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## Rhetorical Tribalism and the Polemic Public Sphere

Author Redacted<sup>1</sup>

Of deep concern to many invested in public rhetoric and civic engagement is the ~~US's present~~ slide into "tribalism," ~~within the United States. Tribalism, a term a metaphor I and others~~ ~~borrow~~, primarily ~~borrowed~~ from popular media, ~~to references~~ a problematic shift in political and social life. This ~~is a shift~~ ~~is~~ marked by increased ~~is in~~ ideological dogmatism, hyper-partisan identifications, post-truth, and affective polarization. ~~T, this~~ combination ~~of which~~ is emerging as a notable threat to civil discourse and democracy itself. Drawing on canonical and contemporary scholarship in public sphere theory and rhetorical studies, I introduce and define two relevant phrases: "the polemic public sphere" and "rhetorical tribalism." In doing so, I work towards a conceptual framework for rhetorical analysis and production, ~~one that~~ I then illustrate and apply ~~this framework~~ ~~merely~~ as an introductory example ~~through a brief~~ analysis of speeches from the 2024 Republican National Convention. ~~My hope is that this~~ framework ~~sketched here might~~ ~~can~~ provide ~~openings opportunities~~ for new research and teaching in rhetoric, thereby ~~serving as an interven~~ ~~ingtion~~ into what many regard as a crisis of democracy.

**Keywords:** rhetorical tribalism, polemic, public sphere, polarization, agonism, antagonism

*"Let me begin by doing my part to begin the healing process, to bring down the temperature and tone down the rhetoric by saying this: fuck you, you cretinous, insurrectionist gargoyles."*

—Seth Meyers, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, January 11, 2021<sup>2</sup>

*"I don't know if you're uninformed, ignorant, or just a narcissist (my vote is on all three). -You're severely doing wrong by your son (and other children he comes into contact with) by dismissing medical science and being an anti-vaxx ankle. -And by ankle, I mean three-feet lower than a cunt. -Your son deserves better. -You give the title of 'mother' a bad name."*

—shared social media post online, with 18,200 upvotes<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> {Author name and bio redacted for review}

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Horton, "Seth Meyers on Republicans Calling for Unity: 'Craven, Soulless Ghouls,'" *The Guardian*, January 12, 2021, sec. Culture, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/jan/12/seth-meyers-republicans-capitol-attack-stephen-colbert-jimmy-kimmel>.

<sup>3</sup> Greta Jaruševičiūtė and Rokas Laurinavičius, "50 Savage Insults People Found Online That Were Too Good Not To Share With Everyone," *Bored Panda* (blog), accessed May 19, 2022, <https://www.boredpanda.com/rare-funny-insults/>.

Across a wide spectrum of examinations over the past ~~half a dozen~~<sup>six</sup> years, academics ~~and public intellectuals~~ have been grappling with ~~the America's~~ deep social and political divisions ~~of American society~~. Indeed, the previous issue of this ~~very~~ journal features two important articles exploring differing ~~but specific~~ ~~ent~~ ways ~~in which that~~ “hyper-polarization” and “partisan gamesmanship” might be countered ~~—; namely, through~~ public rhetorics that critically engage with varied forms of mythmaking and, in certain instances, public rhetorics that embrace and enact diatribe and obscenity. ~~Such scholarship elaborated in These essays/articles~~ by Benjamin P. Sweeney and Thomas A. Salek, respectively ~~—~~ contributes to ongoing interdisciplinary conversations seeking to understand and intervene in what might be deemed a crisis of democracy in the United States.<sup>4</sup> ~~S-While~~ social scientists, journalists, and academics ~~of all stripes~~ are working to understand this crisis in ~~their respective~~ different ways, ~~such as~~ — exploring socio~~logical~~/psychological causes and effects ~~for one example~~, or analyzing ~~the~~ legal boundaries of political life ~~for another~~. However, ~~—~~ a particularly ~~fecund~~ ~~productive~~ ~~object of relevant~~ inquiry, for those of us invested in public rhetoric and civic engagement, should be how American politics and ~~even~~ everyday life have become “tribalist” in nature.<sup>5</sup> ~~For example, Hence my interest in the articles by~~ Sweeney and Salek ~~, each of which provides partially explain insight into~~ the rhetorical means by which tribalist identities and allegiances are constructed and, in some cases, challenged.

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~~By~~In using the term “tribalist,” ~~which I will more fully define and develop later in this essay,~~ I ~~wish to reference, at least as a starting point,~~ the factionalism marking political and social life in the United States, along with the rise of ideological dogmatism, hyper-partisan identifications, and “affective polarization.”<sup>6</sup> Tribalism is ~~n’ot~~ just a feature of mainstream politics ~~(, to which it is so routinely tied)~~. Tribalism ~~it~~ manifests across activist movements, residential communities, social clubs, religious contexts, corporate cultures, and even academia—the latter an alleged last bastion of open inquiry, rational debate, and ~~multiperspectival complexities in opinion, identity, and knowledge creation~~ diverse perspectives. ~~To be sure, I do n’ot wish to use this term “tribalist” to somehow~~ redefine publics and/or counterpublics as *tribes* in any historically scientific, sociological, or anthropological sense. Rather, I ~~am~~ drawing on “tribalism” as a metaphorical term that ~~has s recently become~~ routinely deployed in popular media ~~and~~ ~~Because that metaphorized notion~~ has become so pervasive, ~~and~~ mundane, ~~and because it is and so~~ intimately bound to the emergent crisis of democracy in the United States. Therefore, ~~I wish to leverage it here, building on it to explain and examine, explain, (and aligning it this term as a corollary of)~~ a specific dimension of our present public sphere—what I coin ~~as~~ “the polemic public sphere.” ~~to~~ I wish to signal the ~~kinds of~~ antagonistic, divisive, oppositional, and aggressive discourses ~~surrounding many of us in circulating in~~ the mainstream ~~on a daily basis~~. ~~Hence~~ the epigraphs that precede this essay ~~; they~~ reflect a particular kind of polemical

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin P Sweeney, “Everything and Nothing: Myths of White Supremacy and ‘Irishness’ in the Age of Trump,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 14, no. 1 (2024): 31–45; Thomas A Salek, “Swearing an Oath to Veterans and Exposing Cruel Partisan Gamesmanship: Jon Stewart’s Strategically Uncivil and Profane Diatribe in Support of the 2022 PACT Act,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 14, no. 1 (2024): 15–30.

<sup>5</sup> Fathali Moghaddam, *Threat to Democracy: The Appeal of Authoritarianism in an Age of Uncertainty* (American Psychological Association, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1chrgrp>; Gretchen Helmke, Mary Kroeger, and Jack Paine, “Democracy by Deterrence: Norms, Constitutions, and Electoral Tilting,” *American Journal of Political Science* 66, no. 2 (2022): 434–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12668>.

