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Trumping Tradition and the View from DC: Seven *In Situ* Theses on the 2025 Inauguration

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Donald Trump's second presidential inauguration, relocated to the Capitol Rotunda, signaled a significant shift in American political rhetoric and spectacle. This study employs an in situ *approach, drawing on our collective firsthand observations from Washington, D.C., to analyze the rhetorical impact of the inauguration's altered setting, audience composition, and symbolic messaging. We argue that the event, characterized by regal aesthetics, restricted public access, social media-driven dissemination, and elite attendance, worked to reconstitute traditional inauguration norms, which made it more intimate yet less democratic while strategically inviting a comparison to Ronald Reagan, whose second inauguration was also moved indoors. Moreover, the inauguration's diffuse and improvisational nature reflected broader elements of Trump's political style that elevate spectacle, disruption, and ambiguity. By offering seven theses drawn from our on-the-ground experiences of inauguration weekend, this study contributes to ongoing discussions on presidential rhetoric, political mythmaking,* in situ *rhetorical methods, and the evolving nature of democratic rituals in the digital age.*

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Trump's November 2024 political victory sent shockwaves around the world. Unlike 2016, which could be written off as a narrow fluke, he stomped to reelection with a clean sweep of the battleground states, the popular vote, an incoming GOP trifecta, and his hand-picked successor as his vice-presidential running mate. As *New York Times* writer Ezra Klein reflected, "In 2016, Trump felt like an emissary of the past; in 2025, he's being greeted as a harbinger of the future."[2] Whereas Trump's first inaugural address reflected his political weakness insofar as it (1) failed to fulfill the genre expectations outlined by Campbell and Jamieson to acknowledge the president's limited powers and call for national unity, (2) mirrored the rhetorical attention-seeking tactics typically deployed by third party candidates, and (3) was simply dismissed by many, as George W. Bush put it, as "some weird shit," Trump's second inaugural address served as the exclamation point for his long political comeback.[3] Given these triumphal circumstances, Trump's second inaugural address stood as a pivotal opportunity for him to cast his vision for the next four years of U.S. public life.

To position ourselves to better understand Trump's second inaugural, we went as a team to attend the address in Washington, D.C. We aimed, in the spirit of Kenneth Burke, to better interpret and anticipate the political tides of our own time so that we can fulfill Hogan's call for

2. Ezra Klein, "Trump Barely Won the Popular Vote. Why Doesn't It Feel That Way?" *New York Times*, January 19, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/19/opinion/trump-mandate-zuckerberg-masculinity.html.
3. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 31-34; Ryan Neville-Shepherd, "Genre-Busting: Campaign Speech Genres and the Rhetoric of Political Outsiders," in *Reading the Presidency: Advances in Presidential Rhetoric*, eds. Stephen J. Heidt and Mary E. Stuckey (New York: Peter Lang, 2019), 86-105; Yashar Ali, "What George W. Bush Really Thought of Donald Trump's Inauguration," *The Intelligencer,* Mar. 29, 2017, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/what-george-w-bush-really-thought-of-trumps-inauguration.html.

rhetorical scholars to act as "'watchdogs' in the marketplace of ideas."[4] Our team stayed at The Washington Center (TWC), where we participated in TWC's presidential inauguration seminar course prior to the address. We planned to adopt an *in situ* approach to gain a deeper understanding of the speech, its immediate audience reception, and its interaction with the political environment of Washington on inauguration weekend. This methodology, according to Heather Ashley Hayes,

> should involve rhetorical scholars placing themselves in a given setting, observing rhetorical acts as they occur in real time, in the embodied space(s) of the speakers who deliver and respond…in essence, studying rhetoric both *in its original place* and *as it occurs*. This approach is mindful of both the embodiedness of rhetoric, as well as its kairotic possibilities, which, as Spivak cautions, are often lost and/or rewritten via the visual and written recordings of history."[5]

Our aim was to deploy field methods to collect information about text, context, and audience that would be inaccessible from physical, digital, and chronological distance.[6] We did so while recognizing that, as Damien Smith Pfister argues, "we ought to be critical about the claim to know about a rhetorical event just because a rhetorician has participated in it, and we ought to be skeptical of participants' testimony as having some sort of privileged insight into… casual relationships." Pfister recommends that scholars "toggle our orientations between embracing immersion and seeking critical distance, rather than favoring one over the other."[7] We agree, which is why our research team was composed of eight scholars of diverse political preferences, nationalities, and citizenships who experienced the events leading up to the inauguration—and,

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4. J. Michael Hogan, "Public Address and the Revival of American Civic Culture," in *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address,* eds. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 437; Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," *The Southern Review* 6 (1939): 1-29.
5. Heather Ashley Hayes, "Doing Rhetorical Studies *In Situ*: The Nomad Citizen in Jordan," *Journal for the History of Rhetoric* 20.2 (2017): 169-170.
6. Sara L. McKinnon, Robert Asen, Karma R. Chávez, and Robert Glenn Howard, "Introduction: Articulating Text and Field in Nodes of Rhetorical Scholarship," in *Text + Field: Innovations in Rhetorical Method*, eds. Sara L. McKinnon, Robert Asen, Karma R. Chávez, and Robert Glenn Howard (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 3-14.
7. Damien Smith Pfister, "Rhetorical Field Methods and the Logic of Immersion," in *The Conceit of Context: Resituating Domains in Rhetorical Studies*, eds. Charles E. Morris III and Kendall R. Phillips (New York: Peter Lang, 2020), 299.

as it turned out, the speech itself—in different parts of the city. We also prepared by grounding ourselves in the National Mall's symbology and studying the inaugurations of prior presidents at the National Archives as points of comparison. We sought to leverage our multiple perspectives as a corrective to the limited sensory, affective, and experiential insights perceptible to a single subject and imbue our research with a higher degree of critical distance that still maintains the key insights *in situ* scholarship affords. While *in situ* research does not provide an unassailable vantage point necessarily rendering one critic's evaluation more authoritative than another's, it does allow scholars to access sensory data and affective insights otherwise not legible to them.

However, the relocation of Trump's inauguration from the National Mall to the Capitol Rotunda scuppered the original plan by rendering our research team unable to access the physical space in which the ceremony took place. After some back and forth, Trump ultimately decided to move the ceremony indoors due to weather.[8] In response, we adapted Brett Lunceford's notion of "rhetorical autoethnography," which draws both "on the critic's experiences with the rhetorical transaction in question" and "on theory to help illuminate some aspect of rhetoric, whether in the general sense or as it relates to a particular rhetorical transaction."[9] Specifically, we aimed to better document "how the audience actually reacted to the rhetoric" by positioning ourselves at various inauguration watch parties on Capitol Hill as well as by participating in charged events leading up to the inauguration (including The People's Protest, the Trump Sunday Victory Rally, Secretary of State Marco Rubio's Confirmation Hearing, and paying respects to President Jimmy

8. Monica Sager, "Trump Says He's Moving Inauguration Indoors. Here's How It Will Work," *Newsweek*, January 17, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/trump-says-hes-moving-inauguration-indoors-heres-how-it-will-work-2016914.
9. Brett Lunceford, "Rhetorical Autoethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 5.1/2 (2015): 17.

Carter as his body lay in state in the Capitol Rotunda).[10] These experiences allowed us to draw unique insights about the address and its reception by virtue of our firsthand observations.

Put differently, our critical focus is not the speech text alone. We follow Thomas Benson in seeing "the three elements of production, text, and reception not only as sequential but also as mutually and inseparably part of the same larger text."[11] In the context of the 2025 presidential inauguration, this perspective means viewing the address, its setting, and the events unfolding across D.C. on inauguration weekend not as separate rhetorical formations but as interconnected elements of a larger textual whole. As Gehrke states, "The rhetorical event is all this together."[12] In adopting this perspective, we likewise follow Stephen H. Browne in approaching the tension between text and context—in this case, Trump's second inaugural address and the setting of that inauguration ceremony—as a "pseudo problem" resolved through a more capacious appreciation for the constitutive capacities of epideictic rhetoric.[13] Like Davis Houck and Mihaela Nocasian— whose analysis of FDR's first inaugural connects Roosevelt's speech with the assassination attempt on his life in Miami, Herbert Hoover's ineffectual pleas for public confidence, public disenchantment with democracy, and many Americans' desire for FDR to assume "dictatorial" powers—so our consideration of the 2025 inauguration draws on wider features of the context in D.C. to situate the rhetorical meaning of the event and its implications for the U.S. presidency.[14]

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10. Lunceford, "Rhetorical Autoethnography," 15.
11. Thomas W. Benson, "'To Lend a Hand': Gerald R. Ford, Watergate, and the White House Speechwriters," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 1.2 (1998): 224.
12. Pat J. Gehrke, "What Rhetoric Can Do: Criticism as Critique," in *The Effects of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Effects: Past, Present, Future*, eds. Amos Kiewe and Davis W. Houck (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 89.
13. Stephen H. Browne, "Rhetoric, Text, Effect," in *The Effects of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Effects: Past, Present, Future*, eds. Amos Kiewe and Davis W. Houck (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 136.
14. Davis W. Houck and Mihaela Nocasian, "FDR's First Inaugural Address: Text, Context, and Reception," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 5.4 (2002): 670.

