth saying about his rhetoric. But I think most will agree that there *is* something about Trump's rhetoric that deserves explanation.

The position has also been advanced that we should view him as a highly skilled demagogue, a view which appears to run in close harmony with describing his political positions or appeal as populist. Such a position appears to be advanced by Jennifer Mercieca in her coming book, *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Brilliance of Donald Trump*. According to this position, we should view him simply as a conniving huckster who uses a variety of argumentative and stylistic strategies to dupe the ignorant and gullible. This explanation, however, also seems less than satisfactory. For one, it seems to suggest that what makes his rhetoric remarkable is how he excels at deploying conventional rhetorical techniques—but I think the instinctual feeling of most observers will be that the remarkable aspect of his rhetoric is how untraditional, unusual, and apparently crude it is. Regardless of how many times he cleverly uses paralipsis or *ad baculum* appeals, it will likely strain our common sense to believe that he is a simply a master rhetorician—at least, in any ordinary sense.

There are other problems with the position that merely labels him a scarily effective demagogue. For one thing, the term 'demagogue' is too pejorative—it is unclear what insight we gain by merely condemning Trump's rhetoric. If we allege that his rhetoric is populist (perhaps a less pejorative articulation of the demagoguery claim) it is also not clear that we are deepening our insight. In his summary of the academic conversation on populism in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Takis S. Pappas notes the absence of a "comprehensive general theory" or even a "minimal definition" of populism. Even if the accusation of populism is more than merely pejorative, the lack of a consistent definition of populism complicates this line of inquiry considerably. It is not my intent to assert that authoritarianism, populism, or merely old-

fashioned rhetorical figures are useless towards understanding Trump's rhetoric; rather that these lenses lack, as I said, the desired explanatory power. The most flamboyant, extravagant, and fantastic aspects of Trump's rhetoric are not explained by his populist appeals (other politicians can and do employ these) nor his effective use of rhetorical figures (employed, again, by other politicians). How could he have survived the leak of the *Access Hollywood* tape? How did he manage to stand out in a crowded field of Republican candidates—particularly given his lack of political experience? How could he break so many rules of American political rhetoric and still somehow succeed? These questions still loom over us; there is something genuinely remarkable about his rhetoric. Rather than looking for an explanation of his success in his adherence to one rhetorical pattern or another, I look for an explanation in his striking abandonment of conventional rhetorical patterns. In my view it is roughly this unusualness itself (what I will describe more technically as antinomic rhetoric) that is a necessary and neglected explanatory factor in his rhetorical success. My analysis will apply the concept of antinomic rhetoric in conjunction with an academic definition of trolling to a particular rhetorical exchange between then-candidate and later President Trump and Senator Elizabeth Warren. I will argue that we can best understand Trump's rhetoric if we view it as aimed at disruption and employing deception and aggression rather than aimed at persuasion and employing rational proofs and shared values. The contrast between these two approaches will define the antinomic character of his rhetoric and partially illustrate why he has been so strangely successful.

Nomos and Antinomic Rhetoric

Nomos means simply "law;" but contextually is understood to mean something like "institutions, conventions, and social beliefs," both those explicitly codified in law and those more implicitly acted out by a society (Kennedy 30). As one might suspect, *nomos* is relevant to

Greek oratory in general and particularly to Aristotle's forensic genre, with the law (explicit and implicit) as a key source of authority for persuasion (Carey 46; Kastely 129). The role of *nomos* was refigured and highlighted in recent times by Susan Jarratt in her rereading of the Sophists, who proposes that *nomoi* occupy an intermediate space between the poetic *mythos* that undergirded Greek civilization and the explicit *logos* of philosophy (42, 60). Unlike the primitive *mythos*, *nomoi* are deliberately chosen via discourse; unlike the unchanging, philosophic *logos*, *nomoi* are historically, geographically, and culturally contingent. According to Jarratt, rhetoric has a special ability to both shape and reveal *nomoi* (through the creative and analytical modes of rhetoric respectively) (74). Note that the analytical function of rhetoric examines a *nomos* at arm's length and pronounces judgment on it, while the creative function of rhetoric *actively reconstitutes* the *nomos* without the *nomos* being the explicit semantic object of a rhetorical utterance. Rhetoric in turn is shaped by *nomoi*; social discourse is constrained by social norms, as are the criteria for accepted proof. The linguistic framework itself by which discourse is conducted can be considered a provisional social code—a *nomos*.

Antinomic rhetoric—rhetoric against the *nomos*—is a term that was employed by Kristie Susan Fleckenstein in her treatment of visual antinomy. According to her, antinomic rhetoric privileges change in social order by constantly dismantling and reconstituting that order (115-117). Presumably rhetoric can be antinomic in both its creative and analytic functions: rhetorical criticism can evaluate the *nomos* from a critical distance while creative rhetorical utterances distend, distort, or break the boundaries of social custom. I will use the term antinomic discourse in the sense described: symbolic communication that by either creative or critical operation works to upend, alter, or replace a *nomos*.