<sup>6</sup> K. Elizabeth Coggins and Kathleen J. Gruschow, “Toward a Shared Ideological Currency: Ideological Affective Polarization & the Changing Structure of Ideology in the U.S,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129241261697>.

discourse that, as I will argue, ~~functions to strengthen tribalism rather than inviting and discourages~~ collaboration, compromise, ~~or and~~ social change ~~in the ways often theorized and hoped for in rhetorical education and scholarship.~~

Building upon a variety of scholarly ~~and journalistic~~ analyses and arguments, ~~including those by Sweeney and Salek referenced above,~~ I develop in this essay a critical framework for better understanding ~~the tribalism's~~ rhetorical nature ~~of both tribalism and the polemics that sustain it.~~ ~~It-While my framework is an interdisciplinary framework, but it's one~~ ~~fundamentally~~ grounded in theories of rhetoric and ~~of the public sphere.~~ ~~My hope is that it-my framework can be applied to help understand and intervene in~~ a range of cultural moments (meaning both “historical eras” as well as ~~and~~ “events”), ~~providing in the process a useful way of understanding them and, ideally, intervening in them.~~ To build this framework, ~~In an effort to illustrate that hope, this essay I~~ will explore (a) our current, broad ~~sociopolitical moment that~~ is sometimes referred to as “the Trump era,” and (b) a more precise (and very recent) rhetorical event, namely the Republican National Convention (hereafter RNC) held in July 2024. Given constraints of length and the ground I wish to cover here, such explorations will not be as granular as they might otherwise be; they will instead provide brief openings into deeper analyses that others might take up, should they wish to borrow and build upon the initial framework I am attempting to provide.

I'll ~~begin below by first offering~~ a working definition ~~of the aforementioned facet~~ of the public sphere ~~by.~~ ~~Doing so necessitates a reference briefly sketching to~~ literature on ~~public sphere~~ theories ~~of the public sphere in general.~~ ~~Then,~~ ~~which I will sketch very briefly before narrowing and specifying the facet that~~ ~~what~~ I am calling the “polemic public sphere”—a move that takes inspiration from and finds a productive analog in ~~the work of~~ James E. Caron's ~~work~~ on satire and the rhetorical function of ~~what he has termed~~ “the comic public sphere.”<sup>7</sup> ~~Next~~ ~~Following that section, I will then work through~~ ~~construct~~ an operational definition of “rhetorical tribalism,” building on popular media conceptions of social and political tribalism, ~~which I will selectively synthesize and flesh out these examples with brief nods to canonical scholarship in rhetoric as well as and~~ emergent theories of new materialist rhetorics and rhetorical ecologies. ~~In doing so, I will be working towards a flexible, interdisciplinary framework for an interdisciplinary rhetorical theory and practice that yokes together rhetorical tribalism and the polemic public sphere, exploring~~ ~~In the process, I'll explore~~ the productive potential of examining the interrelations of polemics (in their oft-perceived eristic, antagonistic sense), publics and counterpublics, social media, and other rhetorical-material conditions producing the tribal divisions (and correlational unities) that many see as a serious threat to democracy in the ~~United States at this moment.~~ Finally, ~~I'll examine a specific (and very recent) rhetorical event: the July 2024 Republican National Convention (RNC). I aim to provide brief openings into deeper analyses that others might take up, should they wish to borrow and build upon my framework. I will conclude by applying this tentative framework to analyze, at least at an introductory level, recent rhetorics on display at the RNC in the summer of 2024.~~

## The Polemic Public Sphere

<sup>7</sup> James E. Caron, *Satire as the Comic Public Sphere: Postmodern “Truthiness” and Civic Engagement*, vol. 2 (Penn State University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv1k03g04>.

—The construct of “the public sphere” needs little introduction in ~~this~~ journal ~~such as this~~ ~~with its presumed readership~~; nevertheless, a brief sketch will ~~be useful to~~ help contextualize and operationalize the framework I wish to develop. Many readers will likely see ~~as a starting point~~ ~~the work of~~ Jürgen Habermas’s, ~~whose~~ influential *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* ~~as a starting point~~. Habermas helped scholars across multiple disciplines better understand and theorize how citizens in a free society ~~are able to~~ can articulate shared concerns, discuss and debate ideas for improving communal life, and contribute to the shared governance implicit in a deliberative democracy.<sup>8</sup> Habermas’s formulation materially links civil society’s increased participation in its ~~own~~ governance to the spread of coffeehouses and reading clubs in ~~18th-Century~~ Europe ~~during the eighteenth century~~. ~~This a~~ growth ~~correlates~~ ~~correlative with~~ the spread of print literacy via newspapers, magazines, and journals. The public sphere, for Habermas, encompasses the literal and metaphorical spaces ~~within which~~ ~~where~~ rational-critical dialogue and debate can occur outside of state control. Habermas observes that the ~~public sphere’s~~ liberatory potential ~~of the public sphere~~ is unfortunately undermined by the ~~very~~ ~~machinations of~~ capitalist production that enabled its rise. ~~His~~ idealized rational-critical public becomes a passive consumer public under the force of commercial mass media as corporate and private business interests dominate the form and content of public discourses, hindering what might otherwise be a universally accessible rationality ~~that~~ facilitates ~~ive of~~ truth and consensus.

—It ~~is of course~~ the presumed ideal of universality and the telos of consensus in discourse that became the subject of post-Habermas critiques, such as the well-known analyses provided by Nancy Fraser and, ~~later~~, Michael Warner.<sup>9</sup> For such scholars, the ~~singular~~ public sphere is an inherently problematic construct ~~in its singularity~~. ~~as~~ Fraser notes, it ~~is~~ more accurate to speak of ~~plural~~ ~~publics~~, ~~plural~~, and to recognize ~~the ways in which~~ ~~how~~ differing groups and individuals, with ~~their~~ inequalities of power and access, ~~will not be able to~~ ~~cannot~~ speak to one another as peers the way Habermas idealizes. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci and others, Fraser sees in the public sphere a multiplicity of hegemonic operations, ~~wherein~~ normative discourses shore up ~~the dominant~~ ideologies ~~of dominant groups~~ and promote the “spontaneous consent” that masks subordination. Much of Fraser’s analysis is built upon a feminist historiography that demonstrates patriarchy as central to ~~even the~~ ~~very~~ idea of a public, ~~and~~ ~~So~~ she thus advocates for our recognition of feminist subaltern *counterpublics* as an effective example of the internal incoherence of a singular public sphere. Warner extends Fraser’s critique in his eponymous ~~essay~~ ~~and~~ book on “publics and counterpublics ~~to~~,” ~~within which he~~ argues for their poetic world-making potentiality and necessary coexistence in participatory democracies. ~~What both~~ Fraser and Warner seek to highlight ~~are~~ the struggles among publics, many of which are simultaneously counterpublics. The distinction between the two, as Warner points out, is that ~~counterpublics~~ ~~the~~ ~~latter are those which seek to~~ define themselves in opposition to a dominant public:

“A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or a wider public but a dominant one.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Burger, and Lawrence Kert, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25–26, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>; Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. 119.

