

# President Trump and Charlottesville: Uncivil Mourning and White Supremacy

Samuel Perry\*

*This essay examines President Donald Trump's responses to the tragic events in Charlottesville that took place on August 10 and 11 of 2017. It argues that Trump failed to fulfill his role as mourner-in-chief because he engaged in "uncivil mourning." The essay establishes a theoretical framework for understanding mourning and then examines the three responses Trump gave after Heather Heyer was killed and others were injured by a white supremacist. It argues that rather than mourning Heyer or the values of protestors who confronted "Unite the Right" rally participants, Trump mourned the cultural erosion of whiteness. This follows a pattern well established in Trump's speeches and tweets.*

**Keywords:** White supremacy, Mourning, Presidential rhetoric, Donald Trump

## Trump and Charlottesville

On August 11-12, 2017 white supremacists marched on Charlottesville, Virginia as part of the "Unite the Right" rally under the auspices of preserving Confederate history.<sup>1</sup> The assembled groups carried Confederate battle flags, deployed swastikas, other Nazi symbols, Ku Klux Klan paraphernalia, various white nationalist banners, and tiki torches in a stunning visual display suggestive of the normalization of white supremacy in contemporary American politics. The primary organizer of the "Unite the Right" rally leads a white nationalist organization called "Unity and Security for America," and the website for the organization claims, "Unnecessary foreign interventions and attacks on Western history and heritage are detrimental to the survival of the tradition which brought us reason, logic, medicine, human rights and took us into outer space."<sup>2</sup> As George Hawley argues, "a lot of people who were there [Charlottesville] were not so much motivated by a passion for Robert E. Lee or Confederate history than a sense that, first of all, this represented sort of a broader attack on white American identity."<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the rally in many ways was to mourn and resist a perceived cultural erosion of whiteness.

In a violent and tragic culmination of events, the rally and protests of it ended when Heather Heyer, age 32, was killed by a white supremacist who rammed his car into a crowd of peaceful

---

\* Sam Perry (Ph.D., Georgia State University) is an Associate Professor in the Interdisciplinary Core at Baylor University. The author can be reached by email at [Sam\\_Perry@Baylor.edu](mailto:Sam_Perry@Baylor.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Jacey Fortin, "The Statue at the Center of Charlottesville's Storm," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/us/charlottesville-rally-protest-statue.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Natasha Bertrand, "Here's What We Know about the 'pro-White' Organizer of 'Unite the Right,' Who Was Chased out of His Own Press Conference," *Business Insider*, August 14, 2017. <http://www.businessinsider.com/who-is-jason-kessler-unite-the-right-charlottesville-2017-8>.

<sup>3</sup> "Unite The Right': Charlottesville Rally Represented Collection Of Alt-Right Groups," *NPR.Org*, August 15, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/2017/08/15/543730227/unite-the-right-charlottesville-rally-represented-collection-of-alt-right-groups>.

protestors. Between Saturday and Tuesday, President Donald Trump made two statements on Charlottesville and then went off script in an interview. Since then, Trump has tweeted about and remarked on his responses to Charlottesville, which has invited criticism from across the political spectrum. It is worth examining each of these statements, and this analysis does so by weaving together criticism of each as part of a fragmented set of discourses that inform public understanding of the events in Charlottesville. These statements use phrasing similar to previous speeches that illuminate some of the problems embedded in Trump's broader reactions to tragedy. Trump tends to treat perpetrators and victims of attacks differently based on their race, ethnicity, and religion. This essay offers a composite of these responses, and reactions to other tragedies, that outline an ideological bent toward white supremacy present in Trump's rhetoric. Trump's attempts to assume the role of consoler and mourner-in-chief provide critical spaces that prove particularly telling in this regard.

As America's mourners-in-chief, presidents are generally expected to respond to national tragedies and potentially divisive events taking place on the American political landscape by encouraging and facilitating unity. George Condon, Jr. argues, "whether the deaths and destruction result from acts of God or the misdeeds of man, the nation expects its president to provide comfort and solace and to serve as the mourner-in-chief. They also hope that his words will somehow help them make sense of the event that has so disrupted their lives."<sup>4</sup> In the wake of white supremacists marching on Charlottesville and one white supremacist driving his car into a crowd of protestors, people expected Donald Trump to make remarks concerning the death of Heather Heyer and the injured protestors. However, as with most things Trump does, his response proved unconventional. In fact, the response morally equated neo-Nazis, neo-Confederates, white supremacists, and alt-right marchers with the protestors who confronted their messages of hatred. Mary Stuckey noted that Trump's address "stands out for failing to include language," like the conciliatory and unifying language found in Ronald Reagan's address after the Challenger explosion.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of tragedy, Trump mourned. Though it seemed to many that he mourned the same causes as those gathered for the "Unite the Right" rally, rather than for the victims of violence perpetrated by a white supremacist. Trump failed to address threats to American notions of inclusion, equality, and civil rights, while he used language that seemed sympathetic to the organizers of the "Unite the Right" rally.

This essay places President Trump's responses to the Charlottesville tragedy in the context of his responses to other tragedies. Trump consistently uses the same rhetorical strategies and structures to talk about himself and attack his opponents, while he rarely gives the attention to victims that would seem appropriate to the rhetorical genre of mourning. The essay proceeds by providing a theoretical sketch of mourning that explains the concept of uncivil mourning, providing a rhetorical critique of Trump's Charlottesville responses, and offers some concluding thoughts regarding what might be learned from Trump's responses to Charlottesville. Examining Trump's comments in response to tragedy through rhetorical concepts associated with mourning establishes patterns concerning the ways in which Trump's responses to tragedy are contingent upon the racial, ethnic, and religious identities of the perpetrators of violence and the victims of violence. Trump mourns the cultural erosion of whiteness when he responds to tragedy, which in the aftermath of

---

<sup>4</sup> George E. Condon, Jr., "President Obama: Mourner-in-Chief," *The Atlantic*, May 22, 2013. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/05/president-obama-mourner-in-chief/443001/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mary E. Stuckey, "Analysis | Unlike Trump, Most Presidents Emphasize Our Common Ideals," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/25/unlike-trump-most-presidents-try-to-unite-americans-around-our-common-ideals-in-their-speeches/>.

the Charlottesville attack highlights his connections to and identification with white supremacist groups and rhetoric.

