

White Supremacy in the Age of Trump: An Introduction to a Special Issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*

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This essay introduces a special issue of the Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric on White Supremacy in the age of Trump. This essay recounts an abbreviated history of racism in the United States of America and myriad instances where white supremacy was a vibrant part of Donald J. Trump's rise to political power. These events demonstrate that racial animus is both a cornerstone of American history and contemporary politics.

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Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, **three fifths of all other Persons.**"

The Constitution of the United States of America¹

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition."

Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America²

The ideal of a white ethnostate, and it is an ideal, is something that I think we should think about in the sense of what could come after America. It's kind of like a grand goal."

Richard Spencer³

Jews will not replace us!
Blood and soil.⁴

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¹ U.S. Const. art. I, § 2.

² Alexander Stephens, "Cornerstone Speech" (speech, Savannah, GA, March 21, 1861), American Rhetoric, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/alexanderstephenscornerstone.htm>

³ Al Letson, "A Frank Conversation with a White Nationalist," *Reveal: From the Center for Investigative Reporting*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.revealnews.org/episodes/a-frank-conversation-with-a-white-nationalist/>.

⁴ Emma Green, "Why the Charlottesville Marchers Were Obsessed with Jews," *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/nazis-racism-charlottesville/536928/>.

Sieg Heil⁵

Unite the Right Rally Attendees

I have taken several passes at writing this introduction. Each attempt sparked by emerging allegations that the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, is a racist. For a businessperson, celebrity, and politician with a well-documented history of incendiary acts of racial animus,⁶ Trump somehow dodges a final declaration of his status as a racist—recently he told reporters, “No, no, I’m not a racist. I am the least racist person you have ever interviewed.”⁷ The evasiveness of Trump-as-racist is instructive about America itself. As a nation, the United States was founded and built upon the principle that White-Europeans held a divine mandate to settle a nation which indigenous people had already populated. That same belief used the Trans-Atlantic slave trade to chain Africans in bondage and build the American nation using their blood, sweat, and tears. The *mythos* of America—from the Founding Fathers to Manifest Destiny and the Civil War to Barack Obama—evidences a kind of hopeful optimism about our greatness which occludes a basic fact about America; racism is a defining characteristic of America both past and present.

White supremacy has always been a cornerstone of the United States of America. Expressing shock at the cacophony of racist rhetoric echoing throughout the nation in the wake of Donald J. Trump’s ascendancy to the Presidency requires one to ignore the hate-tinged rhetoric we have cured within the foundation of the American project. It is not difficult to recognize that the United States has, repeatedly, chosen to embolden white supremacy, rather than embrace the equality of all people. Slavery built this nation. We fought the Civil War to end the practice. However, while legal slavery ended, institutions and structures of racism endure.

Following the war, a series of black codes criminalized blackness, punishing *free* blacks who dared to claim their right to a life free of bondage. The establishment of lynch laws and the Convict-Lease System capitalized on the criminalization of blackness to institute slavery by a different name. As Fredrick Douglass aptly noted:

The Convict Lease System and Lynch Law are twin infamies which flourish hand in hand in many of the United States. They are the two great outgrowths and results of the class legislation under which our people suffer to-day... Hence the convicts are leased out to work for railway contractors, mining companies and those who farm large plantations. These companies assume charge of the convicts, work them as cheap labor and pay the states a handsome revenue for their labor. Ninetenths of these convicts are Negroes.⁸

⁵ Dara Lind, “Nazi Slogans and Violence at a Right-Wing March in Charlottesville on Friday Night,” *Vox*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138132/charlottesville-rally-brawl-nazi>.

⁶ See Christianna Silva, “Trump’s Full list of ‘Racist’ Comments About Immigrants, Muslims and Others,” *Newsweek*, January 11, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/trumps-full-list-racist-comments-about-immigrants-muslims-and-others-779061>. See also, David Leonhardt and Prasad Philbrick, “Donald Trump’s Racism: The Definitive List,” *The New York Times*, January 15, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/01/15/opinion/leonhardt-trump-racist.html?_r=0.

⁷ Brent D. Griffiths, “Trump: I am the Least Racist Person You Have Ever Interviewed,” *Politico*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/01/14/trump-least-racist-person-340602>.

⁸ Frederick Douglass, “The Convict Lease System” in Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Irvine Garland Penn, and Ferdinand L. Barnett, *The Reason Why the Colored American is Not In the Columbian Exposition*, ed. Robert W. Rydell (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 23.

These laws functioned as placeholders for slavery, denying African-Americans freedom and enfranchisement. Today, America is a nation defined by its system of mass incarceration which disproportionately incarcerates African-Americans, deepening their disenfranchisement.