I also argue that Jarratt's nesting of *logos* inside *nomos* and *mythos* has consequences for Aristotelian conceptions of civic rhetoric and persuasion. In *Deliberative Acts: Democracy, Rhetoric, and Rights*, Arabella Lyon identifies and challenges the ongoing relevance of three crucial norms of Aristotelian civic rhetoric: shared values, rational discourse, and proofs (33). All three of these operate, I argue, on the level of *logos*, nested inside a *nomos*. *Nomoi* are specifically those social codes, those norms and standards that are shared by a community. Rational discourse and proofs imply conventions of rationality and standards of acceptable proof—a kind of framework for guiding civic discourse.

As an analytic activity, antinomic rhetoric can criticize the *nomos* without actually changing it. But as creative activity, antinomic rhetoric makes an additional move: it actively dissolves the *nomos* by violating its standards. Hence, antinomic rhetoric of the creative variety simply does not persuade on the level of *logos*. It struggles to effectively employ proofs, rational discourse, or shared values, *because the foundation for all these—the* nomos—*is precisely the matter under dispute*. Battles are fought on the level of logical propositions, but the larger war exists on the deeper level of embodied norms, conventions, and forms of discourse.

The antinomic character of Trump's rhetoric has already been partially raised under a non-rhetorical, colloquial classification: that of internet trolling. Internet trolling can be loosely defined as intentionally sowing conflict in online communities by posting inflammatory or tangential material and can refer to the person acting as well as the act itself[1]. Internet trolls are presumed to do this merely for amusement ("for the lulz") or alternately to specifically disrupt some normal operation of the targeted online community. Various pundits and publications have

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[1] My definition here is derived from a variety of popular sources, including *Wikipedia*, *Urban Dictionary*, news sources, and tech blogs. A more technical and academic discussion of trolling is presented in the following paragraph.

compared Trump to an internet troll. Nate Silver of *FiveThirtyEight* labeled him "the world's greatest troll" and the *New York Times* ran an opinion piece in July 2018 titled "For Whom the Trump Trolls" (Dowd). The description has become something of a meme—Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, challenged to defend President Trump's threat to revoke the security clearances of former national security officials, responded that he thought Trump was just "trolling people, honestly" (Serfaty et al.). The recurrence of this descriptor invites further analysis: is it merely a meme to label Trump the troll-in-chief? Or can his trolling be regarded as a rhetorical practice to which he partially owes a portion of his success? I will argue that trolling can be regarded as an antinomic rhetorical practice—a twenty-first century reapplication of the ancient Greek idea of *nomoi* to rhetoric.

Claire Hardaker's research provides the best academic definition to date of online trolling, although here we will apply the definition in both online and offline contexts. An online troll is a user "who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement" (Hardaker 237). Hardaker goes on to describe four identifying criteria of trolling: deception through an assumed persona that masks the troll's true intent, aggression designed to elicit annoyance, anger, or retaliation from other users, disruption of the course of the online conversation, and success in the troll's ability to execute the previous three criteria without detection or impedance from the community being trolled (216). These underlying factors create the externally visible 'face' of trolling: statements that ordinary online community members perceive as inflammatory or obtuse.

Although it certainly is possible to engage in this kind of discourse purely for amusement, it is not hard to see how trolling could be employed as a strategic technique. Rather than persuading one's audience, a troll can disrupt the conversation through antagonistic rhetoric. Regardless of whether or not the troll sincerely agrees with his or her own statements, the audience will often feel compelled to respond and defend against the antagonistic rhetoric, potentially abandoning lines of argument that are more important or more advantageous. The audience is baited—trolled—into litigating parts of the discussion that are either suboptimal or genuinely disadvantageous.

Speaking generally a troll operates by inciting the community to respond in a way that, while initially appearing logical, is actually against the community's own best interests. Two theories of the origin of the term "trolling" applied to online discourse will illustrate this. "Trolling" as a term referring to strategic provocation may have originated in the US Air Force during the Vietnam War (Bishop 8). "Trolling for MIGs" referred to sending out lead fighter jets to draw off and lure away enemy fighter jets into a fruitless chase while the typically slower and more vulnerable dive bombers proceeded unimpeded to their targets. The term "trolling" also has resonances to the fishing technique of the same name, where one or more baited hooks are dragged through the water to attract fish. In both these apocryphal etymologies, we see similar themes of baiting and goading an opponent and deception by misdirection—as Hardaker says, deception, aggression, and disruption.