### A Theoretical Sketch of Uncivil Mourning

Eulogies and mourning discourses generally fall into the category of epideictic rhetoric. Aristotle argues that funeral orations are one of the primary modes of epideictic rhetoric,<sup>6</sup> and that temporally epideictic rhetoric provides a way of reminding, “[the audience] of the past and projecting the future.”<sup>7</sup> Epideictic trades in what Aristotle calls *auxēsis* or amplification, which takes up matters, “agreed upon, so that what remains is to clothe actions with greatness and beauty,” when they are praiseworthy and does the opposite when matters or events are worthy of blame.<sup>8</sup> The political work of mourning concerns “the force of time and the time of force, about the relation between force and language, between time and the force of mourning.”<sup>9</sup> The timing and the force of the language deployed when Trump mourned proved jarring and inappropriate to many audiences precisely because he assumed that people already agreed with his position that there was plenty of blame to go around in the aftermath of the Charlottesville tragedy. Michael Tumolo, Jennifer Biedendorf, and Kevin Ayotte “introduce the term *uncivil mourning* to designate discursive acts that approach death as an opportune moment for advancing supplementary claims without engaging the ideas of the deceased.”<sup>10</sup> Trump engaged in uncivil mourning. In his three initial responses to the Charlottesville tragedy, Trump mentioned Heyer by name once and referred to her as a “young woman,” “a fantastic young woman,” and “an incredible young woman” in his later interview.<sup>11</sup> Trump does not engage Heyer’s ideas, discuss meaningfully her place among the opposition to the “Unite the Right” rally, and offers very little in terms of describing her or the values that made her a target. Further, Trump repeatedly offered the supplementary claim that the “Unite the Right” rally members were no more to blame than were those who opposed their messages of white nationalism and white supremacy.

The consequences for uncivil mourning are twofold: 1) Failing to properly engage the work of mourning not only disrespects the deceased, but creates a pattern of discursive erasure of the deceased’s citizenship.<sup>12</sup> So in the Charlottesville tragedy, by failing to engage Heyer as an individual and provide credence to her beliefs, Trump erases her individual identity and the advocacy of

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991): 47.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, 82-83.

<sup>9</sup> Pascale Anne Brenault and Michael Naas, “Introduction” in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*. Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. 1 edition. (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2003): 5.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Warren Tumolo, Jennifer Biedendorf, and Kevin J. Ayotte. “Un/Civil Mourning: Remembering with Jacques Derrida,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2014): 108–109. doi:10.1080/02773945.2014.888463.

<sup>11</sup> Carly Sitrin, “Read: President Trump’s Remarks Condemning Violence ‘on Many Sides’ in Charlottesville,” *Vox*, August 12, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/2017/8/12/16138906/president-trump-remarks-condemning-violence-on-many-sides-charlottesville-rally>.; Jessica Estepa, “Read President Trump’s Full Statement on Charlottesville Violence,” *USA Today*. Accessed September 8, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/08/14/transcript-donald-trump-remarks-charlottesville-violence/565330001/>.; “Read the Complete Transcript of President Trump’s Remarks at Trump Tower on Charlottesville.” *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 2017. <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-charlottesville-transcript-20170815-story.html>.

<sup>12</sup> By “discursive erasure,” I mean the use of language and symbols on the part of Trump and his administration that obscures or removes minority groups from public discourse. For an extended example of this phenomenon see Jaime Moshin’s essay in this volume.

which she was a part. 2) The failure to nuance causes of death in relation to the political and ideological motivations for terrorist attacks reifies dominant and oppressive modes of identity formation. In other words, Trump advances supplementary claims that assume whiteness is the default cultural standard for identity politics. Trump amplified the reasoning and purpose of the march organizers, even as he attempted to address the tragedy at hand, when he questioned, “Are we going to take down the statue? Because he was a major slave owner. Now, are we going to take down his statue? So you know what? It’s fine. You’re changing history. You’re changing culture.”<sup>13</sup> Recall the words of the “Unity and Security for America” website, and consider Kessler’s more particular comments on the Charlottesville rally, “The genesis of the entire event is this Robert E. Lee statue that the city is trying to move, which is symbolic of a lot of other issues that deal with the tearing down of white people’s history and our demographic replacement.”<sup>14</sup> These two elements of Trump’s response failed to mourn properly the victims of Charlottesville and to address the concerns of the American public. The Trump response to Charlottesville was a nadir in Trump’s relatively young presidency in terms of public approval.<sup>15</sup>

Rhetorically speaking, Trump’s comments proved particularly jarring because in death, audience expectations for eulogies are not only concrete, but generally sacrosanct in the expectation that the dead deserve respect. As Tumolo, Biedendorf, and Ayotte argue, civil mourning upholds certain standards of political discourse because, “Moreover, the consideration of ‘friendship’ in this sense involves fidelity both to those whom we ‘like’ affectively and those whose ideas we dislike intensely yet respect as fellow human beings with a right to divergent opinions.”<sup>16</sup> In this case, we might think of citizenship and friendship as linked or interchangeable terms with regard to the President of the United States’ obligation to mourn the deaths of citizens after a national tragedy. The vagaries of Trump’s comments concerning Ms. Heyer, the values of the protestors, equivocating morally between white supremacists and those protesting them, and his repeating of the white nationalist media outlets’ talking points promoting the event raised questions regarding what exactly Trump mourned in the aftermath of the Charlottesville tragedy. Theoretically speaking, Trump mourned what he perceives to be ongoing threats to the United States’ borders and nationalist constructions of identity tied up in race and ethnicity. Jacques Derrida argues, “discourse on death also contains, among so many other things, a *rhetoric of borders*... a treatise about tracing of traits as the borderly edges of what in sum *belongs to us* [*nous revient*], belonging as much to us as we properly belong to it.”<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this essay, the sense of belonging here refers to the ways in which Trump belongs to the alt-right and white supremacists, just as much as they belong to him because of their shared orientation to the potential death of white masculinity and their similar mournful discourses that accompany that fearful orientation.