Ostensibly under cover of “Reconstruction”—a project which aimed to heal the wounds of the Civil War—many areas enacted Jim Crow laws to ensure the segregation of African Americans—condemning them to separate and less-than-equal access to the bounty of the nation. In the early twentieth century, the United States again endorsed segregation by race through policies of segregating cities via lending practices. Known as redlining, and supported by federal laws, major cities were surveyed and divided based on the desirability of sections of the city. Areas seen as economically advantageous were kept for white Americans, while regions with little promise of economic development, environmental hazards, and crumbling infrastructures were reserved for minorities. These policies set guidance which was used to approve or deny housing loans for Americans. Redlining segregated our cities and, in many ways, that segregation remains today. As a result, African-Americans for decades have lived in areas with fewer job prospects, less funding for their schools, and increased environmental hazards. In short, racial animosity and racist policy is woven in the fabric of America and that legacy endures today.⁹

Reflecting on our history brings us to the present moment and the candidacy of Donald Trump. It is difficult to separate Donald J. Trump’s election to the presidency from the public and forceful reemergence of white supremacy in the United States. Members of the self-described Alt-Right¹⁰ (a euphemistic term for “a mix of racism, white nationalism and populism”¹¹), gained a national profile during Trump’s campaign. Public interest in the group surged three times in recent years, following Secretary Clinton’s speech condemning the movement, in November 2016 as the election neared, and in August 2017 after a violent and deadly march opposing the removal of a Confederate monument.¹² As the euphoria of Obama-era fantasies of a post-racial America crashed, Americans watched images of white supremacists marching in the streets, many in open embrace of Nazi symbols and ideology.

Trump campaigned, in part, on rhetoric which indulges in racist ideology. It seems fitting, given the theme of this special issue to recount a few of Trump’s articulations with white supremacy during his rise to political prominence:

- Trump emerged as a political figure as the most prominent proponent of Birtherism—a campaign to delegitimize President Barack Obama via claims he was not born in the United States.¹³
- Trump called for a total ban on Muslims entering the United States.¹⁴

⁹ It is important to note that the narration of American history above focuses primarily on the experience of African Americans, however, America has also worked to inculcate policies which oppress Native Americans and a host of minority groups—often resulting in death and disenfranchisement.

¹⁰ Throughout this essay, I hesitate to use the “Alt-Right” absent qualification and contextualization because of the power of term’s euphemistic function in legitimizing a world view which defines me, other Americans, and large sections of humanity as unequal and unworthy. While this may decrease precision and increase wordiness, I can see no other way forward.

¹¹ John Daniszewski, “Writing About the ‘Alt-Right,’” *The Associated press Blog*, November 28, 2016, <https://blog.ap.org/behind-the-news/writing-about-the-alt-right>.

¹² *Alt-Right Google Trends*, (January 14, 2018), Distributed by Google, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&geo=US&q=Alt-Right>

¹³ David Leonhardt and Prasad Philbrick, “Donald Trump’s Racism: The Definitive List.”

¹⁴ Tal Kopan, How Trump’s ‘Muslim Ban’ Comments Can Hurt His Travel Ban Case,” *CNN*, February 7, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/06/politics/trump-muslim-ban-travel-lawsuit/index.html>.

- Trump referred to Mexican immigrants as criminals and rapists.¹⁵
- Trump began calling Senator Elizabeth Warren Pocahontas as a means of belittling her and to draw attention to a controversy over Warren's Native American Heritage.¹⁶

After taking office, Trump has continued to express racist views. For example, he has attacked NFL players kneeling during the national anthem,¹⁷ voiced support for white supremacist agitators in Charlottesville,¹⁸ allegedly claimed all Haitians have AIDS,¹⁹ and describe African nations, Haiti, and El Salvador as “shitholes” when discussing immigration.²⁰ These incidents suggest Trump is conversant with the language of white supremacy at the same time that white supremacist agitators are increasing their visibility in American politics.

In early August 2017, I watched a live feed as a coalition of white nationalists, white supremacists, neo-Nazis, members of the so-called Alt-Right, and conservatives marched against demands for the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee. Lee, a slaveholder and Confederate general who led the South's military insurrection against the United States of America. Lee, posed atop a horse and covered in a gentle patina, sits in the middle of Emancipation Park in Charlottesville, VA. While wielding torches—ironically, they had tiki torches which are a tacky artifact of American appropriation of Polynesian cultures—some chanted “Blood and soil” (a phrase which originates in Nazi propaganda) and “Jews will not replace us.”²¹ As I saw these events unfold my heart fell. This enunciation of white supremacy menaces the lives of minorities (based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender identity, ability, etc.). This open display of racist ideology and antisemitism also targeted my flesh and blood. My maternal great grandparents fled anti-Jewish violence in Kiev, Ukraine around the beginning of the twentieth century. In the U.S., they no doubt saw America's flirtations with antisemitism and Nazism during their lives. As a child, I grew up watching innumerable acquaintances view my mother's faith as a placeholder they sought to replace with Christian salvation. While I do not practice Judaism, my blood and body are always already suspect. As such, it is no surprise that I see the danger of white nationalist identity politics as urgent.

The complexity of the rhetorical forces intensifying white supremacy makes it difficult to untangle what, if any, role the Trump campaign and presidency play in enabling these groups. Do they merely coexist? Do they share some quantity of white supremacist ideology? Are they distinct, but sympathetic, forces which reinforce one another? These are the questions which this

¹⁵ Katie Reilly, “Here Are All the Times Donald Trump Insulted Mexico,” *Time*, August 31, 2016, <http://time.com/4473972/donald-trump-mexico-meeting-insult/>.