Broadly, we argue that Trump's second inaugural significantly deviated from generic expectations for U.S. presidential swearing-in ceremonies, breaking norms that have held for decades or even centuries. In so doing, it worked to reconstitute the rhetorical bonds that have linked and renewed the system of American governance, leaders, and people that has held since the constitution. To demonstrate this claim, we advance seven theses concerning the inauguration as a rhetorical artifact, each of which highlights a different aspect of the 2025 inauguration and its nonconformity with prior presidential inaugural ceremonies.

We have condensed these insights into a set of brief arguments about the rhetoricity of the inauguration ceremony, arguing for how the decision to change the location of the 2025 inaugural address altered the speech's rhetorical impact, reception, and meaning. While each student member of the research team took the lead in crafting a distinct interpretation of the ceremony, we deliberated collectively as a team and advance the following arguments in one voice. In focusing on the inauguration's environs, we hope to lay the groundwork for future scholarship by aiding "the overarching effort to capture the milieu within which cultural values are exhibited and performed"—what Enos, Robinson, and Nobles call "rhetorical decipherment," a more expansive reconstruction of a rhetorical situation by not only capturing the discourse created in a given context but also "the general climate around the discourse."[15] We contend that this approach to the 2025 inauguration allows us to demonstrate how the event worked to reconstitute the norms surrounding a presidential inauguration in various ways.

15. Richard Leo Enos, Natasha Trace Robinson, and Heidi Gabrielle Nobles, "Rhetorical Decipherment and the Recovery of Women in the History of Ancient Rhetoric: A Note on the Bronze Age Women of Linear B Scripts," *Journal for the History of Rhetoric* 23.1 (2020): 87.

An *In Situ* Guide to the 2025 Inauguration

In what follows, we outline seven theses regarding the rhetorical force of Trump's second inauguration in the Capitol Rotunda. Rather than a didactic throughline, these theses are meant to reflect the conversational, polyvocal, and ephemeral nature of *in situ* rhetoric; we believe such a structure better reflects our patchwork, impressionistic experience of inauguration weekend on the ground as it evolved in haphazard, improvisational fashion. These seven interpretations offer a reconstructive mosaic of inauguration discourse that aims, to cite Ronald Carpenter, to "situate that discourse more firmly in the *total process* of persuasion."[16] Built on *in situ*(ish) methods, we argue that the shift to the Capitol Rotunda marked a symbolic rupture with previous presidential inaugurations that made the 2025 ceremony more Reaganesque, more intimate, more regal, more "broligarchic," less unifying, less democratic, and less discrete, altogether highlighting the shifting character of the American presidency writ large.

More Reaganesque

A Republican political outsider eager to unmake the administrative state takes the oath of office for a second presidential term, having won a greater-than-expected electoral victory. Against the president's wishes, the freezing weather forces the ceremony indoors, undercutting his claims to a sweeping democratic mandate by altering the public celebration into an enclaved affair.[17] The inauguration parade is shunted off to a sports arena, where the candidate's original campaign mantra of "Make America Great Again" adorns supporters' attire.[18] Critical journalists

16. Ronald H. Carpenter, "A Disciplinary History of Rhetorical History: Retrospect and Prospect," in *Doing Rhetorical History: Concepts and Cases*, ed. Kathleen J. Turner (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 231. Emphasis in original.
17. Thomas Beaumont, "1985 Was the Last Time an Inauguration Was Indoors. Ronald and Nancy Reagan Felt They Had No Choice," *AP News*, January 18, 2025, https://apnews.com/article/ronald-reagan-1985-inauguration-trump-cold-weather-bd01fac5d72796efa15e6177e3a60a39.
18. Emma Margolin, "'Make America Great Again'—Who Said It First?" *NBC News*, September 9, 2016, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/make-america-great-again-who-said-it-first-n645716.

note the "hastily installed" stage, "somewhat subdued" crowd, "sporadic applause" from the audience, and "unexpectedly intimate setting" that all weirdly juxtaposed the inaugural address' proclamations that the nation had reached a "turning point" and was now "posed for greatness" over the next four years.[19] Amid security concerns—the president having already survived a serious threat on his life after being shot by a would-be assassin—the septuagenarian head of state, flanked by his vice president and presumed successor, concludes the ceremony and sets off to begin what promises to be a significant term in office.

Although the above paragraph is about Ronald Reagan, it could just as easily describe the 2025 inauguration of Donald Trump. This resemblance might strike some as shocking; after all, Trump is typically considered a break from Reagan-era conservatism.[20] As columnist Nate Cohn wrote in 2023, "For more than 30 years, the Republican Party was defined by Ronald Reagan's famous three-legged stool: a coalition of fiscal conservatives, social conservatives and national security hawks. It's not Mr. Reagan's party anymore."[21] Trump's embrace of tariffs, public spats with allies, lack of clear ideological commitments, and well-documented marital infidelities all stand in stark contrast to the Great Communicator. Trump himself said in 2016, "this is called the Republican Party, it's not called the Conservative Party."[22] Trump's move to ideologically reinvent his party has, at times, cost him support among longtime conservative voters and voices. *National Review*, for instance, regularly publishes attacks on his policies, actions, and statements notwithstanding it serving as a longtime voice of mainstream (read: Reaganite) conservatism.

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19. Bernard Weinraub, "President Sees U.S. At 'Turning Point' as 2D Term Begins," *New York Times,* January 22, 1985, 1.
20. Randall Fowler, "From Reagan to Trump: Strategic Trade in US Foreign Policy," *Providence*, August 19, 2025, https://providencemag.com/2025/08/from-reagan-to-trump-strategic-trade-in-us-foreign-policy-1/.
21. Nate Cohn, "It's Not Reagan's Party Anymore," *New York Times*, August 10, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/10/upshot/reagan-trump-gop-stool.html.
22. David Rutz, "Trump: This Is the Republican Party, It's Not Called the Conservative Party," *Washington Free Beacon*, May 8, 2016, https://freebeacon.com/politics/trump-republican-party-not-called-conservative-party/.

Hence, there is a strategic interest for Trump to appear more Reaganesque to mute criticism of this sort. The opportunity presented by moving the inauguration ceremony indoors to the Capitol Rotunda furnished a ripe moment of *kairos* to do so. Hence, while Trump's rhetoric and policies mark a break from Reagan, Trump's second inaugural marked a moment of strategic imitation.

There are many likenesses between Reagan and Trump, of course. Both men emphasized prioritizing the United States and American citizens in their presidential rhetoric. While many presidents have framed their leadership around the ideas of national renewal, prosperity, and defense against existential threats, Reagan and Trump stand out in the way they employed particularly forceful and direct rhetoric while claiming to represent the everyday people forgotten by Washington insiders, invoking a transcendent sense of urgency and national struggle.

Their rhetorical expressions of these common themes vary, of course. Reagan infused his speeches with optimism, invoking a "shining city on a hill" that needed to be defended from the creeping dangers of Soviet communism and federal bureaucracy to "protect the world from itself."[23] He often extended his positive associations with the United States to other countries such as Israel, thereby elevating American history and ideals in his rhetoric while making sure not to put U.S. allies down to do so.[24] Trump, by contrast, typically employs a more combative and accusatory tone to advocate for a particularly populist understanding of American greatness, emphasizing a nation under siege by globalism, political elites, and shifting cultural values that hamstring the country from achieving its glorious destiny. All the same, the shared theme of an inevitable American greatness rooted in the nation's exceptional history remains consistent.

23. Jason Edwards and David Weiss, *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 1–10.
24. Randall Fowler, "Reagan and Israel: Heroic Democracy in the Holy Land," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 23 (2020): 461.

Secondly, light-dark metaphors compose an essential rhetorical tool in each leader's oratorical arsenal. They are a powerful device. As Michael Osborn notes, "When light and dark images are used together in a speech, they indicate an perpetuate the simplistic, two-valued, black-white attitudes that rhetoricians and their audiences seem so often to prefer… patterns of light-dark metaphors can serve to suggest (where the determinism is left implicit) or reinforce (where the determinism becomes explicit) the impression that some particular series of events had to or will occur."[25] Both Reagan and Trump infused their rhetoric with light-dark metaphors through a panoply of secondary references to this broad schema. For example, Reagan relied on the "shining city on a hill" image derived from Matthew 5:14 to bolster his foreign policy vision. Stephen J. Heidt shows how this metaphor's logic worked to underwrite Reagan's contention that "America stands as a beacon of freedom and hope, from which we are obligated to guide those nations lost to totalitarianism and despotism… [metaphors] of American exceptionalism, as light/dark metaphors, function by associating the light with hope, freedom, and prosperity while the dark invokes the danger of disorder or the lack of democracy."[26] Reagan's use of light/dark metaphors reinforced the idea that the country had a moral obligation to lead the world toward freedom. His speeches painted a picture of America as a guiding force, illuminating the path for other nations, particularly those struggling under oppressive (read: Communist) regimes.