---

<sup>13</sup> “Trump Tower on Charlottesville...”

<sup>14</sup> Joe Heim, “Charlottesville Prepares for a White Nationalist Rally on Saturday,” *Washington Post*, August 10, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/charlottesville-readies-for-a-white-nationalist-rally-on-saturday/2017/08/10/cff4786e-7c49-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/charlottesville-readies-for-a-white-nationalist-rally-on-saturday/2017/08/10/cff4786e-7c49-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html).

<sup>15</sup> Steven Shephard, “Poll: Trump Hits New Low after Charlottesville,” *Politico*, August 23, 2017. <http://politi.co/2xbMqiL>.

<sup>16</sup> Tumolo, Biedendorf, and Ayotte, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*. Translated by Thomas Dutoit. 1 edition. (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993): 3.

Trump's rhetoric mourns the erosion of culturally hegemonic whiteness.<sup>18</sup> This is part of why his Charlottesville responses, especially his Tuesday interview, took on a defensive and even aggressive tenor at times. Even in his first set of remarks, Trump deflected blame and referenced longtime nemesis President Obama saying, "It's been going on for a long time in our country. Not Donald Trump, not Barack Obama, this has been going on for a long, long time."<sup>19</sup> This engages in the rhetorical technique of paralipsis, or introducing something the speaker does not intend to talk about as a diversion, which, as Jennifer Mercieca points out, is one of Trump's go-to rhetorical strategies.<sup>20</sup> The unnecessary deflection of blame and the offering of two other focal points, Obama and American history writ large, illustrate Trump's tendency to make things about him, but also to work in confrontational modes of communication that validate his identity and his position. As Paul Johnson argues, "Trump's attacks on one supposed institutional matrix of power—the Washington establishment—bolster another power structure: White masculinity."<sup>21</sup> In the Charlottesville responses, Trump argues he is treated poorly by the press, receives undue criticism from other politicians, and he affirms the group identities of people associated with the "Unite the Right" rally. He does these things, rather than focus on the emotional and affective dimensions of the public's outrage and shock at white supremacists attacking protestors. The press takes the brunt of his criticism. Trump argued that poor reception of his first two responses was because of fake and dishonest reporting. Trump said during his interview concerning the first two responses, "And honestly, if the press were not fake and if it was honest, the press would have said what I said was very nice," and followed his own self-defense by defending "Unite the Right" attendees by claiming, "But you had many people in that group other than neo-Nazis and white nationalists. OK? And the press has treated them absolutely unfairly."<sup>22</sup> Trump assumes the role of victim and puts those members of the "Unite the Right" rally that presumably were not openly displaying swastikas or wearing Klan robes in an allied position of victimhood.

While the reversal of victimhood in this situation may not seem logically intuitive, the Trump campaign thrived on this sort of rhetoric. As Johnson argues:

Far from seeming forthrightly illogical, claims of White, masculine victimhood encourage objectively well-off members of society to interpret the presence of difference and uncertainty as threatening the subject with unjust marginalization, coding a 'diverse and diffuse range of experiences'—or in the case of Trump, political topoi ranging from immigration to terrorism to trade—as part of a single trauma: the subject's exile from politics.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, "Making America Great Again" means making the United States a smaller and more exclusive place. The Trump slogan mourns the advent of pluralism and the use of language that accepts minority groups into the fabric of American culture as citizens with equal protections under the law, which Trump since the early days of his campaign identified as the weakness of

---

<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this essay, the term "culturally hegemonic whiteness" refers to white, particularly heterosexual male, identity constituting the dominant type of personhood in the United States. Citizenship is grounded in this identity to the extent that it overwhelms most forms of public discourse.

<sup>19</sup> Sitrin, "Read..."

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Mercieca, "The Rhetorical Brilliance of Trump the Demagogue." *The Conversation*, December 11, 2015. <http://theconversation.com/the-rhetorical-brilliance-of-trump-the-demagogue-51984>.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Elliott Johnson, "The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump's Demagoguery." *Women's Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 230. doi:10.1080/07491409.2017.1346533.

<sup>22</sup> "Trump Tower on Charlottesville..."

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, "The Art..." 231.

political correctness or being politically correct.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Trump articulates a victimage of fragile white masculinity consonant with Kessler's stated aims in organizing the "Unite the Right" rally. The alt-right, white supremacists, and Donald Trump share a particular fear—the death of white masculine identity as the dominant cultural norm. Theirs is a mournful discourse.

For most, the work of mourning varies in its scope and size, but Trump seems to have a one size fits all reaction that correlates to his conception of maintaining culturally hegemonic whiteness—or white supremacy. It is worth noting that much of Trump's framework for mourning evidences fervor to counter the first black man to hold the presidency. The Trump agenda seems instrumentally motivated to undo anything that President Obama did during his terms of office.<sup>25</sup> Ideologically, Trump's motivation is something more troublesome than the usual show of undoing the work of a politician of a different party upon entering office, and it is the same as ideological motivation held by people like Jason Kessler and Richard Spencer. Ta-Nehisi Coates argues:

Trump truly is something new—the first president whose entire political existence hinges on the fact of a black president. And so it will not suffice to say that Trump is a white man like all the others who rose to become president. He must be called by his rightful honorific—America's first white president... It is often said that Trump has no real ideology, which is not true—his ideology is white supremacy, in all its truculent and sanctimonious power.<sup>26</sup>

The dripping irony of Coates discarding the whiteness of 43 preceding presidencies to label Trump as the inaugural white president suggests that naked white nationalism and supremacy distinguishes Trump from his predecessors.

When put in context of his previous responses to terrorist attacks, Trump's Charlottesville responses follow a pattern of divisive discourse in a genre of speech that generally serves to unite and heal. Trump mourns in a way that excludes and sharpens divides between Americans of different backgrounds. Trump mourns embracing women as equal to men,<sup>27</sup> black folks as equal to white folks,<sup>28</sup> LGBTQ folks as equal to heteronormative folks,<sup>29</sup> Muslims as equal to Christians,<sup>30</sup> Latinx immigrants as equal to immigrants of Western European descent,<sup>31</sup> and a host of other "us

<sup>24</sup> Nick Gass, "Trump: I'm so Tired of This Politically Correct Crap." *POLITICO*. September 23, 2017. <http://politi.co/1KCjOhH>.