¹⁶ Emily Crocket and Michelle Garcia, “Why Donald Trump keeps Calling Elizabeth Warren Pocahontas,” *Vox*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/2016/5/16/11684776/elizabeth-warren-pocahontas>.

¹⁷ Matthew Yglesias, “Donald Trump versus the NFL, Explained,” *Vox*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/25/16360264/donald-trump-colin-kaepernick>.

¹⁸ Rosie Gray, “Trump Defends White-Nationalist Protesters: ‘Some Very Fine People on Both Sides,’” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/trump-defends-white-nationalist-protesters-some-very-fine-people-on-both-sides/537012/>.

¹⁹ Michael D. Shear and Julie Hirschfield Davis, “Stoking Fears, Trump Defied Bureaucracy to Advance Immigration Agenda,” *New York Times*, December 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/23/us/politics/trump-immigration.html>.

²⁰ Josh Dawsey, “Trump Derides Protections for Immigrants From ‘Shithole’ Countries,” *the Washington Post*, January 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-attacks-protections-for-immigrants-from-shithole-countries-in-oval-office-meeting/2018/01/11/bfc0725c-f711-11e7-91af-31ac729add94_story.html?utm_term=.1c5074e3680f.

²¹ Walter Tießler, “Not Empty Phrases, But Rather Clarity,” *German Propaganda Archive*, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/tiessler3.htm>

special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* explores. The essays assembled in the issue take up the overlap of white supremacy and Trump throughout his campaign and in the early days of his presidency. Each, in their own way, looks at how Trump's campaign covers for, echoes, and enables rhetorics of white supremacy.

First, Stephanie Hartzell provides a cartography of the language of white supremacy. She aptly examines the variety of nomenclature used to describe various pro-white groups and locates the rise of the so-called Alt-Right in that trajectory. Rhetorical critics have long been attentive to the role labels play in rhetoric. Hartzell explains, with clarity and specificity, the intricacies of these movements as a means of calling us to recognize the power of framing to embolden or disrupt various white supremacist ideologies and groups.

Second, Jaime Moshin turns to the rhetorical power of silence as a means of understanding the ways that Donald Trump provides cover and support for antisemitic groups. The rhetoric of silence is a particularly imaginative frame because it helps illustrate how webs of unstated premises and subtle nudges speak volumes to the audiences Trump targets. Moshin discovers five silences used to signal antisemitism: literal; symbolic; dialogic; paralipic; and dog-whistled. Moshin's analysis of these silences makes a compelling case for the role of white supremacy in Trump's worldview.

Third, James Chase Sanchez builds a theory of rhetorical versatility to understand how both Trump and the KKK provide various textual winks to their audiences as a means of disseminating white supremacy. Sanchez analyzes how contemporary KKK propaganda and Trump's rhetoric echo one another. Sanchez's essay calls us to use the tools of rhetorical criticism to name and identify rhetorics of bigotry and to work to undermine the force of such rhetoric.

Fourth, Samuel Perry draws on the obligation of the president to heal public grief to analyze Trump's rhetoric following the Charlottesville, VA protest. Unlike past presidents, Perry argues that Trump engages in a form of uncivil mourning which grieves the loss of white supremacy rather than those who were injured or killed at the protest. Perry's essay is particularly useful for understanding how speech genres help illustrate Trump's engagement with white supremacy.

Fifth, Stephanie Gomez examines Trump's use of executive orders to halt immigration from Muslim-majority countries. Gomez draws on the concept of hybridity to show the ways the Trump administration marks immigrants as either acceptable or unacceptable. Gomez's analysis aptly suggests that Trump contradictorily uses both fluid and fixed notions of identity to bar marginalized groups from America and to reinforce white identity politics.

Sixth, Rebecca Townsend conducts a Burkean analysis of Trump's speech in Warsaw, Poland. Townsend argues that the spatial and verbal rhetoric Trump uses functions to widen the notion of "the West" as a means to create a version of Europe defined by white Christianity. Townsend's essay movingly draws upon her fieldwork in Poland broadly, and specifically at the site of Trump's speech.

Finally, Will Penman and Doug Cloud turn their attention to the frames the news media has used to cover Trump's candidacy. Penman and Cloud examine over fifty instances of Trump criticism to build a typology of frames. They show how the media depicts Trump as an Acclaim-Seeker, a Sick Man, an Authoritarian, or an Idiot. Significantly, they use these archetypes to explore how each provides a different explanation for Trump's connections to racist rhetoric—providing insight into the benefits and dangers of representing Trump in various ways.

As assembled, these essays make a compelling case that the rise of white supremacy is not a phenomenon that is separate from and adjacent to President Trump. Instead, they suggest Trump and white supremacy, in a variety of ways, share a reciprocal embrace in a variety of ways. Trump's rhetoric—both in enunciation and silence—stands upon the bedrock of white supremacy.