What happens, though, when relations among publics are rhetorically constructed ~~in such ways so that even~~ a dominant public can ~~create its own momentary status as temporarily claim~~ subordinate ~~status~~ and ~~thus justify in the~~ need ~~of for~~ its ~~own~~ oppositional discourses? What happens when “the cultural horizon” against which a dominant public marks itself off is ~~itself~~ projected as relationally oppressive? ~~W~~To ~~put it another way,~~ what happens when oppositional discourses are normative and strategic to the extent that any public using them must—as ~~both~~ cause ~~and~~ effect of such use—see itself as subordinate? Consider, as a current ~~day~~-example, ~~the ways in which~~how a heterosexual white ~~male~~ Christian conservative ~~male~~—an intersectionality axiomatic of historical cultural domination in the United States—might regard himself as oppressed in the context of “woke” America. Such a paradoxical perspective is hardly new. ~~However, but these perspectives are it is~~ no longer easily disregarded as mere hypocrisy and instead needs ~~these days~~ to be understood as an animating force in civic life. Nowhere is this ~~reality~~ more evident than in ~~the Donald Trump’s~~ 2016 electoral victory. ~~of Donald J. Trump, Trump’s whose~~ populist campaign ~~both~~ tapped into and fueled rhetorics that, according to Paul Johnson, enabled white audiences to reject hegemonic whiteness and take on a marginalized subjectivity.<sup>11</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly sees this process occurring within an emotional-moral framework best described as “resentment,” a term that ~~he says~~ “captures the socially expressed state of mind, the ethical stance, and collective identity sought out by a form of political rhetoric that links white victimization with virtue.”<sup>12</sup> Deliberative rhetorics in the public sphere are increasingly ~~functioning to both~~ producing and reflecting not only resentment but ~~also~~ other related qualities of anger and fear about one’s ~~own~~ marginalized positions, oppositional as those must inherently be to projected dominant others as an ontological condition.

Scholars of rhetoric and the public sphere often ~~seek to~~ bracket out such theoretical contradictions, sometimes through complex efforts to distinguish “legitimate” claims of oppression from their relativist counterparts. Tischauser and Musgrave, for ~~one~~ example, build on ~~work by~~ Domonkos Sik’s ~~work~~ to identify “the performance of *imitated counterpublicity* in which critical race rhetoric is coopted to mobilize white supremacist sentiment and organize white tribal politics.”<sup>13</sup> Robert Asen, for another example, argues that rhetoricians ~~need to must~~ engage history and materiality to see ~~the ways in which~~how one’s privilege might be signaled in their marginalization discourse and ~~the ways in which~~how such discourse narrows or opens space for others.<sup>14</sup> Saul Newman makes a similar move by distinguishing *parrhesia*—speaking truth to power—~~from~~ post-truth rhetorics that purport to do so but belong ~~in fact~~ to power itself.<sup>15</sup> In all such ~~eases~~ examples, these scholars are ~~working to~~ figuring out how to make

<sup>11</sup> Paul Elliott Johnson, “The Art of Masculine Victimhood: Donald Trump’s Demagoguery,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 229–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2017.1346533>.

<sup>12</sup> Casey Ryan Kelly, “Donald J. Trump and the Rhetoric of Resentment,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 1 (2020): 2–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1698756>.

<sup>13</sup> Jeff Tischauser and Kevin Musgrave, “Far-Right Media as Imitated Counterpublicity: A Discourse Analysis on Racial Meaning and Identity on Vdare.Com,” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 31, no. 3 (2020): 284, italics original; <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2019.1702124>.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Asen, “Ideology, Materiality, and Counterpublicity: William E. Simon and the Rise of a Conservative Counterintelligentsia,” *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 3 (2009): 263–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630903140630>.

<sup>15</sup> Saul Newman, “Post-Truth, Postmodernism and the Public Sphere,” in *Europe in the Age of Post-Truth Politics: Populism, Disinformation and the Public Sphere*, ed. Maximilian Conrad et al., Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 13–30, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13694-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13694-8_2).

discourse expansive and open rather than insular and closed. ~~They r~~<sup>16</sup> recognize ~~ing~~ that tribalism ~~is routinely an outcome of results from~~ rhetoric perceived to be striking back against an oppressive system. Regardless of the definitional boundaries put upon it, counterpublic rhetoric is thus characterized first and foremost by opposition. ~~D~~<sup>17</sup> ~~by~~ dissensus ~~is not as~~ a component of dialectic (which would have as its telos new understandings and improved relations) but ~~is as~~ an inherent feature. ~~C~~<sup>18</sup> ~~As such, it is~~ counterpublic rhetoric ~~is thus~~ insistently antagonistic, ~~what which~~ may be ~~centrally explained~~ characterized by at least one definition of “polemic.” ~~This definition~~<sup>19</sup> ~~—that which has as its etymology comes from~~ the Greek term “polemizein,” meaning “of or for war, warlike, hostile,” and has come to mean “disputatious” and “combative.”<sup>16</sup>

~~To be clear,~~ I do not mean to invoke what Ruth Amossy means by “polemic,” ~~for S~~<sup>20</sup> she draws etymologically from the French “polémique” to define polemic more neutrally as ~~“controversy,” as or~~ social conflict inescapably rooted in dissensus and disagreement but reliant upon at least some shared ethico-political values.<sup>17</sup> ~~Unsurprisingly,~~ Amossy draws, ~~unsurprisingly,~~ from Chantal Mouffe, whose excellent work on hegemony and the public sphere makes a strong case for dissensus, ~~which Mouffe has regarded as~~ a necessary and unavoidable component of the political realm.<sup>18</sup> Deeply critical of Habermas’s goals of shared reason and consensus-making, Mouffe ~~establishes a~~ <sup>21</sup> ~~’s ultimate framework is that of~~ “agonistic pluralism.” ~~This~~<sup>22</sup> ~~a~~ theory of democracy ~~that~~ sees civic deliberations successfully occurring within pluralistic societies ~~fundamentally through conflict and~~ without any presumptions of conflict ~~resolution~~<sup>23</sup>. ~~Mouffe~~<sup>24</sup> she is thus ~~in alignment~~ aligned in many ways with Fraser’s and Warner, ~~given their’s~~ conceptions of counterpublics and the relentless struggles for power within ~~what Fraser calls~~ “actually existing democracies.” Yet I ~~am~~ concerned about agonistic pluralism’s ~~devolution~~<sup>25</sup> ~~into~~ antagonistic polarization. The ideal of agonistic pluralism is that enemies are turned into adversaries, ~~the distinction being that A~~ <sup>26</sup> ~~adversaries share mutual respect and responsibility for one another, while enemies simply want to win, even (or perhaps especially) if it means the other’s defeat or destruction. Such Much is a key distinction upon which much of agonistic pluralism rests upon this key distinction,~~ according to Andrew Knops, who has critiqued Mouffe’s framework for its ~~own~~ universalizing assumptions of the political realm.<sup>19</sup> Amossy may be subject to a similar charge, ~~given that because, when all is said and done,~~ she correlates her analyses of public controversies to a characterization of overall social progress, ~~to a broad political context and to~~ a teleological outcome, both of which feel universalizing despite ~~that~~ Amossy ~~does not explicitly claim~~ <sup>27</sup> ~~ing~~ them as such.

~~The title of~~ Amossy’s book, ~~titled length work on the subject is~~ *In Defense of Polemics*,<sup>28</sup> implies ~~ing~~ a preexisting antipathy signified by the term “polemics.” Indeed, she writes early ~~on~~ in the book that she ~~wishes intends~~ to recuperate the concept from the common sentiment that polemics involve “speech said to be partial, marred by passion, a violent discourse incapable of contributing to the smooth running of the rational debate that nourishes democracy.”<sup>20</sup> ~~Given the her project’s purpose of her project, and within the her~~ Mouffe-inspired framework ~~she employs,~~ she ~~is successful in~~ operationally defin<sup>29</sup> ~~ing~~ at least some polemics as productive and integral to

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<sup>16</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, “Polemic, Adj.” (Oxford University Press, September 2023), Oxford English Dictionary, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3448460289>.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Amossy, *In Defense of Polemics*, trans. Olga Kirschbaum (Springer, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Chantal Mouffe, Elke Wagner, and Chantal. Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*, Thinking the World Politically (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Knops, “Debate: Agonism as Deliberation - On Mouffe’s Theory of Democracy,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15, no. 1 (2007): 115–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00267.x>.