Trump has generally inverted light/dark metaphors to reflect a nation in peril—one that had been weakened by political corruption, globalization, and cultural decline. His rhetoric often suggests that America's status as a "shining city" has dimmed and requires restoration through strong leadership and decisive action, such as in his first inaugural address. Hence, while Reagan

25. Michael Osborn, *Michael Osborn on Metaphor and Style* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2018), 64-64.
26. Stephen J. Heidt, "Presidential Rhetoric, Metaphor, and the Emergence of the Democracy Promotion Industry," *Southern Communication Journal* 78.3 (2013): 235-237.

sought to reassure Americans that their country embodied these ideals and needed to confidently uphold them, Trump has positioned himself as the necessary force to reclaim lost greatness. The interplay of light and dark in both presidents' rhetoric operates from a shared nationalistic vision of American greatness, but Trump more overtly positions himself as Andrew-Jackson style disruptor, demanding aggressive action to restore the nation's fading brilliance.

However, Trump's second inaugural address broke from this typical use of light/dark metaphors to borrow a page from Reagan's rhetorical playbook. The overarching theme of the speech shone through in his opening words: "The golden age of America begins right now." The "golden age" metaphor, buttressed by references to sovereignty, strength, safety, and justice, hit the notes of Reaganite optimism rather than 2016 Trumpian pessimism; as Trump elaborated, "our top priority will be to create a nation that is proud and prosperous and free." Although the body of the speech denounced the Biden administration's "horrible betrayal" of the American people in familiar Trump fashion, these grievances were bookended by invocations of promising, hopeful words that revisited Reagan-era bright themes of American exceptionalism: "We will dream boldly, and nothing will stand in our way. Because we are Americans. The future is ours. And our golden age has just begun." Like Reagan, Trump infused his speech with encouraging light/dark metaphors to instill a sense of expectant optimism, at least at the speech's close.

There are many differences between Trump and Reagan, even down to how comfortably each leader interacted with inaugural attendees.[27] Yet Trump's overt attempts to mimic Reagan in his second inauguration—from the light/dark metaphors and rotunda setting to the campaign slogan and released Middle East hostages announcement—signal that the likenesses in their

27. Reagan is notably flanked by standing attendees, whereas Trump is positioned alone, winged by family and supporters who remain seated. Detroit Free Press, "Full 1985 Ronald Reagan Inauguration Speech Indoors as 2025 Donald Trump Inauguration Moved Inside," YouTube video, January 17, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRL45ryw2a8.

second inaugurations were more than coincidental. They were strategic attempts to imbue Trump with Reagan's still-powerful ethos.

More Intimate

Trump's 2025 inauguration move indoors signifies a calculated shift in how presidential power is staged and consumed. Unlike past inaugurations, which relied on accessible grandeur, this event was designed for a digital-first audience. With polished visuals, tight messaging, and direct-to-viewer engagement, it transformed the traditional presidential transition into a made-for-social-media product. This section will explore how Trump's enclosed setting amplified his political branding, making the event feel more controlled, intimate, and ultimately tailor-made for the social media platforms through which millions of viewers experienced the inauguration. Comparing this shift with past inaugurations and presidential media strategies reveals how Trump has adapted to the rules of modern public visibility to command political attention achieved not only by large physical crowds but also by online reach and digital engagement.[28]

Presidential inaugurations have long functioned as grand public performances that reinforce political authority via mass participation in a longstanding national ritual. The 2025 ceremony disrupted this tradition. Officially, the move indoors was due to inclement weather, but the result was undeniable: a more scripted, media-friendly event with restricted public access. By limiting unpredictability, the inauguration became a more curated, scripted performance that maximized control over optics. Without heckling protestors, awkward crowd-size comparisons, or disruptions, Trump's team ensured that every moment aligned with his carefully cultivated image. Television coverage reinforced this effect with tighter camera angles that focused on him and his allies rather than a sprawling sea of citizens, working to bolster the notion that he stands

28. Robert C. Rowland, *The Rhetoric of Donald Trump: Nationalist Populism and American Democracy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2021), 119.

as a larger-than-life "man of destiny."[29] Online, the event was clipped, edited, and recirculated, ensuring the inauguration's most striking moments spread broadly while avoiding the risk of any unexpected disturbances. In Wang's terms, the inauguration invited circulation in "contemporary digital spaces where immediacy almost becomes a reality," thus generating a sense of "hypermediacy" among digital consumers.[30]

We witnessed this shift play out firsthand. That weekend, this member of the research team waited in a line outside Capitol One Arena for hours with the hopes of attending Trump's pre-inaugural rally. As the crowd grew restless, tensions escalated—pushing, outbursts, and frustration intensified the closer we got to the entrance. Ultimately, I left before getting inside, realizing that the in-person experience had become secondary to the content being generated for online audiences. Later, at the People's March, anti-Trump sentiment played out in real time, not just through chants and speeches, but through the lens of countless raised smartphone cameras, capturing signs and slogans designed for digital circulation. The pattern was evident as political engagement via the screen that was seen, shared, and reshaped online took precedence over the in-person audience experience. These made-for-memeing moments during inauguration weekend reinforced the principle that modern political engagement requires mastering "the dialectic between online phenomena and IRL ('in real life') phenomena."[31] Like Reagan, who deployed the "intimate medium of television… [to] project a sense of private self," so Trump conveyed a sense of immediacy through the circulatory afterlife of the ceremony online.[32] As Cara Finnegan

29. Ross Douthat, "Donald Trump, Man of Destiny," *New York Times*, July 15, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/15/opinion/donald-trump-assassination-destiny.html.
30. Zhaozhe Wang, "Rhetorical Economy: Affect, Labor, and Capital in Transnational Digital Circulation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 108.4 (2022): 382.
31. Dan Bristow, "Introduction," in *Seizing the Memes of Production*, eds. Alfie Brown and Dan Bristow (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum, 2019), 19.
32. Michael Weiler and W. Barnett Pearce, "Ceremonial Discourse: The Rhetorical Ecology of the Reagan Administration," in *Reagan and Public Discourse in America*, eds. Michael Wiler and W. Barnett Pearce (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 37.

notes, processes of textual reproduction and circulation do "important cultural work, including creating interpretive communities and constituting publics" with political salience.[33] By trading outdoor pageantry for an indoor, controlled environment, Trump reinforced a digital-era media strategy that prioritizes maximum shareability and engagement over attendance, becoming a case study in digital-era presidential image-making.[34]

Stephen Heidt's concept of the "molecule" metaphor to describe presidential rhetoric is useful here.[35] Like an unstable molecule, a presidential speech such as Trump's second inaugural address is rarely encountered wholesale by auditors; rather, like a radioactive molecule, the speech fires off particles of meaning—one line here, another moment there—that are reassembled into new texts by social media users, political agents, and press outlets. Trump's inauguration was suffused with such moments that lent themselves to atomization as they were isolated from the larger speech, then turned into new clips, headlines, or X post content. Trump's strategy is less about delivering a fixed message than it is about conveying a dynamic web of fragments that constantly circulate, shift, and evolve through digital remixing.

In sum, Trump's decision to move the address indoors may have ostensibly been about the weather, but it was also a deeply strategic act that enhanced the digital appeal of the event and invited viral reproduction and circulation on social media in a manner that starkly contrasts with previous presidential inaugurations. One consequence of this change is that, like the felt warmth of a TV broadcast straight from the oval office, Trump's second inauguration became a more intimate event for his (millions strong) virtual audience.

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33. Cara A. Finnegan, "Studying Visual Modes of Public Address: Lewis Hine's Progressive-Era Child Labor Rhetoric," in *The Handbook of Rhetoric and Public Address*, eds. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and J. Michael Hogan (London: Blackwell, 2010), 257.
34. Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 141-143.
35. Stephen J. Heidt. "The Presidency as Pastiche: Atomization, Circulation, and Rhetorical Instability." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 16.4 (2013): 653–686.

More Broligarchic

Unlike recent inaugurations on the National Mall before a vast audience, Trump's second inaugural address limited audience attendance to about 600 individuals. The guest list included tech industry leaders like Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai, Sam Altman, Tim Cook, Peter Thiel, and TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew in addition to non-tech billionaires such as Rupert Murdoch, Dana White, Bernard Arnault, Miriam Adelson, Phil Ruffin, and Mukesh Ambani—not to mention billionaire nominees to the Trump administration like Linda McMahon, Howard Lutnick, Scott Bessent, Doug Burgum, and Chris Wright. Critical reporters raised concerns over this visual concentration of power, interpreting it as an emerging "broligarchy," a fusion of political authority with economic and technological hegemony where billionaire "bros" have an outsized role shaping the government's direction.[36] Trump's signature bravado and address enhanced this dimension of the ceremony. While the move indoors was attributed to weather, its exclusivity also signaled a shift toward oligarchic governance, in which Silicon Valley elites wield disproportionate influence through oversight organs like the newfangled Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). The "broligarchy" formulation, while facile, underscores the significance of the 2025 inauguration's rhetorical politics of audience.