The broader point is that this description of trolling intersects with the concept of antinomic rhetoric in compelling ways. First, the antagonistic rhetoric employed by trolls is very likely in itself to transgress social standards of tasteful conversation. It will often be rude, offensive, or extreme in some other way. Second (and perhaps more importantly), trolling

inherently constitutes a significant breach in the specific *nomos* of Aristotelian civic rhetoric. Shared values, rational discourse, and standards of proof are useful for persuading an audience to one's point of view. In contrast, trolling aims at disruption, not persuasion; it is opaque and deceptive instead of transparent and logical; it eschews proof and employs distraction; instead of attempting to reach consensus with interlocutors it views them with a deliberately hostile attitude. Trolling is antinomic by nature.

"Pocahontas": Trump's Feud with Elizabeth Warren

As noted above, we can generally characterize Trump's rhetoric as inelegant, evasive, and vulgar. It should also be noted that all three can be categorized *prima facie* as violations of social conventions of political and presidential rhetoric—in other words, as antinomic. Nowhere is Trump's unconventional rhetoric so evident as in the frequent personal feuds he engages in on Twitter and elsewhere. He is famous for his nicknames: Crooked Hillary, Lyin' Ted, Liddle Marco, and so forth. One of the most salient examples of his nicknaming and personal feuding is his repeated rhetorical engagements with Senator Elizabeth Warren. In these exchanges we will clearly see Trump's famous trolling style on full display, and by examining these exchanges as examples of antinomic rhetoric greater insight will be gained into both the artifact and the concept.

My analysis will use the method of concept-oriented criticism outlined by James Jasinski in his paper *The Status of Theory and Method in Rhetorical Criticism*. Jasinski calls for an analytic process that "might be thought of as a back and forth tacking movement between text and the concept or concepts that are being investigated simultaneously" (256). Although there are nascent literatures on the role of *nomos* in rhetoric and on trolling as a type of discourse, the definitions of these concepts remain as yet provisional and the borders of their meanings and

ranges of application are still being drawn. The relationship between Trump's rhetoric (together with Warren's responses) and the concept of antinomic rhetoric will be iteratively developed over the course of my analysis in three stages. First, I will present the first major Twitter exchange between Trump and Warren and comment on the ways that Trump's rhetoric can be characterized as antinomic. The second stage will deal with Warren's October 2018 DNA test announcement, the ensuing consequences for Warren's presidential ambitions, and put forward a probable argument that the antinomic character of Trump's rhetoric motivated Warren's decision. The third and final stage will explore how this analysis expands the general concept of antinomic rhetoric and asks to what degree Trump's political success can be assigned to his use of antinomic rhetoric.

An Antinomic Salvo: Trump's Trolling of Warren

Elizabeth Warren was elected as a Democratic Senator from Massachusetts in 2012, defeating Republican incumbent Scott Brown. Her name was briefly floated as a potential presidential and vice-presidential candidate in the 2016 election, but, although she endorsed Hillary Clinton for the presidency, she remained personally removed from the race (Milbank). In 2018, she won reelection to the Senate, and on December 31, 2018, she announced that she was forming an exploratory committee to run for president in 2020. On May 3, 2016, Trump's last Republican opponents dropped out of the race and he became the presumptive nominee of his party (Martin and Healy). That same day, Warren tweeted the following over the course of a few minutes:

> .@realDonaldTrump is now the leader of the @GOP. It's real - he is one step away from the White House. (@ewarren, ".@realDonaldTrump is now")

Here's what else is real: @realDonaldTrump has built his campaign on racism, sexism, and xenophobia. (@ewarren, "Here's what else")

There's more enthusiasm for @realDonaldTrump among leaders of the KKK than leaders of the political party he now controls. (@ewarren, "There's more enthusiasm")

.@realDonaldTrump incites supporters to violence, praises Putin, and is "cool with being called an authoritarian." (@ewarren, ".@realDonaldTrump incites supporters")

.@realDonaldTrump attacks vets like @SenJohnMcCain who were captured & puts our servicemembers at risk by cheerleading illegal torture. (@ewarren, ".@realDonaldTrump attacks vets")

@realDonaldTrump surrounds himself w/ foreign policy advisors who've been called a "collection of charlatans." (@ewarren, "@realDonaldTrump surrounds himself")

And @realDonaldTrump puts out out [sic] contradictory & nonsensical national security ideas one expert called "incoherent" & "truly bizarre." (@ewarren, "And @realDonaldTrump puts out")

What happens next will test the character for all of us – Republican, Democrat, and Independent. (@ewarren, "What happens next will")

It will determine whether we move forward as one nation or splinter at the hands of one man's narcissism and divisiveness. (@ewarren, "It will determine whether")

I'm going to fight my heart out to make sure @realDonaldTrump's toxic stew of hatred & insecurity never reaches the White House. (@ewarren, "I'm going to fight my heart out")

My claim is that Trump's rhetoric is antinomic in character: more specifically, that it deceives and antagonizes in order to disrupt with minimal concern for shared values, rational deliberation, and standards of proof. I have presented Warren's series of tweets primarily in order to contrast

them with Trump's subsequent replies and to demonstrate what is meant by antinomic rhetoric.