<sup>25</sup> Jack Moore, "Donald Trump's Only Policy Agenda Seems to Be 'Undo Obama Stuff.'" *GQ*, August 10, 2017. <https://www.gq.com/story/donald-trump-undo-obama>; Chuck Todd, Mark Murray, and Carrie Dann. "Trump's Guiding Principle So Far Has Been Undoing Obama's Agenda." *NBC News*, June 1, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/trump-s-guiding-principle-so-far-has-been-undoing-obama-n766986>; Peter Baker, "Opinion | Can Trump Destroy Obama's Legacy?" *The New York Times*, June 23, 2017, sec. Sunday Review. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/23/sunday-review/donald-trump-barack-obama.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The First White President." *The Atlantic*, October 2017. [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/?utm\\_source=atfb](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/?utm_source=atfb).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Barbaro and Megan Twohey. "Crossing the Line: How Donald Trump Behaved With Women in Private." *The New York Times*, May 14, 2016, sec. Politics. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Jesse Berney, "Trump's Long History of Racism." *Rolling Stone*. August 15, 2017. <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/features/trumps-long-history-of-racism-w497876>.

<sup>29</sup> Madeline Conway, "Trump Escalates Clash with LGBT Community." *POLITICO*. July 26, 2017. <http://politi.co/2uxZaAW>.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Beinart, "Why Is Trump Silent on Islamophobic Attacks?" *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/trump-should-condemn-attacks-on-muslims-too/517893/>.

<sup>31</sup> Michelle Ye Hee Lee, "Donald Trump's False Comments Connecting Mexican Immigrants and Crime." *Washington Post*, July 8, 2015, sec. Fact Checker. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/>.

and them” binaries that presuppose mercantile notions of ceding of rights by one group as another group achieves an equal status legally or socially. More to the point, Trump mourns perceived threats to the boundaries between white men and minority groups because he sees the dissolution of those borders as a sign of American decline.

### **Trump, Charlottesville, and #MAGA Mourning**

When Trump mourns most sincerely in public, he focuses on the cultural erosion of whiteness. This mourning, while almost always uncivil, is not always explicitly a call for or direct defense of white supremacy. However, Trump biographer Michael D’Antonio argues, “Much of Trump’s campaign was about establishing an ‘us vs. them’ view of our times, which meant that Trump’s side, made up largely of white Americans, was at war with the opposition, made up of Hispanic Americans, Muslim Americans, the press and foreigners.”<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, some constituents figured racism as a primary point of identification with Trump. The Trump campaign avoided opportunities to disavow white supremacists like David Duke,<sup>33</sup> or to swiftly condemn alt-right attacks on minorities like the ones in Oregon and Kansas with the same speed he condemned jihadist terror attacks.<sup>34</sup> Many perceived Charlottesville a reprisal of that failure.<sup>35</sup>

On Saturday following violence between protestors and white supremacists, Trump made a brief statement the first time he spoke about the event. The statement proved to be even more jarring than some of the previous racially charged statements from Trump because Trump equivocated on the culpability of white supremacists and those protesting the white supremacists. More simply, when mourning the events in Charlottesville, Trump blamed the equally racist agitators from Neo-Nazi organizations, the Ku Klux Klan, and people marching with those factions and the counter-protestors that showed up to denounce racism. Trump stated, “We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides.”<sup>36</sup> The repeated prepositional phrase at the end of the sentence “on many sides, on many sides,” seems designed to spread blame among parties across the political spectrum in Charlottesville. Though, the only fatality was Ms. Heyer, and most of the reported injuries occurred when white supremacist James Alex Fields, Jr. drove his Dodge Charger into a group of peaceful protestors leaving the site of the previous gatherings and conflicts that day,<sup>37</sup> the Trump responses insist that the many political and ideological groups share equal responsibility for the violence in Charlottesville.

The “many sides” description created room for interpretation that cast doubt on whether or not Trump in fact condemned violence in the strongest possible terms if he was not ready to directly

---

<sup>32</sup> Michael D’Antonio, “Trump Is Doing to the Dreamers What Was Done to Him.” *CNN*. September 5, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/05/opinions/trump-dreamers-fear-loathing-opinion-dantonio/index.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Donald Trump and David Duke: For the Record.” *Washington Post*, March 1, 2016, sec. Fact Checker. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/03/01/donald-trump-and-david-duke-for-the-record/>.

<sup>34</sup> Philip Bump, “Trump’s Quick to Tweet about Terror and TV, Slower on Things like the Attack in Portland.” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2017, sec. Politics <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/05/30/trumps-quick-to-tweet-about-terror-and-tv-slower-on-things-like-the-attack-in-portland/>.

<sup>35</sup> Dan Merica, “Trump -- Again -- Fails to Condemn Alt-Right.” *CNN*. August 13, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/politics/trump-fails-to-condemn-the-alt-right-white-supremacists/index.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Sitrin, “Read...”

<sup>37</sup> Joe Ruiz, “Ohio Man Charged With Murder In Fatal Car Attack On Anti-White Nationalist March.” *NPR.Org*. August 13, 2017. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/13/543176250/charlottesville-attack-james-alex-fields-jr>.

name white supremacists groups culpable for the death and injury of other Americans. Fellow politicians took to social media platforms asking Trump to call out Neo-Nazis and the KKK. Republican members of Congress took to Twitter imploring Trump to directly call out white supremacists and to categorize the murder of Heyer and attack on other protestors as an act of terrorism. Senator Cory Garner tweeted, “Mr. President — we must call evil by its name. These were white supremacists and this was domestic terrorism.”<sup>38</sup> The exhortation, especially by fellow Republicans, to use specific language when referring to terrorist attacks, rather than vaguely admonishing everyone who took to the streets in Charlottesville undermined Trump’s later claims that he was waiting to gather all of the information available prior to commenting on the matter. On Tuesday, Trump would argue in his own defense:

I didn't wait long. I wanted to make sure, unlike most politicians, that what I said was correct, not make a quick statement. The statement I made on Saturday, the first statement, was a fine statement. But you don't make statements that direct unless you know the facts. It takes a little while to get the facts. You still don't know the facts.<sup>39</sup>

Mournful rhetoric mobilizes the force of time and language. Trump’s fellow Republicans saw his response as a failure to make a timely statement forcefully denouncing the parties at fault for the death of Ms. Heyer and the injury of dozens of others. For example, Senator Orrin Hatch invoked the memory of his brother, who died in World War II, as he impugned Trump for allowing “Nazi ideas to go unchallenged here at home.”<sup>40</sup> Nazis are typically viewed in the American political imaginary as the dialectical opposite of Americans. Trump’s response did not adequately call the nation to mourn because, as Hatch argues, he did not invoke American values and name the groups, specifically visibly present neo-Nazis, in Charlottesville that threatened those values.