<sup>20</sup> Amossy, *In Defense of Polemics*. 2.



democracy. She would undoubtedly ~~be supportive of the Salek's~~ rhetorical examinations, ~~referenced in my introduction, by Salek in this journal.~~ Salek analyzes ~~an Jon Stewart's~~ angry diatribe, laced with invective and obscenities, performed ~~by Jon Stewart~~ in July 2022 for the news media outside the US Capitol building. Stewart, the former (but now ~~current~~ part-time) host of Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, has been a highly visible celebrity advocating regularly on behalf of 9/11 first responders and US veterans suffering in the aftermath of tragedy and war. Salek argues that Stewart's ~~use of~~ swearing and ~~his~~ invective ~~—~~ in response to Republicans blocking the passage of the PACT Act ~~—~~ functions in the moment to intentionally "[breaks] with the norms of civility."<sup>21</sup> Drawing on ~~scholarship by~~ Thomas Benson and Susan Herbst, Salek argues that Stewart's incivility is a rhetorical tactic ~~—~~ one designed to gain ~~the media's~~ attention ~~by the media~~, to provoke responses, and even to generate interpersonal identifications among the subjects of his advocacy. ~~In alignment with Amossy and others extolling who extol the polemic's~~ agonistic potential ~~of polemic~~, Stewart's rhetoric ~~provides is~~ an important example of democratic engagement and resultant social change. ~~(One might also look to the Stewart's~~ passionate diatribe provided ~~by Stewart~~ to Congress in 2019 on behalf of 9/11's first responders ~~—~~ a diatribe that was even more rhetorically powerful and prompted a similar successful outcome among legislators on Capitol Hill.<sup>22</sup>)

Nevertheless, ~~I see such these~~ examples ~~aren't~~ as the norm but ~~are~~ exceptions to a broader, more ubiquitous and pernicious form of polemic that now saturates the public sphere. ~~While And it is for that reason that, just as I am eventually utilizing use~~ "tribalism" ~~later in this essay in ways that~~ align with popular media uses of the ~~cat~~ term, I ~~seek here to invoke here~~ the commonly derisive meaning of "polemic" that Amossy ~~is~~ working against. ~~I do so~~ because I ~~am~~ less hopeful than she is. ~~I see~~ polemics as grounded, not always but most often, in antagonism rather than agonism. I want to bring the vernacular usage, which has an important circulatory function in the public sphere, into ~~our~~ rhetorical scholarship so that we may work with (and within) that circulation. ~~— It is also because I also am in agreement~~ with Knops's criticism of agonistic pluralism, especially in light of the exigency ~~at the heart~~ of this essay's motivation ~~—~~ namely, the ~~US's~~ emergent crisis of democracy ~~in the United States~~. Once we refuse the universalizing or totalizing impulses in theorizing a society comprised mainly of agonists, we can see varieties (and degrees) of both agonists and ~~antagonists~~ ~~always~~ already engaged across democratic domains. ~~We~~ we can see Amossy's idealist construct of polemic co-existing with its more populous counterpart, the eristic version of polemic that she wishes to reframe. ~~This — a~~ form ~~that~~ is clearly on the rise in the Trump era and is becoming for too many an epistemological orientation for ~~their~~ participation in public discourse. ~~As~~ Tom Nichols ~~has~~ recently ~~wrote~~ ~~itten~~ in *The Atlantic*;

"People now delight in shocking others the way toddlers who have learned their first swear words enjoy seeing the horror of adults around them. This, as the Never Trump conservative writer Rick Wilson once put it, is 'performative assholery,' and it is everywhere."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Salek, "Swearing an Oath to Veterans and Exposing Cruel Partisan Gamesmanship: Jon Stewart's Strategically Uncivil and Profane Diatribe in Support of the 2022 PACT Act." 19.

<sup>22</sup> WATCH: Jon Stewart Says Congress "should Be Ashamed" over Inaction on Helping 9/11 First Responders, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HT5FTrIZN-E>.

<sup>23</sup> Tom Nichols, "MAGA Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry," *The Atlantic* (blog), September 26, 2024, <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2024/09/maga-means-never-having-to-say-youre-sorry/680042/>.

Manfred Kraus describes ~~this~~ a common conception of polemic as ~~being~~ “characterized by cantankerousness and gainsaying rather than veritable argumentation;” ~~to suggest~~ ~~ing~~ polemic ~~it is~~ “generally condemned as futile or fallacious.”<sup>24</sup> Kraus draws on Marc Angenot to highlight polemic’s “mere antagonism of ideologies,” “mutual misunderstandings,” and “fallacies.” Citing Angenot directly, ~~he~~ Kraus writes that polemics are marked by “‘cognitive breaks’ that result in a futile, yet ~~nonetheless~~ persistent ‘dialogue of the deaf.’”<sup>25</sup> Although ableist and ignorant of the rich communicative capacities of the deaf, Angenot’s metaphor suggests a complementary counter-dimension of “preaching to the choir.” ~~P~~ polemics are commonly understood across both metaphors as failing to change minds, ~~either in their being~~. Polemics are ~~either~~ blocked by those who do ~~n~~ot share the premises upon which their combative discourses rest or ~~by being~~ ~~are~~ mere confirmations for those who ~~already~~ share said premises and comprise the *group* in *groupthink*. It might be reasonable to dismiss (or at least qualify) such antagonistic polemics as a Republican political strategy, particularly ~~in the aftermath of~~ ~~after~~ Trump’s unorthodox but successful 2016 presidential campaign ~~for president in 2016~~. The rise of, ~~not to mention~~ “Trumpism,” the media’s persistent term for characterizing the current Republican party’s communicative, aesthetic, and operational style, ~~further justifies this dismissal~~. Nichols, quoted above, lays the origins primarily at Trump’s feet, writing that “he has built a following among Americans who take his hideous pronouncements as permission to be their worst selves.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet the mode of polemic that I ~~am~~ ~~defining~~ here in contradistinction to agonistic pluralism is ~~also~~ evident ~~not just on the right but also~~ on the left ~~of~~ and across the political spectrum; ~~this mode it is~~ at work in the media and ~~in~~ everyday discourses. ~~Of~~ ~~evidence of its ubiquity~~, one can ~~simply~~ look ~~simply~~ to late-night talk shows, wherein political “others” are routinely eviscerated and virtually never agreed with by celebrity polemicists—the clear majority of whom lean to the left politically and socially ~~(cy. (Consider as one example the Seth Meyers’s epigraph at the start of this essay) by Seth Meyers.)~~ One can also look to social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly known as Twitter), where ~~in~~ everyday people interact, ~~not just as recipients but also as~~ producers of content, and express ~~ing~~ groupthink via likes, ~~and~~ shares, ~~and/or on the one hand or moral outrage on the other. (In the next section I elaborate further on the social media ecosystem within which such polemics manifest and contribute to tribalism.)~~

The comedic social and political ant/agonisms of late-night talk shows ~~alluded to above~~ belong to what Caron ~~has termed~~ “the comic public sphere,” ~~and defines as a dimension of the broader public sphere—H~~ ~~which he defines the singular comic public sphere as a dimension of the broader public sphere uses in its singular form,~~ not ~~out of~~ disagreement with scholars like Fraser but ~~in keeping with sentiments that~~ ~~to reaffirm that such an~~ ~~this~~ umbrella category ~~is a useful fiction for~~ ~~can~~ capturing a society’s wide array of rhetorical actions undertaken by competing and complementary publics and counterpublics. The comic public sphere, ~~for Caron~~, is only a subset of ~~such~~ rhetorical actions within ~~the~~ overall context. ~~This, a~~ subset ~~is~~ characterized specifically by comedy that induces ~~metanoia, or a transformation in perspective,~~ and prompts civic engagement. His primary examples of the comic public sphere are the works of media celebrities who were ~~at one time~~ correspondents on the left-leaning *The Daily Show* when it was hosted by Stewart: Samantha Bee, John Oliver, and Stephen Colbert. Caron analyzes

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<sup>24</sup> Manfred Kraus, “Cultural Diversity, Cognitive Breaks, and Deep Disagreement: Polemic Argument,” *Argumentation Library* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 91, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4041-9\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4041-9_7).