Consider that Warren's tweets can be stitched together into an intelligible sequence of ideas that

develops across the series of the tweets. Whatever the strict truth of her premises and whether the

inferences are strictly correct, Warren is making an intelligibly rational and potentially

persuasive claim with appeals that her audience is likely to resonate with, grounded in a shared

network of values. There is a claim; there is a line of reasoning; there is the intent to persuade the

audience. Warren's statements here are comfortably "nomic."

In contrast, consider Trump's response. Three days later, on May 6, 2016, he released a

barrage of tweets about Senator Warren:

> I hope corrupt Hillary Clinton chooses goofy Elizabeth Warren as her running mate. I
>
> will defeat them both. (@realDonaldTrump, "I hope corrupt Hillary Clinton")
>
> Let's properly check goofy Elizabeth Warren's records to see if she is Native American. I
>
> say she's a fraud! (@realDonaldTrump, "Let's properly check")
>
> Goofy Elizabeth Warren, Hillary Clinton's flunky, has a career that is totally based on a
>
> lie. She is not Native American. (@realDonaldTrump, "Goofy Elizabeth Warren")

The contrast between the two series of tweets (aside from length, of course) is striking and

illuminating. Trump's series of tweets is much harder to stitch together into a logical sequence. It

is not easy to identify a clear main claim or what evidence is being mustered to support that

claim. If the standard of good discourse requires appeal to shared values, rational argument, and

clear standards of inference and proof, then Trump's tweets clearly fail that standard. Trump's

statements here, I argue, are not even intended to be persuasive—at least not directly. Instead

they are intended primarily to aggravate Warren and distract her and everyone else from her

previous lines of argument—that is, Trump is trolling her from a position outside the *nomos* of

Aristotelian civic rhetoric. I want to make especially clear that Trump's rhetorical antinomy is not reducible to mere insults or extreme language; it implies a more profound breach in the normal order of social deliberation. Persuasion and disruption appear to be entirely different objectives employing entirely different modes of discourse.

If Trump's aim is trollish, antinomic disruption (in contrast to deliberative persuasion), then there are also intriguing consequences for our understanding of who Trump's audience is. The audience, according to Bitzer, is those "who are capable of being influenced by discourse and being mediators of change" (8). Presumably Warren's audience was the American people, whom Warren wished to sway against Trump—certainly we do not think that Warren expected her tweets to directly persuade Trump to drop out of the race. In general, we would suppose that a presidential candidate's audience is those voters who might be influenced to change their votes in that candidate's favor. In some sense, Trump's first (though not only) audience is Warren herself—not because he is trying to persuade her to adopt his views, but because he is trying to provoke her.

Ultimately, of course, Trump's final audience is the American public. He must persuade fifty-one percent of America to agree with him or to identify with him—that is a necessary condition of democratic elections. Viewing Trump's rhetoric as antinomic allows us to understand Trump's rhetoric as a two-step process: First, the existing *nomos* is fractured by his trolling. In and of itself, this is not necessarily persuasive to the electorate, particularly to the core base of his opponent or to the moderate middle. Dissolution of the existing *nomos* does, however, foment a chaotic environment with fewer clear standards of civic values and ambiguous rules of rhetorical engagement. Such an environment might reasonably produce the conditions where arguments that are doomed to failure in a structured environment of

Aristotelian civic rhetoric can prosper in the absence of otherwise robust competition. This is the second step: although trolling, *per se*, does not appear to be primarily persuasive in Aristotelian fashion or identificatory in Burkean fashion, it does create the environment where, to borrow the ancient turn of phrase, the weaker argument appears the stronger. Erosion of *nomoi* equate to a collective social inability to even discern what weaker and stronger arguments are. Such a chaotic environment may be the potential seedbed of a staggering diversity of public rhetoric; certainly in this case it permits Trump's unusual and unforeseen style of public discourse.

> Their exchange on Twitter continued that day with Warren replying almost immediately:
> I called out @realDonaldTrump on Tuesday. 45 million saw it. He's so confident about his "counter punch" he waited until Friday night. Lame. (@ewarren, "I called out @realDonaldTrump")
> "Goofy," @realDonaldTrump? For a guy with "the best words" that's a pretty lame nickname. Weak! (@ewarren, "'Goofy,' @realDonaldTrump?")
> We saw what happened when birthers like @realDonaldTrump attacked @BarackObama. They lost big. American voters knew better. (@ewarren, "We saw what happened")
> We saw when Scott Brown attacked my family & his staff made tomahawk chops & war whoops. They lost big. MA voters knew better. (@ewarren, "We saw when Scott Brown")
> .@realdonaldtrump is a bully who has a single play in his playbook -- offensive lies thrown at anyone who calls him out. (@ewarren, ".@realdonaldtrump is a bully")
> .@realDonaldTrump spews insults and lies because he can't have an honest conversation about his dangerous vision for America. (@ewarren, ".@realDonaldTrump spews insults")

But here's the thing. You can beat a bully -- not by tucking tail and running, but by

holding your ground. (@ewarren, "But here's the thing.")