In his second statement, Trump did state, “Racism is evil, and those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans.”<sup>41</sup> The statement falls more in line with the kind of statement one might expect after such an event, but Trump seemed uncharacteristically subdued in this statement. His tone and physical delivery did not match an intensity of feeling that many expect when Trump truly cares about the subject on which he is speaking. Commentators noted in relation to Trump’s condemnation of NFL players kneeling in protest of police brutality against African Americans, calling them “sons of bitches,” that the Charlottesville condemnations of white supremacists seemed dull and disingenuous.<sup>42</sup> The condemnations from Garner and Hatch by no means make up the full body of Congressional reprisals for the inadequacy of Trump’s response,<sup>43</sup> but they evidence two of the most prominent lines of argument related to mourning.

First, in the aftermath of the Charlottesville attack, both tweets recall a consistent failure on the part of Trump to denounce white supremacist groups. This failure is amplified by the fact that

---

<sup>38</sup> Louis Nelson, “Trump Declares ‘Racism Is Evil’ amid Pressure over Charlottesville.” *POLITICO*. August, 2017. <http://politi.co/2w6alfU>.

<sup>39</sup> “Trump Tower on Charlottesville....”

<sup>40</sup> Nelson, “Trump Declares...”

<sup>41</sup> Estepa, “Read...”

<sup>42</sup> “NFL Executives, Players Respond to President Trump.” *ESPN.Com*, September 23, 2017. [http://www.espn.com/blog/nflnation/post/\\_/id/249685](http://www.espn.com/blog/nflnation/post/_/id/249685).

<sup>43</sup> Russell Berman, “Republicans Rebuke Trump All Over Again.” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/08/republicans-rebuke-trump-all-over-again-white-supremacy-charlottesville/537033/>.



Hatch calls out Trump for cheapening the memory and the accomplishments of the post World War II generation. This proves interesting in light of the veneration of the Greatest Generation among many conservatives in the post 9/11 era and the fact that Trump himself believes that the postwar boom might have been the last time that America was great.<sup>44</sup> The statements failed as eulogies or statements that mourned adequately because they did not clearly espouse values with which many Americans would be comfortable or condemn values with which they would not be comfortable. Epideictic rhetorics are panegyric (they offer public statements of praise and blame) and, as Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tytca argue, are concerned with “recognizing values.”<sup>45</sup> Conversely, Trump dulled value claims when asked to clarify who was responsible for the violence in Charlottesville. He asked first, “OK, what about the alt-left that came charging (inaudible)? Excuse me. What about the alt-left that came charging at the—as you say, the alt-right? Do they have any semblance of guilt?” Trump pulls himself farther into a conversation that equivocates on violence and fails to honor the values of the deceased and injured.

Trump associates Ms. Heyer’s cause with a group—the *alt-left*—he sees as equally culpable for the events in Charlottesville. According to Mark Pitcavage of the Anti-Defamation League, the alt-right coined the term *alt-left*, “to create a false equivalence between the far-right” and “anything vaguely left-seeming that they didn’t like.”<sup>46</sup> After using and giving credence to the alt-right’s term the alt-left to describe their opposition, Trump answered his own question, “I’m not putting anybody on a moral plane... Well, I do think there’s blame—yes, I think there’s blame on both sides. You look at—you look at both sides. I think there’s blame on both sides.”<sup>47</sup> As Hatch’s condemnation and others like it suggest, there is no moral equivocation with Nazis in the mainstream American political imagination, and Nazi symbols were quite present among the “Unite the Right” contingent.

Second, Trump’s history of political responses to terrorism renders the timeliness and forcefulness of his response to Charlottesville legible within the politics of white supremacy. Trump creates an apparent internal contradiction within his well-known predilections for firing off the cuff and speaking from his gut and his proclamation that his Charlottesville response was born of patient data collection. Trump built his constituency, as conservative newspaper *The Washington Examiner* put it, “From Des Moines to Detroit to Palm Beach to Staten Island, the first answer was always the same when you asked a Trump voter why they supported the man: ‘He tells it like it is...’” and they explain, “‘He tells it like it is,’ meant, for the most part, that he didn’t care for PC [politically correct] pieties.”<sup>48</sup> On the campaign trail, this meant that Trump often expressed his opinions on terrorist attacks almost instantaneously, rather than waiting for all the facts. For example, within 12 hours of the Brussels attacks in 2016, Trump tweeted, “I have proven to be far more correct about terrorism than anybody- and it’s not even close. Hopefully AZ and UT will be

---

<sup>44</sup> David E. Sanger and Maggie Haberman. “In Donald Trump’s Worldview, America Comes First, and Everybody Else Pays.” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2016, sec. Politics. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy.html>.

<sup>45</sup> Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tytca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971): 47-48.

<sup>46</sup> William Cummings, “Trump Spoke of the ‘Alt-Left.’ Is That a Thing?” *USA TODAY*. August 16, 2017. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2017/08/15/president-trump-alt-left-charlottesville/571192001/>.

<sup>47</sup> “Trump Tower on Charlottesville...”