<sup>25</sup> Kraus, 91.

<sup>26</sup> Nichols, “MAGA Means Never Having to Say You’re Sorry.”



the rhetorical functions of their satiric news reports, monologues, interviews, and other segments as vehicles for comedic critiques of politics and media. He argues that their brands of comedy induce a particular form of metanoia, which he terms “a-musement” to reference audiences’ cognitive shift away from merely being ~~amused or~~ entertained to “musing” on what has been critically revealed or commented upon. Caron ~~layers upon such satiric work a further~~ ~~describes another~~ function of these celebrities’ rhetoric: “satiractivism.” ~~He borrows this~~ neologism ~~he borrows~~ from Sophia McClennen and Remy Maisel to reference the fusion of a-musement and practical civic engagement that ~~is~~ produced when audiences are directed ~~explicitly~~, within the comedic moment, to ~~mechanisms for~~ participatory action ~~(such as~~ donation ~~opportunities,~~ letter-writing campaigns, ~~and~~ petitions, ~~etc.~~).<sup>27</sup>

By “the comic public sphere,” ~~then~~, Caron does ~~n~~’~~ot~~ intend to overwrite the broader public sphere or any of its publics ~~that~~ ~~(which~~, I ~~would~~ argue, might be conceived of as simultaneously counterpublics). ~~Rather, h~~, ~~he~~ ~~wishes instead~~ ~~intends~~ to signify a categorical dimension that can manifest in a mode of rhetoric employed ~~potentially~~ by any ~~given~~ public. His illustrative case studies reflect a ~~very~~ specific public. ~~On~~ their respective late-night comedy talk shows, Bee, Oliver, ~~and~~ Colbert, ~~and I would add~~ Seth Meyers ~~(my addition)~~ ~~to Caron’s list~~—each create a momentary public that might be loosely defined by largely mainstream left-of-center critics of ~~(a)~~ Trumpism, ~~(b)~~ the current Republican party, and ~~(c)~~ the media that support ~~this party~~ ~~em~~. ~~It~~ ~~to be sure~~, however, ~~there exists~~ a small but growing version of ~~this~~ ~~at~~ specific televisual comic public sphere ~~exists~~ on the conservative side of politics in the ~~United States~~. ~~One~~ prominent example is right-wing comedian Greg Gutfeld’s late-night talk show, *Gutfeld!*, which ~~utilizes~~ ~~uses~~ many of the same comic gestures as those analyzed by Caron ~~(and~~, sometimes earning ~~ing~~ higher overall ratings than Colbert)~~s~~.<sup>28</sup> Caron would undoubtedly see ~~this~~ ~~Gutfeld’s show~~ as evidence that the comic public sphere, as a rhetorical dimension, is ~~n~~’~~ot~~ ~~in principle~~ owned by or integral to any particular political positions or ideological orientations.

~~It~~ ~~But~~ therein lies definitional trouble: Caron spends ~~a~~ considerable ~~amount of~~ time distinguishing comedy as snark or invective from satiractivism and satiric humor producing a-musement. ~~Caron s~~, ~~seeing~~ a thin line between ~~these~~ rhetorical functions but remain~~ing~~ optimistic that ~~invective~~ ~~the latter~~ contributes to civic engagement, at least ~~within and~~ for the public that ~~both gets and~~ appreciates the humor. ~~That is indeed where he~~ ~~he~~ draws definitional lines ~~by~~, suggesting that snark—which carries no intention to ~~bring about~~ ~~incite~~ change or ~~at least~~ critical thought—does ~~n~~’~~ot~~ belong to the public sphere and might even be considered anti-public sphere discourse. However, as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai ~~’s work helps to~~ illuminate, what ~~is~~ considered mere ridicule or invective versus ~~what is deemed~~ satirical ~~in nature is, in the end~~, depend~~ent~~ on one’s ideological position~~ing~~, particularly when one accepts postmodern epistemologies as an (anti)foundation for knowledge ~~and action~~ ~~n~~ (and ~~thus for~~ civic engagement). As Berlant and Ngai argue, “Comedy helps us test or figure out what it means to say ‘us.’” ~~This~~ a statement ~~that~~ condenses the complexity of humor’s reliance on in- and out-group understandings and empathies, cultivated as those must ~~inevitably~~ be through

<sup>27</sup> Matthew R Meier, “Is Satire Saving Our Nation? Mockery and American Politics by Sophia A. McClennen and Remy M. Maisel (Review),” *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 2 (2017): 244–47.

<sup>28</sup> Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, “How Conservative Comic Greg Gutfeld Overtook Stephen Colbert in Ratings to Become the Most Popular Late-Night TV Host,” *The Conversation*, accessed May 19, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/how-conservative-comic-greg-gutfeld-overtook-stephen-colbert-in-ratings-to-become-the-most-popular-late-night-tv-host-166867>.

lived experience, identification, and ritualized (re)productions of ideology.<sup>29</sup> Explicitly referencing a similar metonymy of ~~the humor's~~ us/them dynamic ~~at work in humor, they~~ Berlant and Ngai cite Mel Brooks's famous dictum that ~~"Tragedy is when I cut my finger, but Comedy is when you fall in an open sewer and die."~~ Berlant and Ngai ~~They~~ explore ~~in various ways~~ the social contingency of comedy and the potential illogic of attempting to categorize "true" comedy from its opposite ~~in light of such contingency~~. I would extend their observations to the potential illogic of distinguishing between ~~ridicule and~~ invective ~~on the one hand~~ and civically engaged satire ~~on the other, since because~~ the difference might be nothing more than the dreaded epistemological relativism that has persistently haunted postmodern philosophy. What Caron sees as generating ~~ingive of~~ a-musement, a fan of *Gutfeld!* might ~~see dismiss~~ as ~~mere~~ unfunny invective ~~that can be dismissed~~. Thus, the comic public sphere may be ~~functioning, at least much of the time,~~ more accurately ~~as~~ a form of polemic ~~that's~~ operationally defined through the metaphors offered by Angenot and ~~myself meabove~~. Caron's satiractivists preach to the choir and remain deaf to ideological premises not already assumed in and by the audience. Caron, Amossy, and Mouffe wish to see a broader productive dialectic unfolding as publics rely on these specific modes of comedy or polemic to strengthen themselves internally and make ~~more~~ visible their struggles for power ~~more visible~~ in an unequal social context. ~~N;~~ nevertheless, it ~~is~~ difficult to reconcile the optimism of ~~such this~~ potential dialectic within the contexts of postmodern relativism and the crisis of democracy that ~~is inspired~~ this essay's ~~backdrop and~~ *raison d'être*.