If you think recycling Scott Brown's hate-filled attacks on my family is going to shut me

up, @realDonaldTrump, think again buddy. Weak. (@ewarren, "If you think recycling")

The @GOP's hate-filled lies didn't scare me before, @realDonaldTrump. And they don't

scare me now. (@ewarren, "The @GOP's hate-filled lies")

.@realDonaldTrump lied his way through the primaries without being held accountable.

That's over. (@ewarren, ".@realDonaldTrump lied his way")

Whatever @realDonaldTrump says, we won't shut up. We won't back down. This

election is too important, & he won't step foot in White House. (@ewarren, "Whatever

@realDonaldTrump says")

Once again, Warren's tweets are much easier to logically sequence than Trump's, and this series

of tweets shows many of the same characteristics as the previous series. However, some changes

may be noted, and in these we can begin to find the effects of antinomic rhetoric. In its creative

function, antinomic rhetoric attempts to dissolve the structure of the existing *nomos*—changes

the rules of the rhetorical game, as it were—but it is not obvious that the audience or target of the

antinomic rhetoric need respond in kind. Even if one side in a discussion were to employ

antinomic rhetoric as Trump does, rejecting the shared objectives, methods, and proofs that

previously bounded the conversation, the other side might plausibly choose any number of

strategies in response.

In internet parlance, the two main categories of response are described as feeding or not

feeding the trolls. To "feed the troll" is to engage directly with the troll's statements, treating

their comments as good-faith, authentic contributions to the conversation; to not feed them

typically means simply ignoring them (Hardaker 230). Critically, even to point out that a troll is a troll sometimes qualifies as feeding the troll, since it occupies discussion time that could more profitably be directed elsewhere (Hardaker 236). I believe that in these tweets we can see Warren taking the bait and feeding the troll (and we will see in the next section that it ultimately redounds to her detriment). Trump's tweets are (consciously or not) well-crafted bait, and it will likely not be immediately obvious that Warren should not leap to correct, criticize, and condemn her antagonist. Attacking one's opponent is taken for granted in politics, and particularly in a two-party system it is an obvious and common strategy. Here and elsewhere in this analysis, however, it will be evident that this strategy has a hidden potential cost in some circumstances— that of allowing one's opponent to define the terms of the rhetorical engagement and perhaps even the rhetorical *nomos* itself.

With this in mind, the first thing to note about these tweets is that Warren focuses exclusively on Trump—it appears she has opted to feed the troll. I repeat the caveat that not every criticism of a political antagonist constitutes trolling: if this were so then trolling would be so common a phenomenon as to be a practically useless tool for analysis. We should look to the broader pattern of utterances and responses as well as to the antinomic quality of the rhetoric employed by the troll. In this case, a broader pattern is evident. Warren's unidimensional focus was not lost on Trump himself. He replied on Twitter:

> Goofy Elizabeth Warren and her phony Native American heritage are on a Twitter rant.
> She is too easy! I'm driving her nuts. (@realDonaldTrump, "Goofy Elizabeth Warren and
> her phony")

> Goofy Elizabeth Warren is weak and ineffective. Does nothing. All talk, no action --
> maybe her Native American name? (@realDonaldTrump, "Goofy Elizabeth Warren is
> weak")

Trump's troll here is shockingly brazen. Hardaker comments that trolls typically have a vested interest in concealing their disruptive intent for fear that the targeted audience will quarantine the troll, but Trump was either confident (or perhaps oblivious) enough to avow his trollish intent in this way. Although certainty is impossible, we can reasonably suppose that this was a contributing reason to why Warren opted to cut off the conversation with one final rejoinder:

> No, @realDonaldTrump - your racism, sexism & xenophobia doesn't drive me nuts. It
> makes me sick. And I'm not alone. (@ewarren, "No, @realDonaldTrump - your racism")