Edwin Black's concept of the second persona provides a lens for assessing the political meaning of the inauguration guest list. He argues that rhetorical discourse does not merely reflect ideology but actively constructs an ideal auditor, or second persona, that aligns with the rhetor's worldview; the second persona is "a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become."[37] While Black's essay was primarily about how critics can analyze texts through close

36. Brooke Harrington, "What the Broligarchs Want From Trump," *The Atlantic*, November 24, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2024/11/broligarchy-elon-musk-trump/680788/.
37. Edwin Black, "The Second Persona," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 56.2 (1970): 113.

reading to uncover the imagined, idealized auditor implied by the rhetor's words, by reading the guest list of the second inauguration as a text, one can discern the ideal audience for Trump—whom he imagines, in a real sense, model Americans to be. Viewed in these terms, Trump's rhetoric was personally delivered and arguably designed for billionaire elites, representing an ideological evolution from populism to oligarchy despite his self-proclaimed image as a champion for forgotten Americans.

This insight also raises the question of who could only witness the inauguration through electronic communication. Philip Wander's concept of the third persona provides an answer. He argues that rhetorical utterances create audiences that are excluded in the rhetor's discourse; this auditor comprises "a being whose presence, though relevant to what is said, is negated through silence."[38] To again textualize the guest list, one might look to the silences in the Rotunda—who was not present to speak, listen, or be seen—and discover that the voting public was written out of the ceremony almost completely. This move was reinforced in the text of the speech itself. As Laura Basset commented, Trump's address was "eerily devoid of the working-class appeals that characterized his 2016 run, instead focusing on industrial sovereignty, digital currencies, and corporate-national partnerships."[39]

Insofar as the inauguration constituted an epideictic event, its exclusive audience spoke volumes. As Mary Stuckey notes, epideictic rhetoric "can influence the core of community values and bring new meaning to them."[40] Hence, Trump's vows to start a new "golden age," extirpate the "unfair weaponization of the Justice Department," "defeat what was record inflation

38. Philip Wander, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory," *Central States Speech Journal* 35.4 (1984): 210.
39. Laura Bassett, "The Broligarchy is Here," *The Cut*, January 20, 2025, https://www.thecut.com/article/elon-musk-jeff-bezos-mark-zuckerberg-trumps-broligarchy-is-here.html.
40. Mary E. Stuckey, *Slipping the Surly Bonds: Reagan's Challenger Address* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 8.

and rapidly bring down costs," "overhaul our trade system," "pursue our manifest destiny to the stars," "again build the strongest military the world has ever seen," and make the United States "a rich nation again" in his inaugural address, while offered generally to the American people, also took on the ethos of promises to his immediate audience. To build a strong military, to take one example, could be a source of national pride—but it could also mean a paycheck to investors in defense contractors or a signal that foreign sanctions on weapons inputs may soon increase.

In that sense, Trump's rhetoric also impinged on the fourth persona as theorized by Charles E. Morris III. Morris argues that the fourth persona operates as a covert audience, one that understands implicit messages within discourse while remaining concealed from the general public.[41] In this case, Trump's elite audience, which included Silicon Valley magnates, may have grasped his rhetoric in a way that was inaccessible to the broader public. By casting his second presidency as a "liberation" from the establishment, Trump projected a populist image while consolidating power among a new class of economic rulers. The fourth persona, therefore, helps explain how the speech functioned on multiple levels, appealing to the working-class base with anti-establishment rhetoric while signaling to billionaires that they were now, perhaps, the true stewards of the nation's future. As Leighton Woodhouse argues, Trump's presidency elevates the economically wealthy and "venture-capitalist class" against their bitter rivals, the "professional managerial class," the "credentialed [who] embrace progressive politics that favor the power of government institutions run by experts."[42] This message, at least in the early conduct of the second Trump presidency as of this writing (February 2025), is rather clear.

41. Charles E. Morris. 2006. "Pink Herring & The Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92.2: 228-233.
42. Leighton Woodhouse, "DOGE as Class War," *Compact*, February 14, 2025, https://www.compactmag.com/article/doge-as-class-war/.

Trump's second inauguration was more than a ceremonial beginning. It was a rhetorical reconfiguration of American power. By staging an exclusive event dominated by billionaires, his administration signaled a shift from populism to (br)oligarchy. The interplay of audiences—Black's second persona, Wander's third persona, and Morris's fourth persona—reveals how Trump's address constructed an ideal audience, excluded the electorate, and covertly reassured the tech bros. In announcing "Liberation Day," Trump strategically rebranded the entrenchment of elite power as a populist victory, thereby deviating from even his own inaugural precedent.

More Regal

Moving Trump's second presidential inauguration to the Capitol Rotunda did more than keep crowds out of the cold and make the ceremony feel more formal. This choice converted the event into a coronation. Unlike previous inaugurations that prioritized public accessibility, the 2025 event stressed historical gravitas, depicting the presidency (ironically) as an enduring institution not subject to the volatility, venality, and vulgarity of lesser political offices. Similar to other monarchical moments in presidential history, like Nixon's royal White House staff uniforms or the "aristocratic" style of Washington, Trump's inauguration revived the insight attributed to Lincoln's Secretary of State Henry Seward: "We elect a King for four years, and give him absolute power, within certain limits, which, after all, he can interpret for himself."[43] For U.S. presidents, the trappings of monarchy offer the allure of authority, albeit at the political risk of appearing to scorn the demos in whose name they preside. Trump adopted this kingly

43. Quoted in William J. Handley, Memorandum of Conversation with Suleyman Demirel, December 2, 1972, Ankara, Turkey, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976* XXIX, Document 458, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v29/d458; Shannon Duffey, "Press Attacks," George Washington Presidential Library at Mount Vernon, https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/press-attacks.

mode of presidential leadership and patterned the inaugural ceremony after it in a clear rhetorical break from the democratically-infused ethos of prior presidential inaugurations.

The term "regal" is often associated with majesty, formality, and an aura of sovereignty. It describes a politically sacred person or place branded by ceremony, exclusivity, and tradition, evoking images of royal coronations or state functions typified by decorum.[44] Monarchies are not monolithic, however. They vary in structure, authority, and context. The British crown, for instance, is historically influenced by the Davidic monarchy in the Bible, in which the king is subject to divine authority and accountable to God.[45] This underpinning contrasts with absolute monarchies, in which the ruler's authority is often viewed as inherent rather than conditional, or monarchies based on other religious or familial traditions, such as the Hashemite kings of Jordan or Chakri dynasty of Thailand. A monarch's symbolic weight therefore stems not only from aesthetics but also from deeper ideological foundations or faith traditions shaping perceptions of authority. In political rhetoric, regality is conveyed through grandeur, ritual, and the evocation of historical continuity.[46]

Many aspects of the 2025 inauguration assumed the characteristics of a regal event akin to the British coronation. To start, unlike outdoor inaugurations, where crowds, weather, and the vast space contribute to a more open atmosphere, the enclosed setting of the Capitol Rotunda created an event that mirrored the tightly controlled and symbolically rich environment of Westminster Abbey, where the English monarch has been crowned since 1066.[47] Journalistic

44. Janet L. Nelson, "The Lord's anointed and the people's choice: Carolingian royal ritual," in *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, eds. David Cannadine and Simon Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 158.
45. Paul M. Joyce and Diana Lipton, *Lamentations Through the Centuries* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2013), 168-171.
46. Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler, *The Rhetoric of Politics in the English Revolution, 1642-1660* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 171.
47. Matthias Range, *Music and Ceremonial at British Coronations: From James I to Elizabeth II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2-3, 226-228.

accounts described the atmosphere as "eerily regal," with attendees noticing the transition from the traditional democratic accessibility of prior inaugurations to a carefully orchestrated display of authority.[48] Indeed, the covers of *Time* and *Economist* magazines from this week literally depicted Trump in a crown, part of a broader trope in press coverage that compared Trump's style to monarchical rule. Interestingly, whereas in his first term Trump described loyalty to a king as antithetical to "a belief in the promise of America as a free and prosperous society," Trump seemingly embraced his royal visage this time around.[49] The White House even reposted the *Time* cover.[50] Seen in this light, the decision to move the ceremony represented a strategic choice designed to imbue Trump with the grandness of a king.