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Reconfiguring the public sphere into publics and counterpublics was surely a scholarly improvement on a reductive ~~and~~ idealized construct that ~~didn't failed to~~ account for hegemonic normativity. ~~However,~~ the theoretical promise opened up ~~in scholarship~~ by Fraser, Warner, ~~and Mouffe, and Caron (and in Caron's conception of the comic public sphere)~~ has ~~not~~ been as fully realized ~~as was hoped~~. ~~The,~~ its liberatory potential ~~of their work~~ ~~has~~ too often ~~been~~ constrained by the realities of non-dialogic communicative action that tends toward further and/or extreme polarization. ~~Be it in the form of Whether comedy~~ ~~comedy is~~ understood by an in-group as satire ~~or a logical political argument~~ but by an out-group as ~~merely~~ snark ~~or illogical~~ ~~oppositional invective, or analogously as logical political argument by an in-group but illogical~~ ~~oppositional invective by others~~, polemic is too often counterproductively antagonistic. As it contributes to social divisions, ~~it polemic~~ paradoxically ~~and simultaneously~~ strengthens in-group affiliation and belonging, ~~uniting and dividing in the same rhetorical moments~~. This ~~at~~ particular kind of division and unity ~~one~~ categorically defined by rhetorician Kenneth Burke in his conception of "consubstantiality" ~~is~~ a central feature of a polemic public sphere marked by cancel culture, echo chambers, information silos, ~~and~~ filter bubbles, and, most significantly, ~~of~~ ~~all~~ an epistemological orientation that trades faith in shared foundational realities across difference for faith in in-group identification and ideologies.<sup>30</sup>

In the next section, I turn to what I see as a corollary, ~~a producer and product,~~ of such features of the polemic public sphere, ~~namely~~ "rhetorical tribalism." I ~~work towards a defin~~ ~~ition of~~ the phrase by drawing on popular media constructions of "tribalism" as a noun, ~~as well~~ ~~as on and~~ traditional theories of rhetoric as a significant and critically flexible adjective. I also ~~work to demonstrate the potentiality of how~~ emergent rhetorical theories ~~for even~~ ~~may provide a~~

<sup>29</sup> Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy Has Issues," *Critical Inquiry* 43, no. 2 (2017): 235, <https://doi.org/10.1086/689666>.

<sup>30</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

more deeply deeper understanding of tribalism's contexts and instantiations of tribalism when it's understood to be rhetorical first and foremost. In doing so, I hope to link together rhetorical tribalism and the polemic public sphere, seeing them both as toxic and codependent but also able to be theorized, critiqued, and challenged.

## Rhetorical Tribalism

Without question, competing definitions of both “polemic” and “tribalism” can be found in myriad corners of academia and across other domains of knowledge work. Such competing definitions will, for some, pose serious challenges to the my article's very premise of this article. Nevertheless, I believe it is valuable for this specific argument to should be grounded in vernacular uses of both terms. Such as such grounding can enable readers to think through and respond directly to the societal context that's exasperating journalists, political pundits, politicians, and social media commentators, rather than dismissing or, reframing, or otherwise not addressing on semantic grounds our present rhetorical situation as it is commonly referenced and understood. Anybody who has been following mainstream news media this past decade should be familiar with vernacular uses of the term “tribalism.” This term has been used to characterize the social and political divisions that are increasing in intensity in the United States, including especially (but not exclusively) the binary partisan division that has polarized the country's partisan division into dogmatic conservatives and their oppositional counterparts, similarly dogmatic liberals. As journalist Frank Bruni has written, social and political tribalism is growing just as Americans' attachment to organized religion is waning. This a disinvestment from physical communities that is being replaced by “an investment in online ones that more efficiently sort them into cliques of the rigidly like-minded.”<sup>31</sup> At the same time, he notes, many people are using the internet “not to check or challenge their thinking but to validate it.”<sup>32</sup> Bruni's summative claims are summative, based upon a host of scholarly articles and research studies examining the ways in which how various online platforms, especially social media networks, are designed to foster and sustain particular kinds of engagement. These kinds of engagement — often include emotionally charged narratives, diatribes, and invectives that, in the end, contribute to increased fragmentation societal fragmentation on the one hand and increase increased unity within narrowly defined in-groups on the other. Many such discourses fall under the operational definition of antagonistic polemics outlined in this essay's previous section. This reality, which illustrates why one might reasonably consider the polemic public sphere as substantially constituted by tribalist discourses.

While popular invocations of the term “tribalism,” according to Charles McCrary, tend to describe our current social and communicative failings across the public sphere, he himself does not ultimately endorse the metaphor and, preferring instead terms like such as “fragmentation.”<sup>33</sup> This is He prefers these terms because of the potential for “tribalism” to reinforce a colonialist logic, a point he finds some evidence for which he demonstrates by selectively linking the term's mainstream media deployments to conservative writers and scholars such as David Roberts, Amy Chua, and Andrew Sullivan, and others.<sup>34</sup> It This is a fair

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<sup>31</sup> Bruni, Frank, “Our Tribalism Will Be the Death of Us,” *New York Times (Online)*, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Bruni, Frank.

<sup>33</sup> Charles McCrary, “The Trump Era's Tribalism Discourse: Reflections on a ‘Weird Euphemism,’” *The Revealer* (blog), May 6, 2020, <https://therevealer.org/the-trump-eras-tribalism-discourse-reflections-on-a-weird-euphemism/>.

<sup>34</sup> David Roberts, “Donald Trump and the Rise of Tribal Epistemology,” *Vox*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/3/22/14762030/donald-trump-tribal-epistemology>; Amy Chua,

critique ~~is fair~~ when limited to ~~this~~ particular set of public intellectuals. ~~It~~ however, ~~this critique is~~ it is also an unintentionally ironic ~~critique in that because~~ it performs the very rhetorical action that ~~the term is~~ “tribalism” often ~~employed to describes~~, ~~for the most part which~~ ~~deepening a further~~ divides ~~between~~ the constructs of an alleged “liberatory” left and an alleged “imperialist” right. Moreover, ~~it this critique~~ succeeds ~~as a critique~~ only when it ignores pundits’ and scholars’ uses of the term that acknowledge ~~that~~ the public sphere is ~~n’t~~ just breaking apart but is ~~being balkanized, united and~~ divided into more stable us/them binaries.