Such was the end of this particular exchange. A fuller discussion of the second-order effects of trolling will be conducted later in this paper, but for now a brief review of what has been observed thus far will suggest these effects. Trump's rhetoric aims at disruption instead of persuasion and employs deception and aggression rather than rational argument, standards of proof, and shared values. This kind of rhetoric provokes a reaction from the targeted audience, who will likely feed the troll, responding either with incredulous scolding at the breach of decorum or else with the attempt to make a rational, persuasive argument in rebuttal of the troll's exaggerated positions and statements. Warren displayed both these types of "feeding" reactions, first attempting a rational argument and then falling back on mere scolding. Her first strategy is to describe his positions as contradictory and nonsensical, to cite national policy efforts, establish a dilemma between Trump and the future Democratic nominee, and generally demolish his credibility. After Trump's first set of replying tweets, she switches her approach to scolding and name-calling: Trump is a bully; he is lame and hate-filled; he is sickening. These tweets can be

best understood not as substantive attacks on his political positions or even on Trump himself but as a reaction to Trump's antinomic *modus operandi*. Antinomic rhetoric is slippery; it resists straightforward rebuttal. More than this, it seems to lure the targeted audience into using the same style of rhetoric. Warren begins to sound more and more like Trump at various points in her tweets as she shifts from rational rebuttal to reactionary retaliation. One particularly striking example occurs when she ends a tweet with "Lame!"—practically an homage to Trump's frequent usage of single words and exclamation marks. My point here is not that Warren would never employ this style of writing or speaking except in response to Trump, only that here her register and style change in apparent reaction to Trump's rhetoric. What we can conclude more broadly is that antinomic rhetoric works like a corrosive acid on the rules and procedures of a conversation, dissolving the framework that contains it and spilling beyond its limits. Like the universal solvent of the alchemists, it is remarkably difficult to deal with since it abhors a container.

An Unforced Error: Warren's DNA Test Announcement

Trump and Warren have continued sparring on and off Twitter until the present day in mostly similar fashion. It is one specific event, however, in 2018 that should call our attention, and in which we will find the clearest evidence that Trump's trolling—a form of antinomic rhetoric—can be a strategically effective rhetorical practice.

On October 15, 2018, Warren announced she had taken a DNA test indicating that she had Native American ancestry. The story was carried by a variety of major news sources that same day. Warren published a video announcing the results of the test, which found "strong evidence" that Elizabeth Warren had a Native American ancestor between six and ten generations ago (The Story of an American Family). Later that day she tweeted towards Trump:

By the way, @realDonaldTrump: Remember saying on 7/5 that you'd give $1M to a

charity of my choice if my DNA showed Native American ancestry? I remember – and

here's the verdict. Please send the check to the National Indigenous Women's Resource

Center: http://www.niwrc.org/donate-niwrc (@ewarren, "By the way,

@realDonaldTrump:")

Trump is featured three times in Warren's video and again in her tweet, and it seems clear that

Warren viewed her announcement as a response to Trump's recurring use of the nickname

"Pocahontas" and in particular as a reply to a statement he made at a campaign rally that year

promising to donate $1 million to a charity of her choice if she proved her claims to Native

American ancestry. In the parlance discussed in the previous section, Warren once again opted to

feed the troll by providing a rebuttal.

The initial media narrative followed this evaluation of Warren's announcement as a

political win, with mostly positive headlines on October 15 (the day the story was first run).

However, this narrative quickly began to shift against Warren when the Secretary of State of the

Cherokee nation issued a scathing statement calling the use of a DNA test to determine tribal

membership "inappropriate and wrong:"

It makes a mockery out of DNA tests and its legitimate uses while also dishonoring

legitimate tribal governments and their citizens, whose ancestors are well documented

and whose heritage is proven. Senator Warren is undermining tribal interests with her

continued claims of tribal heritage. (Hoskin)

Warren posted a tweet walking back the significance of the test and acknowledging the concerns

of the Cherokee nation:

I won't sit quietly for @realDonaldTrump's racism, so I took a test. But DNA & family

history has nothing to do with tribal affiliation or citizenship, which is determined only –

only – by Tribal Nations. I respect the distinction, & don't list myself as Native in the

Senate. (@ewarren, "I won't sit quietly")

Predictably, Trump was only too happy to goad her further in tweets that day. One read:

Pocahontas (the bad version), sometimes referred to as Elizabeth Warren, is getting

slammed. She took a bogus DNA test and it showed that she may be 1/1024, far less than

the average American. Now Cherokee Nation denies her, "DNA test is useless." Even

they don't want her. Phony! (@realDonaldTrump "Pocahontas (the bad version)")

The media narrative changed to speculation and analysis of how the announcement had affected

Warren's potential bid for the presidency in 2020, whether the announcement had done more

harm than good, and if the proof of ancestry (six to ten generations past) was enough to validly

claim ethnicity. Now a host of blogs, journalistic articles, and opinion pieces can be found

doubting whether the announcement helped her at all. "Can Warren Overcome DNA-Gate and

Recapture the Magic?" asks one. "Elizabeth Warren avoids question on release of DNA test."