One of the most striking similarities between the 2025 inauguration and the British coronation was the deliberate choice of space. British coronations take place in an enclosed, artistically rich, and deeply historic location that conveys the continuity of the monarchy across centuries via Westminster Abbey's soaring architecture, intricate iconography, and centuries-old religious symbols. The Capitol Rotunda, surrounded by towering columns and the Apotheosis of Washington overhead—an ornate painting depicting the first U.S. president ascending to divine judgment, surrounded by female adjutants symbolizing the original 13 colonies—functioned as a similarly enclosed and symbolically potent space. Unlike most inaugurations, which take place on the Capitol steps in full view of the people, the 2025 ceremony removed itself from the broader citizenry and emphasized Trump's presidential status and authority.

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48. Michael Cranston, "Coronation day? The world waits to see which Trump will show up," *Australian Financial Review,* January 17, 2025, https://www.afr.com/world/north-america/coronation-day-the-world-waits-to-see-which-trump-will-show-up-20250114-p5l44t.
49. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 9929—Constitution Day, Citizenship Day, and Constitution Week, 2019," *American Presidency Project*, September 16, 2019, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-9929-constitution-day-citizenship-day-and-constitution-week-2019.
50. Katie Scott, "'Long live the king!': Trump faces backlash for comparing himself to royalty," *Global News*, February 20, 2025, https://globalnews.ca/news/11026858/donald-trump-backlash-king-post/.

The timing of the inauguration added another symbolic layer to the choice of location. Just days before, President Jimmy Carter lay in state in the Rotunda—placed vertically directly between the Apotheosis and the Crypt—marking America's farewell to an iconic statesman.[51] This close temporal link heightened the solemnity of the space, transforming the Rotunda into a consecrated site of both commemoration and renewal. By holding the inauguration within this revered hall, the event visually and rhetorically aligned the incoming president with the nation's most storied leaders.

The structure and choreography of the inauguration further accentuated its regality. British coronations follow a meticulously scripted sequence of rituals, reinforcing the legitimacy of the monarch. From the anointing with holy oil, symbolizing divine right, to the donning of the crown and the homage paid by attending officials, every aspect of the ceremony emphasizes the sovereign's authority and continuity.[52] Trump's second inauguration, which consigned popular elements of the event like the parade away from the National Mall, likewise adopted an air of solemn reverence. Just as British coronations feature a moment of withdrawal when the monarch is temporarily hidden from view during the anointing, emphasizing the sacred transformation of their role, the 2025 inauguration was notable for what it withheld from public view. The limited media access and audience presence instilled mystique and distance between the presidency and the public, reinforcing the idea that this transition of power was not merely a political act but a rite of passage into a grander, more elevated institution.

Art has long played a role in legitimizing rulers, and both the British coronation and the 2025 inauguration employed visual rhetoric to enhance the perception of regal authority. In

51. Architect of the Capitol, "Is anyone buried in the Capitol?" https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/capitol-hill-facts/anyone-buried-capitol.
52. Range, *Music and Ceremonial*, 20-28.

Westminster Abbey, the coronation takes place beneath intricate stained-glass windows and effigies of past monarchs, visually linking the new sovereign to the nation's lineage of rulers. This artistic reinforcement serves as a reminder that the crown is not an individual possession but a role embedded within the grand narrative of British history. The Capitol Rotunda conveys this in its own way; encircling the space are statues of leaders like Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Eisenhower. By placing the 2025 inauguration within this hallowed space, the event visually communicated that the incoming chief executive was part of a grand, mythic continuum.

A final key similarity between the 2025 inauguration and a royal coronation lies in the way the audience was structured. British coronations, while broadcast to the public, are attended only by a high-ranking group of officials, clergy, and nobility that underscores the moment's exclusivity. The 2025 inauguration likewise reduced the number of in-person attendees to a stunning extent. The implication of this restricted audience profoundly altered the affair into an intimate, elite ceremony rather than a mass democratic gathering. The shift stressed the aloofness of the presidency, not its democratic accessibility. Seen in terms of ethos, the ceremony thus substituted democratic legitimacy for the appearance of elite consensus and traditional authority.

Viewed altogether, these coronary elements of the inauguration conveyed the message that Trump was assuming something more akin to a throne than an elected office. The towering neoclassical columns, the Apotheosis of Washington looming overhead, and the encircling statues all contributed to the perception that this inauguration was not just about one leader but about the endurance of the office and greatness of the man. Second, this exclusivity was central to the ceremony. The absence of a large public crowd and the invitation-only nature of the event mirrored coronations where only nobility and clergy are permitted as witnesses. Finally, the rhetoric of mystique and controlled spectacle, marked by limited media access and carefully

orchestrated movements, distanced the moment from the populist traditions of U.S. inaugurations and instead positioned it as an elite, almost sacred transfer of power. This choice makes sense as a strategic rhetorical response to the idea that Trump is an aberration or imposter, foregrounding his renewed presidential authority and positioning him as a continuation of the line of the nation's greatest leaders. In sum, the inauguration moved beyond democratic symbolism and into the realm of structured regality, depicting Trump as a king in everything but name.[53]

Less Democratic.

Despite relocating the inaugural ceremony with only three days to spare, the event ran smoothly (if also improvisationally, as Trump's post-inaugural-address-address illustrates). Yet, in a break with previous inaugurations, this pivot rendered the affair less democratic and more demagogic as a rhetorical event. To wit, Michael E. Morrell defines democracy as the "politics of community that aims at the creation of meaning through the collaboration of advocate and audience, who depend upon one another as mutually accountable co-agents of political meaning and action."[54] This definition, and the claim that the setting of Trump's second inauguration rendered it less democratic, invite more thorough exploration. This argument draws on firsthand observations from attending the 2025 inauguration at Rep. Jody Arrington's watch party and progresses through the following premises: (a) democracy is principally about reflecting the will of the people, (b) presidential inaugurations are therefore "ecumenical" political events, and (c) the smaller event size thus fostered demagoguery.

53. The *Economist* lead article following the inauguration described Trump as "the would-be king." "Donald Trump: The would-be king," *Economist*, February 20, 2025, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/02/20/donald-trump-the-would-be-king. https://x.com/WhiteHouse/status/1892295984928993698.
54. Michael E. Morrell, "Deliberative Democracy and Its Critics," in *Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking, and Deliberation* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 149.

To start, inaugurations are inherently democratic rituals that perform a renewal of the political covenant between president and the people s/he represents as national head of state.[55] Democracy under this definition requires inputs from the "community" in whose name any leadership presumes to govern.[56] Specifically, Morrell uses the word "collaboration" to describe the process of interworking and feedback required, feedback that is traditionally available in the form of audience witness and symbolic ratification of the swearing-in ceremony (which was not possible in Trump's inaugural address).[57] Democracy thus necessarily entails a dialogic, agonistic, and collaborative process among political "co-agents" to determine collective action rather than political meaning being determined via an autocratic hierarchy. From a comparative politics vantage, this "development of accountable government" is central to democratization.[58]

Presidential inaugurations have traditionally functioned as ecumenical rituals within this understanding of democracy. They help reunite and heal the country after the division, enmity, and passions of the campaign season. While the term "ecumenical" is often used to represent a diverse array of Christian theologies and beliefs, it could equally mark the bringing together of a divided electorate via the rhetorical power of the inauguration. In that sense, inaugural addresses function as evidence that, despite any election season hurt, this is still "one nation under God." This democratic function is vital to the ability of the president to move forward in fulfilling the key role of the office as head of state—the symbolic representative of all the people.[59]

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55. John R. Vile, *The Drama of Presidential Inaugurations and Inaugural Addresses from Washington to Biden* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2022), xxii.
56. Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy,* 149.
57. Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy,* 149.
58. Eva Bellin, *Stalled Democracy: Capital, Labor, and the Paradox of State-Sponsored Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 4.
59. Smithsonian National Museum of American History, "Ceremonial Head of State," https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/american-presidency/online/foundations/the-presidents-job/head-of-state.

For example, George Washington also spoke to a divided nation amid fears of elite self-dealing and executive overreach in his inauguration. As today, Americans had concerns about the use of executive power and the impeding power of wealth. Yet Washington responded by rallying the country to unity, laying the foundational performance of president-as-unifier that has guided inaugurations to the present. As Stephen H. Browne states, George Washington acted ecumenically as "he [showed] that liberty and power might be held in productive balance, that such virtue as he possessed was indeed up to the task, he bequeathed to his new country 'a reasonable foundation of confidence' in the great experiment that is republican government."[60] Drawing on Washington's precedent, inaugurations are customarily restorative ceremonies that reunify the country after the divide of an election on the bases of citizens' mutual obligations to one another and their common interest in the success of the United States.