<sup>48</sup> Washington Examiner. “Trump T’ells It like It Is on Taiwan.” *Washington Examiner*. Accessed September 22, 2017. <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-tells-it-like-it-is-on-taiwan/article/2608940>.

voting for me today!”<sup>49</sup> Trump responds almost instantly and touts his own “accuracy” in predicting terrorist attacks and associates that ability with people voting for him. Trump, rather than mourning the victims or offering support to the communities affected by the tragedy, praises himself. Trump’s tweet could be about any terrorist attack that Trump thinks fits the mold of jihadist terrorism that he holds. Mourning requires specificity concerning the person or people being mourned. Trump is most often self-referential in these moments.

One of the more egregious examples of this sort of response took place after the Pulse Night Club shooting in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016. Trump tweeted, “Appreciate the congrats for being right on radical Islamic terrorism, I don’t want congrats, I want toughness & vigilance. We must be smart!”<sup>50</sup> In this instance, Trump lauds himself for having predicted an act of terrorism. Trump claims not to want congratulations, but seems happy to claim that he was right and that people are lauding him for having been correct. In this case, Trump ignores the victims in favor of self-aggrandizement. Trump’s responses fail to mention that Pulse, an LBGQT nightclub, was hosting a Latinx night, and that the victims were targeted specifically because they were at a well-known LBGQT establishment. The erasure of motivation in an attack on a minority group in Trump’s response elides overall patterns of systemic discrimination and violence against that group. This is particularly problematic in this instance because lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are the demographic most likely to be targeted in hate crimes in the United States.<sup>51</sup> It proves even more problematic in the present given the anti-LBGQT policies of the Trump administration,<sup>52</sup> including his attempts to remove protections for transgender children in public schools and exclude transgender people from the military.<sup>53</sup>

As noted above, the initial comments on Charlottesville similarly failed to detail or talk at all about Ms. Heyer or any of the other victims attacked. That victims were targeted because they opposed white supremacy and white nationalism is absent Trump’s responses. In his second set of remarks, Trump said, “Two days ago, a young American woman Heather Heyer was tragically killed. Her death fills us with grief, and we send her family our thoughts, our prayers and our love.”<sup>54</sup> Trump fails to highlight anything specific about Ms. Heyer when given a chance to profile her causes. Given Trump’s comments on women who disagree with his positions politically and personally, such as Megyn Kelly or Mika Brzezinski,<sup>55</sup> this seems more than coincidence. For Trump, speaking well of Heyer stops short of mentioning anything she might have believed that contradicted his own beliefs or the beliefs of his base. When pressed, Trump expanded on his vague commentary about concerning Heyer:

---

<sup>49</sup> Katy Tur, “Trump’s Tweets After Tragedy Often Strike Self-Congratulatory Notes.” *NBC News*, June 13, 2016. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/trump-s-tweets-after-tragedy-often-strike-self-congratulatory-note-n590971>.

<sup>50</sup> Reena Flores, “2016 Candidates React to Mass Shooting at Orlando Gay Club.” *CBS News*, June, 2016. Accessed September 3, 2017. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/2016-candidates-react-to-orlando-night-club-shooting/>.

<sup>51</sup> Haeyoun Park and Iaryna Mykhyalyshyn, “L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely to Be Targets of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group.” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/16/us/hate-crimes-against-lgbt.html>.

<sup>52</sup> German Lopez, “Trump Promised to Be a Uniquely Pro-LGBTQ Republican. It Was Total Bullshit.” *Vox*, July 26, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/7/26/16034404/trump-lgbtq-rights>.

<sup>53</sup> Lopez, Jeremy Diamond, “Trump Signs Directive Banning Transgender Military Recruits.” *CNN*, August 25, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/25/politics/trump-transgender-military/index.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Estepa, “Read: Trump...”

<sup>55</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, “Why I’m Grateful Every Time President Trump Insults a Woman.” *Washington Post*, June 29, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2017/06/29/why-im-grateful-every-time-president-trump-insults-a-woman/>.

So making the statement when I made it was excellent. In fact, the young woman who I hear is a fantastic young woman, and it was on NBC, her mother wrote me and said through, I guess, Twitter, social media, the nicest things and I very much appreciate that. I hear she was a fine, a really -- actually, an incredible young woman. But her mother on Twitter thanked me for what I said. And honestly, if the press were not fake and if it was honest, the press would have said what I said was very nice.<sup>56</sup>

Trump defends his previous remarks, and he makes comments about Heyer that could be about anyone who died in the week previous to his speech before he attacks “fake news” and turns attention to himself. With the Orlando attacks, failing to mention the motivations for the attacks and avoiding profiling the victims, as is customary in most comments mourning the deceased in a terrorist attack, allows Trump to rile his base by talking about an erosion of safety and the threat of terrorism, while maintaining a heteronormative and masculine approach response to terrorism. With the Charlottesville attack, failing to describe Heyer in detail allows Trump to avoid discussing her beliefs which likely aligned more often with the protestors that Trump eventually uses as the ballast for his moral equivocations between white supremacists and the “alt-left.”

In the Orlando case, Trump focused on the identity of the attacker. This proved problematic given the nature of Mateen’s radicalization. While Mateen professed allegiance to the Islamic State (Daesh) in his call to 911 claiming responsibility for the attack, his level of understanding of the delineation between particular jihadist groups and his commitment to a singular radicalized terror cell is less clear according to FBI investigations profiling him.<sup>57</sup> Mateen’s actions evidence radicalization, but the nature of his radicalization was hardly clear when Trump began praising himself and questioning the responses of others. Given the content and timing of his Charlottesville response, this is particularly telling. Trump claimed that he needed to wait to have specific information to talk about the events in Charlottesville and he did not make the same broad associations with the attacker that he has typically made when attackers were radicalized jihadists.