"Elizabeth Warren's claim to Cherokee ancestry is a form of violence." "Voter confronts Warren

on DNA test decision." "Elizabeth Warren Has Lost Her Way." Few observers—if any—will

contend that her DNA test announcement was wise.

What drove Warren to commit this blunder? She herself tells us that she refused to "sit

quietly for [Trump's] racism." By her own admission, Trump's rhetoric was the motive behind

her decision: she was baited—or trolled—into a strategic mistake. My point here is not to

suggest that Trump was prescient of the precise way that his trolling and her response would play

out. My point is that this is a particularly dramatic example of a serious unforced error resulting

from the targeted audience's incompetent response to antinomic rhetoric. Warren could not have known with certainty the adverse effect of her announcement, but surely there were warning signs. Could she not have anticipated that the relatively small degree of genetic ancestry might raise eyebrows? Would it not have been prudent to investigate beforehand the possible response from Native American communities? What precisely did she hope to gain politically from confirming an apocryphal family story that has little to no direct bearing on her ambitions for the presidency or her substantive policy positions? At best the decision appears to have been thoughtless, and looming behind is Warren's own explanation that Trump made her do it.

It is worth mentioning in passing that Trump's response to the incident confirms the deliberately antinomic character of his rhetoric. When confronted by reporters about his promise to donate $1 million to a charity of Warren's choice, he was flippant and dismissive. "Who cares?" he said. "I didn't say that. You better read it again." He told reporters that he would only pay the $1 million if he could "test her personally." His rhetoric is slippery; difficult to pin down: his claims are dubious and his reasoning shaky, but it does not seem to matter at all because he is not aiming at persuasion in the first place. Trump's strategy does not depend on *winning* an argument, only on *having* one. He is the proverbial pig with whom we should not wrestle in the mud: you get dirty, and the pig enjoys it.

Feeding the Troll: Trump's Broader Use of Antinomic Rhetoric

In Jarratt's language, Trump's rhetoric refuses to abide by the dominant rhetorical *nomos*: besides his ordinary breaches of decorum he is aiming at totally different ends and employing totally different means. Since the *nomos* is socially constructed, his refusal to abide by its rules partially robs it of reality and power. His interlocutors can choose to ignore him entirely or (more likely) to "feed the troll" by patiently explaining why the troll is wrong or else denouncing the

troll outright. When the rhetorical *nomos* is relatively fixed and standards of deliberation are known and accepted, explanation and denunciation are potentially successful rhetorical moves, but to a troll these strategies are totally impotent. The dissolution of the rhetorical *nomos* is the dissolution of the standards, rules, and rationales that permit and give authority to argument and denunciation. In such an environment, persuasive and identificatory appeals that the previously existing *nomos* would clearly judge as out-of-bounds are able to flourish. Worse still, explanation and denunciation can be genuinely unproductive: feeding the trolls distracts from more profitable activities, disrupts lines of serious argument in favor of wild goose chases, and occasionally baits unwary victims into genuine strategic blunders. In this case, Trump's derailing of the conversation led to the apparent derailing of Warren's presidential campaign. The nexus of rhetorical move and countermove that surrounds antinomic rhetoric can have real political consequences.

Without performing a full analysis, it does not seem too far a bridge to hypothesize that Trump's ascendancy in the Republican primaries was at least partially due to this same strategy of trolling and similarly inadequate responses. As previously mentioned, Trump began his campaign with a rhetorical bang: "They're bringing crime, they're bringing drugs, they're rapists" (referring to illegal immigrants from Mexico). I have proposed that in the case of the "Pocahontas" nickname, the underlying truth or falsity of Warren's ancestry is secondary to the fact that it is designed to needle her and prompt a response. Perhaps the same is true regarding this statement of Trump's as well; perhaps his 'true' opinion of illegal immigrants from Mexico (or even his broader racial rhetoric) is secondary to the fact that his statement was an instant headline grabber. The New York Times estimated that Trump received $2 billion worth of free media coverage by March 2016 and it seems obvious that this was largely in part to his antics

(Confessore). In those antics we should see trolling, and in that trolling we should see antinomic rhetoric. Many media outlets critical of Trump likely now rue the free and ready assistance they blithely handed him. On a logical level, it must have appeared the perfect opportunity to fact-check Trump and hold him accountable for his lies. On a nomic level (and in internet parlance) they fell for the troll.

In the two years after the election, it is not clear that the media or Trump's political opponents have learned this lesson in any significant degree. This paper has outlined the way that Elizabeth Warren, a notable political antagonist of Trump, fell for his trolling and lost political ground as a consequence. In January of 2019, when the Clemson Tigers college football team was invited to the White House to celebrate their championship victory, Trump catered the event with fast food. Media outrage ensued, and the *Washington Post* performed what the theory of antinomic rhetoric presented here would consider a mortal sin: Trump said that the burgers must stack a mile high, and the *Washington Post* fact-checked this statement, asserting that at two inches apiece the number of burgers could not possibly reach a mile (Bumps). Strictly logically, the *Washington Post* is correct in calculating the height of a hypothetical burger tower—but surely no one believes that it matters. The *Washington Post* won an irrelevant battle; meanwhile, Trump is left to dictate the course of the larger war—with the media and his political opponents as nominally unwilling yet bizarrely compliant agents.