To restate, democratic governance requires the input of co-agents in the political process, which in the ceremonial context of an inauguration requires representative members of the polity to be present to witness the renewal of the nation's political covenant. It was precisely this aspect of the inauguration that was altered by moving Trump's 2025 inauguration indoors. The absence of "co-agents," or a mass audience credibly capable of standing in synecdochically for "the people" writ large, undercut the populist themes of Trump's address—especially given his vow in the speech "to give the people back their faith, their wealth, their democracy and indeed their freedom." In the absence of such a representative audience, the inauguration easily slipped into the ethos of a (more formal than typical) Trump rally, replete with the president's barbs at the "radical and corrupt establishment" that "extracted power and wealth from our citizens" and

60. Stephen H. Browne, "Sacred Fire of Liberty': The Constitutional Origins of Washington's First Inaugural Address," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 19.3 (2016); 421–422.

"cannot manage even a simple crisis at home." This outcome, in Morrell's terms, did not advance a "democracy that gives equal consideration to all."[61]

Instead, the inauguration lurched into demagoguery. According to Patricia Roberts-Miller, demagoguery is "discourse that promises stability, certainly, and escape from the responsibilities of rhetoric by framing public policy in terms of the degree to which and the means by which (not whether) the out-group should be scapegoated for the current problems of the in-group."[62] While subtle reminders of who won the election are not necessarily out of place in inaugural addresses, the degree of Trump's criticism of the preceding administration along with the restricted and curated composition of the audience in the Capitol Rotunda altered the meaning of the ceremony. Rather than a healing, unifying moment, the ritual became yet another episode in which the nation's discord was on full display. From the glares between the Trump family and prominent Democrats to the facial expressions (pro-and-anti Trump) of listeners in the Rotunda, the televisual transformation of the inauguration turned it into a demagogic event.

Based on our research team's firsthand experience, moreover, this dynamic was repeated across the city due to the sequestered nature of inauguration watch parties. Replicating the online echo chamber dynamics of social media, in Rep. Arrington's office there was little debate or uncertainty about who and what merited cheers or boos. While most inauguration attendees are naturally supporters of the president being inaugurated, the (perceived) absence of non-Trump voters in this venue spurred crowd dynamics that assumed partisan homogeneity and strong adherence to in-group ideology. Case in point, this researcher noticed that the loudest and most aggressive boos came not at the appearance of any Democrat but former Vice-President-turned-Trump-critic Mike Pence. This response signaled little support of policies or platform but an

61. Morrell, *Empathy and Democracy,* 149.
62. Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery and Democracy* (New York: The Experiment, 2017) 33.

endorsement of Trump (and his grudges) himself, the kind of expression that moves away from democracy and toward demagoguery. If, as Roberts-Miller writes, "democracy is about having to listen, and compromise, and it's about being wrong (and admitting it)," then these smaller groups accomplished something quite the opposite.[63] Also, for what it's worth, the line to "drill baby drill" garnered the largest applause at the same party—perhaps unsurprising for a crowd mostly comprised of west Texans. One can reasonably assume the inverse occurred at watch parties sponsored by Democrats, many of whom declined to attend altogether.[64]

In conclusion, by moving the presidential inauguration inside the Capitol Rotunda and convening watch parties with localized ideologically homogenous groups, the second inaugural address of Donald Trump was notably less democratic and more demagogic. As Campbell and Jamieson put it, "The people ratify the president's formal ascent to power by acknowledging the oath taking, witnessing the enactment of the presidential role, and accepting the principles laid down to guide an administration."[65] Although it might be a stretch to argue that the inauguration was *anti*-democratic—he did win the popular vote, after all—relocating it indoors with exclusive and rancorously partisan watch parties undeniably made it less democratic.

Less Unifying

The golden age; enduring democracy; national unity; and life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness were themes that imbued the 2025 inauguration.[66] On paper, Trump's second address proposed a vision of prosperity, peace, and the United States coming together as a nation. The speech emphasized democratic principles to reassure the people, providing a sense of stability,

63. Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery and Democracy, 129.*
64. Ewan Palmer, "Full List of Democrats Skipping Donald Trump's Inauguration," *Newsweek*, December 16, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/list-democrats-skipping-donald-trumps-inauguration-2001234.
65. Campbell and Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency,* 34.
66. Donald J. Trump, "Inaugural Address," January 20, 2025, *The White House*, https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/.

continuity, and trust in their government and institutions. After all, Trump directly invoked the "people" eight times in his inaugural address, reaffirming his commitment to all Americans, especially the working class that buoyed him into office.

However, while the speech's words centered on national unity, the firsthand experiences of our research team told a different story. There were many indicators throughout inauguration weekend in D.C. that the event would be less unifying than previous inaugurations, contradicting the message of collective strength and enduring democracy that Trump so heavily emphasized in his rhetoric. The insights we gained through our *in situ* presence in Washington enabled us to experience the event in ways that cannot be fully captured on a screen, leading us to discover a double paradox of disunity over the course of inauguration weekend.

The first paradox was easy to see: the juxtaposition of Trump's vision of U.S. greatness with our on-the-ground experiences of division, protest, resistance, and dissonance. One way we discovered this reality was through the hollowness of unity even among Trump supporters when push came to literal shove. Well before the decision to shift the inauguration indoors, the Trump campaign announced that on inauguration eve, supporters (defined as those who signed up for tickets online) were welcome to join the president-elect at Capitol One Arena for a final victory rally prior to the inauguration

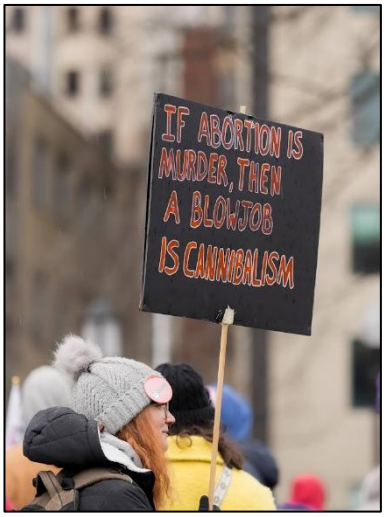


Figure 1: Author Photo from The People's March 2025



Figure 3: Author Photo from The People's March 2025

festivities on Monday.[67] Most members of our team braved the sub-20-degree temperature and began their long, cold, and wet trek to the entrance at 7 a.m. to wait in line prior to the doors opening at 3 p.m. Other members of our team dropped off food and supplies. At 1 p.m. it became evident people were antsy and anxious they may not get into the rally. Emotions ran high, trash covered the ground, and anti-Trump protestors shouted at rally goers through the fences. The scene was energetic, aggressive, and confrontational. Members of the U.S. National Guard maintained the line's order—up until the last hundred feet or so. When members of our team got within sight of the entryway at 3:30 p.m., aggravated would-be attendees sparked a chaotic, mad rush for the doors in fear that the building was at capacity. Our team members departed at that point out of fear for their safety.

This scene did not foreshadow the message of national greatness, glory, and unity Trump would proclaim less than twenty-four hours later. Rather, it paradoxically undermined the controlled, triumphant image Trump projected in his inaugural address. The chaotic and tense atmosphere outside his rally undermined his words of amity and empowerment, reflecting an agitated nation divided and in which even victory celebrations are marked by disorganization, frustration, and interpersonal hostility. While difficult to measure, it seemed to us that numerous Trump supporters came away feeling similarly appalled at this paradoxical disconnect.



Figure 5. Author Photo from The People's March 2025

However, the main event that captured this conflicted reality was "The People's March" two days

67. Will Weissert, "WATCH: Trump holds 'victory rally' in D.C. one day before his inauguration," *PBS News,* January 19, 2025, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/watch-live-trump-speaks-at-victory-rally-in-d-c-one-day-before-his-inauguration.

prior to the inauguration.[68] Organized by an alliance of left-wing advocacy groups, including the Women's March, Planned Parenthood, ACLU, and Sierra Club, the event drew an estimated 50,000 people.[69] While falling far short of the estimated half million protestors who marched the day after Trump's 2017 inauguration, the 2025 march was designed to "confront Trumpism," peacefully opposing the incoming president through the right of assembly and serving as both a demonstration of political resistance and a call for collective action in the face of Trump's electoral triumph.[70]

My fellow cohort members and I approached this protest with curiosity and a genuine desire to understand the viewpoints presented, some of which we shared and others we did not. When we arrived at our designated starting points—the march began at three parks in downtown D.C. and converged on the National Mall—the sites were filled predominantly with women, many holding signs. Many of these signs had slightly vulgar recursive references to Trump, with messages like "electile dysfunction," "Jesus had two dads and turned out fine," "FOTUS - felon of the United States - lock him up," and "smile: he can grab you by the pussy." As these examples suggest, many of the posters had sexual undertones to them, adding a slightly menacing quality to the event while demonstrating the movement's focus on specifically sexual freedoms and protections. The demeanor of the protestors varied from friendly to furious, and the overall vibe was one of both deep anger



Figure 4: Author Photo from The People's March 2025

68. Dana Fisher, "What We Learned from the People's March about Attitudes Toward Political Violence," January 29, 2025, *Brookings*, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-we-learned-from-the-peoples-march-about-attitudes-toward-political-violence/.
69. Mandy Taheri, "The People's March: Photos Show Large DC Protest Before Trump Inauguration," *Newsweek*, January 18, 2025, https://www.newsweek.com/peoples-march-photos-show-large-dc-protest-before-trump-inauguration-2017249.
70. John Zangus, "Tens of Thousands Rally Against Trumpism At the People's March," *DC Media Group*, January 18, 2025, https://dcmediagroup.us/2025/01/18/ten-of-thousands-rally-against-trumpism-at-the-peoples-march-2025/.

toward the incoming administration and mutual support toward fellow protestors (with very clear exceptions for perceived opponents). Interestingly, the main presence of dissenting voices came from faith-based counter-protestors, not from Trump supporters decked out in MAGA gear. These counter-protest efforts took on highly symbolic dimensions, such as one (presumably Christian) man dragging a full life-sized cross amid the protest and a Black man stoically holding a bright neon sign stating, "Jesus Saves." Overall, the tone was discordant as protestors expressed frustration that more had not joined to demonstrate. In sum, the stark contrast between Trump's rhetoric and the demonstrators' chants underscores the paradoxical clash between his aspirational, glossy words and the conflictual experiences of many Americans.