Trump has regularly made blanket statements about “radical Islam,” but when confronted with violence perpetrated by white supremacist Trump eschews his trademark style of open and direct confrontation. Trump does not mention Alex Fields, Jr. by name and deflects the conversation away from discussions of terrorism. Trump described Fields, the man who attacked Heyer and those in the crowd, saying, “The driver of the car is a murderer. And what he did was a horrible, horrible, inexcusable thing,” and remarked that he was, “a disgrace to himself, his family, and his country.”<sup>58</sup> This is certainly a direct condemnation of violence, but even in these comments Trump demurred on the processes of radicalization that might have been relevant to this particular attack, “...you can call it terrorism. You can call it murder. You can call it whatever you want. I would just call it as the fastest one to come up with a good verdict. That's what I'd call it. Because there is a question. Is it murder? Is it terrorism? And then you get into legal semantics.”<sup>59</sup> He responded to the Charlottesville attack by asking for the attacker to be punished without examining the motive for or the rhetoric that preceded his act of violence. In three sets of remarks, Trump never considers the radicalization of white men in anywhere near the same tone or with the same generalizing rhetorical moves that he uses to call out “radical Islam.” As a candidate and now as President, Trump uses jihadist attacks on American soil and European soil to amplify his calls for toughness

---

<sup>56</sup> “Trump Tower on Charlottesville...”

<sup>57</sup> Adam Taylor, “Omar Mateen May Not Have Understood the Difference between ISIS, Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah.” *Washington Post*. June 13, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/13/omar-mateen-may-not-have-understood-the-difference-between-isis-al-qaeda-and-hezbollah/>.

<sup>58</sup> “Trump Tower on Charlottesville...”

<sup>59</sup> “Trump Tower on Charlottesville...”

and to gain support for implementing travel bans that target majority Muslim countries. After the September 14, 2017 London attacks Trump decried resistance to his travel ban and the expansion of it as “political correctness.”<sup>60</sup> When Charlottesville is put into the context of terrorism as defined by Trump, white supremacist violence is not terrorism, even if it is disgraceful, while all acts of violence committed by jihadists qualify as “radical Islamic terrorism.” Terrorism, as defined by Trump, requires legislation that disproportionately affects largely nonwhite races, religions, and ethnic groups, while violence committed by white supremacists simply requires expedient legal action. Legal action that ideally does not bother itself with the semantics of terrorism and the political motivations for it.

However, Trump did find ways to ascribe blame after both the Orlando and Charlottesville attacks that managed to focus scorn on people other than the perpetrators by using ad hominem to make rhetorical pivots toward his opponents. After the Pulse massacre, Trump tweeted to criticize President Obama’s response to the Orlando attacks by questioning and exclaiming, “Is President Obama going to finally mention the words “radical Islamic terrorism?” If he doesn't he should immediately resign in disgrace!”<sup>61</sup> In a twist of irony in light of his response to Charlottesville, Trump decries Obama’s response to a terrorist attack by suggesting that his word choice is not appropriate to the occasion because it lacks specificity. Trump claims Obama ought to disgracefully exit his office because he is not labeling the group responsible for the attack as Trump would label them. Trump also attacked Hillary Clinton along the same lines and beseeched her to drop out of the presidential election.<sup>62</sup> Trump followed his call for Clinton to drop out of the election in a longer statement arguing, “I am trying to save lives and prevent the next terrorist attack. We can't afford to be politically correct anymore.”<sup>63</sup> Trump touts his purpose as saving lives, but again seems to accuse his opponents of causing or encouraging terrorist attacks through their use of “politically correct” language. Trump’s Charlottesville response made “fake news” and dishonest journalists the target of his ad hominem invectives.

Trump tiptoes around condemning white supremacists and nationalists despite condemning his opponents for using nuanced and careful language when distinguishing between radicalized jihadists and broader Muslim populations. The difference, of course, is that there are 1.6 billion Muslims in the world ranging a broad spectrum of ideological positions,<sup>64</sup> and only a small fraction of Muslims espouse terrorist ideologies and/or radicalize. White supremacy, on the other hand, as a manifestation of racist and ethnocentric ideology is inherently prone to violence.<sup>65</sup> White nationalists simply attach a theory of sovereignty to that ideological position, which provides a veneer of political and institutional vernacular. In other words, Trump, white supremacists, and white nationalists belong properly to their own brand of political correctness with all the discursive trappings that establishing such borders entails. On this front, white supremacists praised Trump’s deflections.

---

<sup>60</sup> Daniella Diaz. “Trump Again Seizes on Terror Incident to Call for Travel Ban.” CNN. September 15, 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/15/politics/donald-trump-london-terrorist-attack/index.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Flores, “2016...”

<sup>62</sup> Flores, “2016...”

<sup>63</sup> Flores, “2016...”

<sup>64</sup> “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, April 2, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

<sup>65</sup> Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. Reprint edition. New York: Anchor, 2009.

For white supremacist groups, the “many sides” descriptions were seen as intentionally deflecting attention from their role in the events in Charlottesville. It fit within their notions of what is politically correct because the initial responses did not single out the groups participating in the “Unite the Right” rally by name. Punditry on white supremacist websites considered Trump’s initial response a victory, if not an outright endorsement. Andrew Anglin, head of the white supremacist website *The Daily Stormer*, offered, “He didn’t attack us. (He) implied that there was hate ... on both sides. So he implied the antifa are haters. There was virtually no counter-signaling of us all.”<sup>66</sup> Given Trump’s aforementioned proclivity for making blanket statements ascribing guilt in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, white supremacists and white nationalists supporting Trump argued that not naming their groups directly meant Trump absolved them of guilt. On the white supremacist website, *Stormfront*, one commenter added, “I think (and hope) by ‘other hate groups,’ he means the real hate groups in America, the Anti-White ones.”<sup>67</sup> The alt-right groups who organized the “Unite the Right” rally and carried torches through the streets, white supremacists and nationalists online who disseminate hateful messages, and others identifying with them assumed Trump intentionally avoided mentioning or profiling them in his responses to Charlottesville. As Coates puts it, “In Trump, white supremacists see one of their own.”<sup>68</sup> Trump’s uncivil mourning of the Charlottesville tragedy reinforced this worldview.