Consider, ~~for as one illustration example~~, a recent episode of *The Daily Show* featuring the same host, Jon Stewart, ~~whose strategic incivility described by Salek is discussed above~~. In a September, 2024 response to ~~breaking news that~~ former Vice President Dick Cheney ~~had~~ announcing ~~ing~~ that he would be voting for Democrat Kamala Harris in the upcoming election, Stewart embeds into his monologue a brief video clip ~~the well-known and easily parodied scene of an infamous Monty Python character, “Mr. Creosote,” projectile vomiting into a bucket (from the film, The Meaning of Life).~~<sup>35</sup> ~~Even more to the point~~, Stewart positions the clip strategically on the screen, ~~and ducks behind his desk, and for a moment to pretends that he himself is to doing the~~ outrageously vomiting upon hearing this news. After “recovering,” Stewart begins to move on with his monologue, ~~but after just a few words~~, he stops himself and says, “You know what? I’m sorry; Dick Cheney, can you meet me over by Camera One?” He then turns toward a side camera for effect, pauses, and says, as if directly to Cheney, “Fuck off. Seriously, fuck off!”<sup>36</sup> Cue the raucous applause and cheers from the audience, ~~no doubt prompted by the studio’s literal cue of “applause” signs but also, for certain, by the success of Stewart’s bit.~~ The intended meaning of the polemic here is clear, particularly to those who ~~share enough of the historical context to~~ understand who Dick Cheney is and what he represents to this particular in-group. ~~As~~ George W. Bush’s ~~v~~ Vice ~~p~~ President, ~~he Cheney~~ was the architect of the US-led invasion ~~of into~~ Iraq and a political leader whose policies have been mostly abhorrent to those on the progressive left. Stewart ~~is thus~~ blatantly reject~~ing~~ Cheney, despite their political allegiance ~~relative to Harris vs. Trump~~ in the 2024 election, ~~as~~ Stewart ~~is~~ den~~ies~~ y~~ing~~ Cheney any semblance of respect or shared ground, ~~and he is~~ demarcate~~sing~~ in no uncertain terms that Cheney belongs to “them,” ~~and~~ not “us.” ~~This It is a~~ moment of invective ~~—~~ Stewart himself reflects sarcastically, “What an erudite takedown” ~~—one that is~~ nonetheless sophisticated in its rhetorical reliance on context and social relations. At the same time, ~~it this invective~~ belongs to what I’ve termed the polemic public sphere not just for its decidedly non-erudite content but also ~~for the ways in which because~~ it negates dialogue and instead reflects and reinforces divisions between (and unities within) oppositional political identities.

Tribalism’s divisions and unities often extend ~~even further~~, beyond in-group and out-group identifications, to constructions of reality itself. ~~This is because~~ tribalist discourses are, as McCrary acknowledges, rife with “fake news”—the central tenet of what Bruce McComiskey and a host of others in rhetoric and philosophy studies examine as “post-truth.”<sup>37</sup> It ~~is~~ hardly

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*Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018); Andrew Sullivan, “AMERICA WASN’T BUILT FOR HUMANS,” *The Atlantic* 50, no. 19 (2017): 38.

<sup>35</sup> Jon Stewart Tackles Harris & Trump’s Debate and What This Means for the Election | *The Daily Show*, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtHn59wqdBc>.

<sup>36</sup> Jon Stewart Tackles Harris & Trump’s Debate and What This Means for the Election | *The Daily Show*.

<sup>37</sup> Bruce McComiskey, *Post-Truth Rhetoric and Composition* (Chicago: Utah State University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1w76tbq>; Ryan Skinnell, *Faking the News: What Rhetoric Can Teach Us about Donald J. Trump*, Societas (Luton, Bedfordshire: Imprint Academic, 2018); Lee C. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018); Johan Farkas and Jannick Schou, “Fake News as a

surprising to observe the correlational rise of “tribalism” ~~and as a term (and the phenomenon it signifies) alongside the rise of~~ “post-truth” ~~(also as both terms and phenomenon/phenomena)~~ in the Trump era. ~~For example,~~ Cindy Tekobbe and Amber Buck, ~~for example,~~ argue that, since Trump’s rise to political prominence, “*post-truth* has come to be used as a catch-all term to describe an orientation toward information that is based more in [group] identity than evidence.”<sup>38</sup> They ~~are aligned~~ with McCrary, who writes:

“Objective truth, trust in science, the public sphere, and liberal democracy feel brittle, already cracked and crumbling. Sober reason, the hallmark of Enlightenment modernity, has given way to premodern, fanatical factionalism.”<sup>39</sup>

Such descriptions build upon Roberts’s connections between post-truth and tribalism with his term “tribal epistemology.” McCrary quotes Roberts directly:

“In this way of thinking, people assess information not according to established and widely agreed-upon public standards of objective truth but, instead, according to whether it benefits the ‘tribe.’ ‘Good for our side’ and ‘true’ begin to blur into one.”<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, “tribalist” is fast becoming a routine adjective, preceding terms like ~~the above-used~~ “epistemology,” ~~as well as~~ “politics,” “discourse,” and ~~even terms like~~ “consumption.” ~~The latter as a way to~~ characterizes ~~the myriad ways in which~~ how citizens reinforce their ideological commitments and identifications ~~through by~~ purchasing brands and products that have been socially constructed as markers of particular in-group membership.<sup>41</sup> ~~Additionally the same~~ time, “social” and “political” have become ~~routine~~ adjectives regularly preceding the term “tribalism” in popular media accounts. Amidst all such valid and useful linguistic options, I argue here that “rhetorical tribalism” is an especially effective adjectival phrase. ~~This phrase is rarely, one rare in use~~ but significant for its syntactic implications that ~~said~~ tribalism is an outcome, a recognizable noun qualified by an expanse of rhetorical functions ~~at work~~ in myriad speech ~~acts~~ and symbolic/material practices. If ~~one were to reverse~~ the phrase ~~were reversed~~ to “tribalist rhetorics,” the expanse of rhetorical functions is likely to be understood more narrowly ~~as including primarily those rhetorics~~ that emanate from an extant tribalism. Stewart’s obscene address to Dick Cheney might qualify as an example. By employing “rhetorical tribalism” as an operational phrase, though, I ~~wish to maintain an emphasis on~~ the latter ~~term word~~ as a product of the former. In this case, we might also see Stewart’s rhetoric as ~~producing~~ ~~the~~ of tribalism and not simply as a logical retort from one predetermined and stable side of a binary ~~division~~.

Floating Signifier: Hegemony, Antagonism and the Politics of Falsehood,” *Javnost (Ljubljana, Slovenia)* 25, no. 3 (2018): 298–314, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2018.1463047>.

<sup>38</sup> Cindy Tekobbe and Amber Buck, “Introduction: Approaches to Rhetoric in a Post-Truth Age: Pedagogies, Activism, and Platforms | Enculturation,” *Enculturation*, March 24, 2022, [https://www.enculturation.net/approaches\\_to\\_rhetoric\\_post-truth](https://www.enculturation.net/approaches_to_rhetoric_post-truth). Italics original.

<sup>39</sup> McCrary, “The Trump Era’s Tribalism Discourse.”

<sup>40</sup> McCrary.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Ruch, Ari Decter-Frain, and Raghav Batra, “Millions of Co-Purchases and Reviews Reveal the Spread of Polarization and Lifestyle Politics across Online Markets” (arXiv, January 17, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2201.06556>.