Conclusion

This paper has examined a rhetorical exchange between then-candidate and later President Donald Trump and Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren. In Trump's tweets and other statements, it was shown that Trump's rhetoric is antinomic: rather than aiming directly at persuasion and employing shared values and rational proofs it employs deception and aggression

to disrupt the targeted audience's goals and plans and the conversation as a whole. In Warren's replies on Twitter—and more particularly in her disastrous DNA announcement—we saw that rebuttal and denunciation were equally ineffective responses that disrupted and distracted Warren and ultimately led her into a serious unforced political error. Aside from the secondary political effects of these unforced errors, Trump's trolling works to create the necessary conditions of persuasion. It dissolves the structured *nomos* of Aristotelian civic rhetoric, creating a chaotic environment where, in the absence of sufficiently robust standards of civic values, there is no longer a clear framework against which to positively or negatively judge the quality of rhetorical utterances. Such an absence of frame by itself does not persuade, certainly, but it does create the general conditions where arguments can thrive that would be easily rooted out in other conditions. We can reasonably infer that antinomic rhetoric is a general strategy of Trump's and that the responses that it invites and the rhetorical climate it creates are partially responsible for his political success. Trump is truly the Troll-in-Chief.

There are specific aspects of antinomic rhetoric that particularly invite further analysis. What is the proper strategic response to antinomic rhetoric? Is the internet dictum to not feed the trolls—to merely ignore them— genuinely effective? In the absence of media attention (troll-feeding), perhaps Trump would never have won the Republican nomination and ultimately the presidency. However, he is now the President of the United States of America—is it decorous, moral, or strategically effective to simply *ignore* him? Is it even possible to do this?

An implication of the analysis presented above is that antinomic rhetoric moves the ground of conflict and disagreement from the logic to the nomic level, with two different *nomoi* competing to be the chosen ground of rhetorical conflict. What forces resolve this conflict between *nomoi*, and what factors determine whether one *nomos* or another is adopted as the

ground of discussion? Jarratt suggests that *nomoi* can be shaped by rhetoric in both critical and creative functions: is there a solution to internomic conflict that appeals to debate, discussion, and dialogue instead of name-calling and violence?

Trump's striking use of trolling as a rhetorical practice also points our attention to other, perhaps comparable public artifacts, ranging from the lighthearted to the deeply sobering. An example of the former might be the phenomenon of "rickrolling," the bait-and-switch internet prank where an internet link is posted to some ostensibly relevant material but actually leads to the music video of Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" (Dubs). In this case, the aggression, deception, and disruption are relatively harmless and even humorous. An intermediate example might be "glitterbombing," the practice of throwing glitter on public figures and politicians to protest their views (often related to LGBT issues) (NPR). Anya Galli's article on this subject complicates the relationship between media attention and trollery in ways that suggest possible solutions to the dilemma posed by antinomic rhetoric (275-276). An extreme example would be the March 2019 mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand. The shooting was apparently intended (at least in part) to draw attention to the manifesto, which itself was described by journalists as possibly being a troll (Lorenz). Similar tragedies raise concerns of copycat attacks—if attention is given to these kinds of manifestos, it will incentivize others to engage in violence to garner attention. Per the analysis conducted here, such tactics (intentionally or not) may be a troll: we are tempted to give our attention to the abnormal and the appalling (in other words, the antinomic) but to do so may trap us into a strategically disadvantageous position. The question of how to identify and respond to trolling appears to loom urgently over all these varied cases.

The concept of antinomic rhetoric is a potentially powerful tool for understanding Trump's rhetoric in general, and further analyses of speeches, tweets, and exchanges can and should be conducted to expand and refine our understanding of the nomic aspect of rhetoric and the specific ways that Trump employs this strategy. Antinomic rhetoric provides an insightful and heretofore unused vantage point from which to evaluate Trump's rhetoric—one that expands our understanding of his rhetoric far beyond identifying isolated techniques, populist appeals, or authoritarian ideas. This line of inquiry points us to the substructure of rhetoric; to the foundations and preconditions of persuasion and identification; to the *nomoi* that undergird discourse, with the hope that such an inquiry will help us better understand the way persuasion plays out in civic discourse. The necessity of such an expansion of rhetorical theory—and of Trump's rhetoric specifically—will be obvious to all those individuals who find US politics and culture at present to be discomforting at best.

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