Figure 5: Author Photo from The People's March 2025

If the first paradox was the clash between the inaugural speech's themes—unity, power to the people, and uplifting the working class—with the lived reality of deep division, fear, and trepidation as seen at the protest, the second paradox is the political impotence of these protests. To be fair, the protest amounted to an empirical demonstration that the people are not all united behind Trump. However, insofar as the People's March operated as a "political jam" meant to "unmask" dominant logics through performative enactment of an alternative political reality whose rhetorical function is to gain attention, persuade voters, and affectively "suture" progressive ideological and policy commitments to the hearts of demonstrators, it fell rather short of "jamming" the inauguration even as it effectively illustrated the persistence of deep-seated political division in U.S. politics.[71] Press coverage moved on

71. Yvonne Slosarski, "Jamming Market Rhetoric in Wisconsin's 2011 Labor Protests," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13.3 (2016): 262.

quickly from the protest, and the event only attracted 10 to 20 percent the same number of attendees as the 2017 march (which perhaps explains why one-third of marchers reported being open to violence "in order to save our country.")[72] The march did not effectively seize national attention away from Trump.

One way to explain this paradox is through the concept of image events. As Kevin DeLuca notes, confrontational rhetoric (like at the People's March) operates as "a technique to gain attention," which can then be redirected toward "transforming mainstream society's key discourses and ideographs."[73] In her examination of MLK's 1963 Birmingham campaign, Davi Johnson shows how the "carefully orchestrated rhetoric of bodies," as captured by *Life* Magazine and its images of police brutality against nonviolent protestors, worked to make racial injustice publicly visible and helped shift national public opinion while providing a major warrant for the 1964 Civil Rights Act.[74]

In today's information landscape, social media platforms play the role of *Life* in 1963, which means the relative success of a protest—especially one meant to function as counter-messaging to an inauguration—should be measured by how it displaces attention that would have gone to the president-elect. There is little evidence that Trump's second inauguration did not garner overwhelming amounts of attention, being recirculated as



Figure 6: Author Photo from The People's March 2025

72. Dana R. Fisher, "What we learned from the People's March about attitudes toward political violence," *Brookings*, January 29, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-we-learned-from-the-peoples-march-about-attitudes-toward-political-violence/.

73. Kevin DeLuca, *Image Politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 15-16.

74. Davi Johnson, "Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 Birmingham Campaign as Image Event," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10.1 (2007): 20.

fragments and discussed on TikTok, X, and elsewhere. Indeed, the venue switch made the inauguration ceremony only more televisual and therefore more likely to be recirculated in the form of clips that highlighted specific lines, attendee fashion choices, and audience reactions (Elon Musk's thumbs up and Democrats' facial expressions).[75]

Paradox, as Patricia Roberts-Miller observes, has suffused American attitudes toward democracy going back to the Puritans.[76] This term equally captures the presidential inauguration in 2025. The People's March stood in direct opposition to his vision, as thousands protested for rights they felt were at risk, while the victory rally outside the Capital One Center revealed the disorganization, tension, and high emotions that undercut the unity Trump claimed to champion. Together, these events exposed the stark contrast between the aspirational rhetoric of his speech and the reality of a deeply fractured nation even as they did not visually displace the mediated experience of inauguration weekend.

Less Discrete

Many words could describe Donald Trump's second inauguration. Succinct is not one of them. While presidents have delivered longer inaugural addresses, arguably the most remarkable aspect of Trump's inauguration was its continuing, multisite, and improvisational nature. Rather than a specific line or quote—think the applause that met Obama's 2009 line "We are the ones we've been waiting for" or how FDR's 1933 declaration "to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded" alarmed even the First Lady—the 2025 inauguration did not crescendo to a single note but rather comprised a

75. Jennifer Savin, "Moments from Trump's inauguration that got social media talking," *Cosmopolitan*, January 20, 2025, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a63484421/trump-inauguration-reaction/.

76. Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Voices in the Wilderness: Public Discourse and the Paradox of Puritan Rhetoric* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 1.

panoply of speeches, speakers, songs, and supporter spotlights dispersed over the weekend.[77] Consequently, the inauguration should be viewed as a less discrete and more diffuse event in contrast to previous inaugurations, reflecting Trump's verbosely elliptical rhetorical style (self-titled "the weave," though some prefer "stream-of-consciousness").[78] This insight suggests that the diffuse nature of the inauguration is fully the consequence of Trump's rhetorical style.

According to Barry Brummett, a discrete text is one that is clearly bounded and has a particular focus and intention, often presenting a unified message that is easily identifiable and interpretable. Traditional inaugural addresses are a classic example of discrete texts. As he notes, "Public speaking is also a discrete text… clearly distinct and separate in time and space." Unlike, say, rain, which "is here, there, all over the place, mixed in with the air and the soil, coming and going," speeches are more like pencils or tables or shoes in that it is quite easy to put boundaries around their starting point and end.[79] Inaugural addresses are delivered at a specific moment of transition, are highly scripted, and are intended to provide a coherent, overarching message of unity, policy vision, and commitment. Their structure and rhetoric are designed to create a sense of closure and renewal, providing the audience with a singular, authoritative interpretation of the occasion to which the entire inauguration ceremony builds up and for which it is remembered. There is no debate over whether there should be more or fewer words recording the 1865 inaugural address on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial; its textual content is highly discrete.

In contrast, a diffuse text is one that lacks clear boundaries and does not function as a single, easily identifiable rhetorical moment. Diffuse texts are more open-ended and can involve

77. Ira Chernus and Randall Fowler, *Something to Fear: FDR and the Foundations of American Insecurity, 1912-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2023), 63.
78. Bill Barrow, "Inside 'the weave': How Donald Trump's rhetoric has grown darker and windier," *Associated Press*, October 30, 2024, https://www.ap.org/news-highlights/spotlights/2024/inside-the-weave-how-donald-trumps-rhetoric-has-grown-darker-and-windier/.
79. Barry Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture,* 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 50.

multiple, complex messages that span across time and space; they are defined as "a collection of signs working for the same or related rhetorical influence that is not discretely separated from its context."[80] These kinds of texts do not have the same closure or clear focus that discrete texts have. He offers the examples of the start of school and the overall experience of watching football on TV with others as diffuse texts that nevertheless possess a "unity of influence."[81] The football example is made up of "all of these signs and artifacts, mixed together in an incredible jumble" that nevertheless "contribute to the same rhetorical effect of enjoyment… Yet we would be hard-pressed to identify where this text begins and where it ends."[82] The notion of diffuse texts allows for the analysis of rhetorical phenomena that resist easy categorization or fixed interpretation since they do not conclude with a single, conclusive point but rather engage in continuous, evolving communication.

Political campaigns such as Trump's successful 2024 bid for the presidency can also be understood as diffuse. Rather than a singular moment, the campaign steadily emerged as a text through speeches, tweets, images, debates, statements, controversies, and news cycles. Each part contributed to a less cohesive whole that still is discernable as a unified rhetorical experience. The sheer volume of events, number of speakers at these events, and dispersed locations added to the inauguration's diffuseness.

To start, the entire inauguration weekend constituted a rhetorical experience, blurring the lines between what exactly counts as part of the inaugural text. To list specific sites of rhetorical activity stemming from Trump alone, the president-elect spoke at the Sunday victory rally in Capitol One Arena (60 minutes), his post-inauguration celebration at the same location on

80. Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, 86.
81. Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, 107.
82. Brummett, *Rhetoric in Popular Culture*, 86.