## Conclusion

The initial chain of events in Charlottesville starting with the removal of the Confederate monuments and the celebration of the Lost Cause Mythology vis-à-vis Robert E. Lee were precipitated by, and taking place within, the context of public discussions concerning racially motivated violence and the nationwide protests of it in the preceding years. The protests responding to the killing of Trayvon Martin, the numerous killings of unarmed black people by police, and the attack on the Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina initiated, grew, and sustained conversations about racism in the United States. For people in Charlottesville, and other places around the United States, the removal of these monuments is a part of mourning the treatment of people of color in the United States. President Obama attempted to facilitate conversations between protestors and the broader public by keeping lines of dialogue open with people protesting racially motivated violence.<sup>69</sup> As Andre Johnson points out, while Obama initially distanced himself from discussions of race when he assumed the role of the presidency, Obama also used the bully pulpit to console Americans after the deaths of unarmed black men in the United States. Specifically, Obama mourned following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the murder of Trayvon Martin.<sup>70</sup> Johnson argues, “Obama’s rhetoric shifted on racial matters to include systematic oppression and even implicit racial bias as issues that needed to be addressed.”<sup>71</sup> For many, the removal of the

---

<sup>66</sup> AJ Willingham, “Trump Made Two Statements on Charlottesville. Here’s How White Nationalists Heard Them.” *CNN*. August , 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/14/politics/charlottesville-nazi-trump-statement-trnd/index.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Willingham, “Trump Made...”

<sup>68</sup> Coates, “The First...”

<sup>69</sup> Samuel Perry, “Barack Obama, Civil Mourning, and Prudence in Presidential Rhetoric,” *Howard Journal of Communications*. Vol. 28:2 (2017): 167.

<sup>70</sup> Andre Johnson, “You Got Make Me Go Out and Do It”: The Bully Pulpit and the Articulation of Black Pain,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*. Vol. 5:3/4 (2015): 124-133.

<sup>71</sup> Andre Johnson, “The Scold of Black America”: Obama, Race, and the African American Audience.” *Howard Journal of Communications*. Vol 28:2 (2017): 184.

statues like the one of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville is a gesture of community, good will, and loving your neighbor that addresses those racial issues.<sup>72</sup>

These are the values Trump calls for at the end of his first set of remarks. Trump says, “We must love each other, respect each other and cherish our history and our future together. So important. We have to respect each other. Ideally, we have to love each other.”<sup>73</sup> However, these lines in the context of the wider responses to Charlottesville given by Trump create an interesting paradox. In particular, Trump’s call to cherish “our history,” begs the question, who fits in the “our” of that history? The people of Charlottesville, in discussing taking down Confederate monuments, seem to be grappling with their history and deliberating about what it means. Presumably, the members of the community advocating for removal see this as a step forward in building a brighter, more inclusive future that does not venerate slaveholders or romanticize why the Civil War was fought.

Trump, however, made clear that he did not see the removal of the statue as a sign of progress. Trump questioned reporters, “So this week it’s Robert E. Lee. I noticed that Stonewall Jackson’s coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you all—you really do have to ask yourself, where does it stop?”<sup>74</sup> Trump creates a chiasmus (repetition of sentence structure with subjects intended to be analogous to one another) in which Lee and Stone Wall Jackson are paired with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. In other words, the icons of the Confederacy are being historically equivocated with the icons of the founding of the United States. Trump decries Neo-Nazis and the Klan, but offers a different assessment of those protesting the removal of the Lee statue, saying “they were people protesting very quietly the taking down of the statue of Robert E. Lee... you had a lot of people in that group that were there to innocently protest and very legally protest, because you know—I don’t know if you know, they had a permit.”<sup>75</sup> Trump offers moral and legal sanction to the “Unite the Right” constituencies, while emphasizing that there were “plenty of bad people on the other side.”

If you do look at pictures and videos of the night before, those “quiet” and innocent folks carried torches and chanted “White Lives Matter,” “You will not replace us,” “Jews will not replace us,” and “Blood and Soil”<sup>76</sup>—a prominent Nazi chant.<sup>77</sup> The meticulously organized rally was designed to be a spectacle, as evidenced by white nationalist Richard Spencer’s text to a reporter, “I’d be close to campus, if I were you.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, this was not a spontaneous defense of Lost Cause Mythology that got out of hand. It was a bold statement about the level of comfort white nationalists and white supremacists felt making a public show of force in a liberal college town in close proximity to Washington, D.C. By 11:22 a.m. on Saturday morning following violent incidents that were reported to have been started by white nationalist groups that found willing

---

<sup>72</sup> For a discussion of public monuments praising Lost Cause Mythology: George F. McHendry, Jr. “I’m Not Racist; I’m Nostalgic for Racial Terror: The Debate Over Confederate Monuments.” *Citizen Critics*, June 6, 2017. <https://citizencritics.org/2017/06/im-not-racist-im-nostalgic-for-racial-terror-the-debate-over-confederate-monuments/>.

<sup>73</sup> Sitrin, “Read...”

<sup>74</sup> “Trump Tower on Charlottesville...”

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Joe Heim, “Recounting a day of rage, hate, violence and death,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm\\_term=.578ee68f5b86](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-timeline/?utm_term=.578ee68f5b86)

<sup>77</sup> J.C. Berlin, “How Germany “responds to blood” and soil politics,” *The Economist*. August 13, 2017. <https://www.economist.com/blogs/kaffeeklatsch/2017/08/charlottesville-context>

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

combatants in Antifa members and other armed protestors, the police declared the rally an “unlawful assembly.”<sup>79</sup>

Trump responded publicly to the ensuing tragedy. While the expectation was that he would lead the country in a period of mourning following the collapse of civic norms, the death of a protestor, injuries suffered by dozens more, and an overt display of racism and ethnocentrism, Trump mourned the mythical loss of whiteness. Whiteness is a set of rhetorically constructed boundaries.<sup>80</sup> Derrida argued that borders established by “blood, soil, or social class,” are inevitably “overdetermined or rather contaminated by the events of language.”<sup>81</sup> It seems that rhetorically speaking, Trump’s uncivil mourning laments the loss of a culture that by its very nature is exclusionary and discriminatory. He mourns with white nationalists who wish to take “their” country back, rather than with Americans who would like to celebrate the diversity of what “our” country could be. In terms of proper mourning, Trump eschews the epideictic convention of projecting into the future, in favor of continually recalling and dwelling in the past as he tries to “Make America Great Again.”

---

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek. “Whiteness: A Strategic Rhetoric.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81, no. 3 (August 1, 1995): 291–309.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 7.