Monday (27 minutes), in televised "off the record" comments to overflow inauguration guests in the lower level of the Capitol immediately following the swearing in ceremony (33 minutes), and in his actual inaugural address (30 minutes).[83] Insofar as what the president (or president-elect) says matters, all of these words count equally as Trump's official, public rhetoric as the nation's leader—and where one draws the line between formal statement and mere partisan bombast is much more difficult to discern when the president talks at such a voluminous clip. Indeed, as a researcher who had hoped to witness the inauguration live in DC, it was difficult to know when or where Trump would be speaking next. For example, two members of our research team had the opportunity to meet and thank Congressman Arrington for his hospitality inviting us to the Cannon House Building to watch the inauguration; however, during our time meeting him Trump began his post-inauguration comments, leading us to wonder if we had missed something. It is difficult to determine what formally "counts" as the presidential inauguration in this context.

Moreover, it was not just Trump who spoke. At the ceremony, for example, despite Imam Husham Al Husainy's withdrawal, there were still invocations and benedictions by Archbishop Timothy Dolan, Reverend Franklin Graham, Rabbi Ari Berman, Father Frank Mann, and show-stopper Pastor Lorenzo Sewell. In terms of musical performances, vocalist Christopher Macchio sang the national anthem, the U.S. Naval Academy Glee Club gave a rousing rendition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," Lee Greenwood played his iconic "God Bless the USA," and

83. "FULL SPEECH: Donald Trump addresses overflow crowd after being inaugurated as 47th president," January 20, 2025, 13WMAZ, YouTube 2:25-2:27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SP-7s0ZSCeY.

Carrie Underwood performed "America the Beautiful" solo when the audio system failed to work. Nonverbal reactions from Elon Musk, Hillary Clinton, Barron Trump, and other audience members went viral. So many memorable participants and moments from the ceremony itself, not to mention the large rosters of speakers, performers, and prominent attendees at all the other weekend events, added to the sense that the inauguration was not a discrete moment but a diffuse experience that encompassed proximal episodes like being turned away from Capitol One Arena, having to navigate around the Trump motorcade zipping back and forth through downtown D.C., encountering a Trump branded Tesla Cybertruck parked two blocks from Union Station, marching with anti-Trump protestors on Saturday, and seeing the Sisyphean moment when, once news of the move to the Rotunda broke, workers began removing the tens of thousands of folding chairs they had painstakingly arranged on the National Mall.



Figure 7: Author Photo of Inauguration Cleanup

In short, Trump's second inauguration has been criticized for indulging in partisan point scoring and failing to furnish a unifying message of renewal like traditional inaugural addresses. This criticism arguably stems, in part,

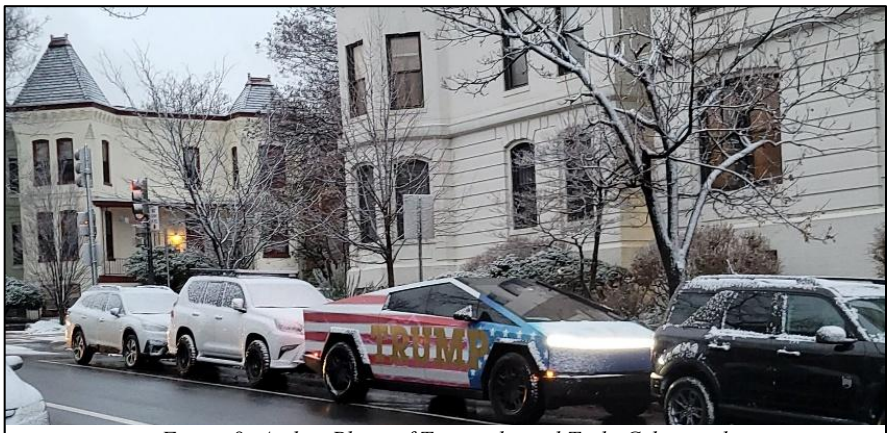


Figure 8: Author Photo of Trump-themed Tesla Cybertruck

from the lack of cohesiveness to the inauguration itself. Rather than a precise moment of healing, Trump's inaugural address was absorbed into the bustle of ancillary events taking place throughout the city that weekend. In that way, the inauguration, like much contemporary presidential rhetoric, can be seen as part of a diffuse text—a continuous, unsettled discourse that resists neat categorization and constantly evolves in response to shifting political realities, especially in the age of Trump. Discrete texts create concrete, finite moments of rhetorical closure. Diffuse texts are unbounded, in flux, and, seemingly, never quite end.[84] It is tough to find a better way to describe the opening of Donald Trump's second presidential term.

Conclusion

There are many possible angles through which to analyze Trump's rhetoric. The list of presidents he variously imitates is long: Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Warren G. Harding, FDR, Reagan, and Clinton. His attributes are uneven. He is insincere yet patriotic, aggressive yet peace-loving, elementary yet visionary, bullying yet the forgotten man's champion. His words have been read insightfully through the lenses of incivility, remix, racism, noise, resentment, and more.[85] While the meaning of Trump's 2025 inaugural address and its import for his second term will be debated for some time to come, the collection of insights generated from our joint presence in D.C. at this pivotal political time admits two critical tenets that can guide future critical interpretation.

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84. For an extended application of the trope of polysyndeton to explain this dynamic of Trump's rhetoric, see: Randall Fowler, "Polysyndeton, Social Media, and the Presidency: Digital Culture & Rhetorical Style in the 2020 Election," in *Political Communication and Digital Advocacy: Strategies and Implications,* eds. John Allen Hendricks and Dan Schill (New York: Peter Lang, 2025), 31-57.

85. Joseph P. Zompetti, "Rhetorical Incivility in the Twittersphere: A Comparative Thematic Analysis of Clinton and Trump's Tweets During and After the 2016 Presidential Election," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 9.1/2 (2019): 29-54; Virginia Kuhn, "Remix in the Age of Trump," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 7. 2/3 (2017): 87; Rebecca M. Townsend, "Trump's Warsaw Address, or How the 'West' Was Widened," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 8.1/2 (2018): 87.

First, many aspects of our experience seem to have anticipated the first month of Trump's presidency. From the lack of clear public communication to the inauguration's improvisational relocation, the wild shift in planning for the ceremony presaged the breakneck pace of Trump's attempts to reshape the federal bureaucracy, impose limits on immigration, withdraw the United States from international agreements, rename geographical features, grant clemency to January 6 offenders, kill DEI, browbeat allies, threaten universities, spur oil development, and restructure American foreign policy. The challenge of grasping all these dramatic changes at once inspired grand theories of interpretation. Trump floods the zone, elevates cultural policy above all else, is ending the Long Twentieth Century, or wants to revive Metternich (Concert of Europe) and Lindbergh (Anti-Interventionism) to form an antiliberal détente with China and Russia.[86]

We offer no such unified theory. Rather, our observations suggest that tropes might offer better insight into Trump 2.0. He is *hyperbolic*, going over the top with a "coronation." He is *polysyndetonal*, going and acting here-and-there-and-everywhere all at once. He is *proleptic*, promising halcyon visions yet demurring on exactly how to get there. And he is *ironic* in style and substance, winking toward accusations of oligarchy and autocracy while claiming an enormous mandate in Jacksonian democratic tradition, estranging himself from conservatism while savaging federal budget items like Reagan's wildest dreams. One trope—one theory—cannot explain all, but a multi-perspectival approach such as that offered here can, like a mosaic, provide a critical field of vision from which to make sense of the second Trump administration.

86. Ezra Klein, "Don't Believe Him," *New York Times,* February 2, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/02/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-trump-column-read.html; Tyler Cowen, "Trumpian Policy as Cultural Policy," *Marginal Revolution*, February 5, 2025, https://marginalrevolution.com/marginalrevolution/2025/02/trumpian-policy-as-cultural-policy.html; N.S. Lyons, "American Strong Gods," February 13, 2025, The Upheaval (Substack), https://theupheaval.substack.com/p/american-strong-gods; Noah Smith, "America is being sold out by its leaders," February 20, 2025, Noahopinion (Substack), https://www.noahpinion.blog/p/america-is-being-sold-out-by-its.

Second, we chart a pathway to assist with future *in situ* scholarship by showing one way to deploy a team of researchers to gather more firsthand data, sense the rhetoric as it is happening in various locations, and engage in rhetorical analysis that honors our complementary affiliations and viewpoints. While our team unfortunately encountered more issues with access than hoped for, the information gained from our collective efforts revealed alternative layers of meaning for analysis and yielded different insights than we anticipated, showing the utility of deploying more sizable research teams than is typical in rhetorical studies to study large-scale rhetorical events. This approach allowed for a more polygonal form of criticism that experimented with Brett Lunceford's notion of "rhetorical autoethnography" to analyze real-world discourse as it unfolded in a manner too swiftly and sprawlingly for a single person to wholly perceive. In the process we have offered multiple possible onramps through which other rhetorical scholars can engage our arguments surrounding rhetorical criticism, field methods, or the 2025 inauguration.

In sum, it is difficult to make definitive claims about Trump's second presidency. However, our experience at the inauguration gave insights that will, with time, assist future researchers in more fully evaluating what thus far promises to be an unfathomably eventful presidency.