Articulating popular constructions of tribalism in the polemic public sphere as rhetorical ~~in nature~~—~~or ie~~, using “rhetorical tribalism” as an operational phrase—~~additionally also~~ allows us to draw on traditional and contemporary theories of rhetoric to more deeply understand (and potentially intervene in) such constructions. ~~This proves to be the case for~~For example, Colleen Elizabeth Kelley’s, ~~whose use of the precise phrase~~“rhetorical tribalism” is one of the ~~very few~~ invocations I’ve been able to find in relevant extant literature.<sup>42</sup> In her recent monograph, *Democratic Disunity*, Kelley examines the US Democratic Party’s intraparty factionalism, ~~working~~to ground the phenomenon in canonical theories of rhetoric-as-persuasion and rhetoric-as-identification. She draws on Lloyd Bitzer’s notion of the rhetorical situation, Burke’s constructs of identification and consubstantiality, and Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin’s framework of invitational rhetoric ~~as ways to~~ contextually define political party discourses ~~in context and to explicate how they are increasingly as~~ toxic and tribalist.<sup>43</sup> ~~Engaging in similar projects~~, other scholars could undoubtedly examine ~~ways in which how~~ rhetorical tribalism is constituted through ~~such~~ classically oriented concepts ~~such~~ as *doxa*; through the social-epistemic functions of particular *enthymemes* underlying ~~specific viral content circulating virally; and~~ through manifestations of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* relative to respective rhetors, audiences, and subjects within the polemic public sphere; ~~and so on~~.

More recent theories in rhetoric can also help us ~~even further~~ understand and flesh out specific configurations of rhetorical tribalism in the public sphere. Sweeney’s analyses of political mythmaking, ~~referenced in my introduction; is are~~ a good example. ~~He~~ he explores the rise of white supremacist groups in the *United States*, drawing on canonized theories of constitutive rhetoric by Maurice Charland and mythmaking by Michael McGee ~~as a means of to~~ better understanding how some identities and worldviews ~~within have been shaped in the Trump era have been shaped~~. Sweeney ~~is hopeful~~ that such work can help us “avoid the essentialization and homogenization of one another into competing, incompatible groups.”<sup>44</sup> The rhetorical tribalism that Sweeney reveals, however, ~~does not~~ entirely belong to what I would consider the polemic public sphere. ~~Some of it this tribalism~~ reflects instead what Kyle Larson and George McHendry, Jr. call *parasitic publics*: “social formations reliant on discourses that ~~contain within them efforts to fit establish~~ mainstream codes of civility and tap into socially acceptable identity politics; despite their unacceptable premises (in Sweeney’s case, Irishness masquerading as white supremacy).<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, such discourses ~~do eventually lead, eventually, into lead to~~ rhetorics that ~~do~~ belong squarely in the polemic public sphere ~~and, that~~ participate in invective, diatribe, and division. ~~T~~ the clearest examples ~~of which~~ might be the “Unite the Right” rally in Virginia in 2017 or, as Sweeney references, the assault on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Other ~~forms of~~ emergent scholarship in rhetorical theory; such as new materialist rhetorics; ~~for instance, further~~ strengthens my arguments ~~here~~ that “rhetorical tribalism” is a valuable adjectival phrase that, when combined with the construct of the polemic public sphere, can help us ~~to~~ understand and intervene in discursive practices and contexts contribut~~ing~~ive to our current

<sup>42</sup> Kelley, Colleen Elizabeth, *Democratic Disunity: Rhetorical Tribalism in 2020* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

<sup>43</sup> Lloyd F Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 1–14; Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*; Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995): 2–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759509376345>.

<sup>44</sup> Sweeney, “Everything and Nothing: Myths of White Supremacy and ‘Irishness’ in the Age of Trump.” 45.

<sup>45</sup> Kyle R. Larson and George F. (Guy) McHendry Jr., “Parasitic Publics,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 49, no. 5 (2019): 517–41.



crisis of democracy. ~~Wishing to~~ move beyond the postmodern turn that positions language and/or representation as the epistemological or even ontological grounds for lived experience, new materialist rhetoricians take cues from posthumanist philosophers such as Donna Haraway and Karen Barad, ~~both of whom~~ Haraway and Barad, along with sociologist Bruno Latour ~~in Sociology~~, work against ~~the modernity's inherent~~ nature/culture dualisms ~~inherent in modernity~~ to focus on materiality's ~~as a~~ productive ~~force~~ role in assembling and reassembling collectivities. What Barad ~~helps to~~ articulates, and what others ~~then~~ take up from them in terms of rhetorical theory, are notions of "intra-action" and "entanglement."<sup>46</sup> The former is Barad's substitute for "interaction," ~~They hope this~~ a revision ~~Barad hopes~~ will more effectively represent the dynamic and always-emergent agency at work within and among entities that ~~should not be understood as~~ aren't entirely distinct from one another nor from the assemblages to which they belong ~~in any given moment~~. ~~In this understanding~~, the rhetorical person, ~~or the rhetorical object~~, is never ~~static or~~ stable, ~~never~~ inherently persuasive, ~~never or~~ agentic ~~on its own~~; ~~Subjects and objects~~ exist are entangled, in states of becoming. ~~All of which This understanding~~ leads Laurie Gries, borrowing from Carl Herndl, to ask, "What happens when the 'propensities, affordances, and affectivities of nonhumans' are included in the action of assembling our collective common world?"<sup>47</sup> Indeed, if we look at ~~the social media's~~ "propensities, affordances, and affectivities" ~~of social media~~ as an assemblage of ~~both~~ human and nonhuman elements, we can understand more richly ~~the tribalism's~~ rhetorical nature ~~of tribalism~~ in the polemic public sphere. ~~This is because~~ rhetorical tribalism is ~~at once~~ a discourse and a socio-material phenomenon emerging from and contributing to what Casey Boyle (~~also building on Barad~~) would call "material practices [that become] ongoing, serial encounters within ecologies," a framework that broadly captures ~~in broad strokes~~ Barad's notions of entanglement and intra-action.<sup>48</sup> Such a framework also belongs to an overlapping area of recent studies in rhetoric, ~~namely~~, rhetorical ecologies, defined and mapped by scholars such as Jenny Edbauer, ~~and~~ Thomas Rickert, ~~and~~ as well as Nathaniel Rivers (~~whose work occurs at the intersection of ecologies and new materialism~~).<sup>49</sup>

~~W~~Thus within emergent theoretical frameworks considering entanglements and ecologies, scholars might look ~~closely, for instance, at the algorithms of social media platforms~~ algorithms to critically examine ~~some of the myriad ways in which how~~ digital mediations of content creation and circulation are transformative. ~~These scholars should~~ not just ~~of~~ examine the content ~~itself~~ but also ~~of~~ the socially and politically divided/unified end users who see themselves as ~~its~~ readers and authors. In his analyses of algorithms in *Rhetorical Code Studies*, Kevin Brock writes:

<sup>46</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>47</sup> Laurie E. Gries, *Still Life with Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2015).

<sup>48</sup> Casey Andrew Boyle, *Rhetoric as a Posthuman Practice* (The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 63. <https://doi.org/10.26818/9780814213803>.

<sup>49</sup> Jenny Edbauer, "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2005): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940509391320>; Thomas J. (Thomas Joseph) Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013); Rivers, "Tracing the Missing Masses: Vibrancy, Symmetry, and Public Rhetoric Pedagogy | Enculturation," *Enculturation*, March 17, 2014, <https://www.enculturation.net/missingmasses>.

[They] ~~that they~~ “may not always be visible, clearly recognizable, or discursive in nature, but they nonetheless create meaning and work to persuade the human and nonhuman audiences they engage to induce various types of change in the ecologies in which they operate.”<sup>50</sup>

~~This Brock’s perspective~~ is evidenced in Facebook’s algorithms affecting user interface activity. ~~For example,~~ Jennifer Sano-Franchini has analyzed ~~for example,~~ how ~~this~~ platform reduces users’ options for engaging in public sphere conversations, ~~pronouncing opinions, and to~~ assessing ~~the other~~ opinions ~~of others or to pronouncing their own opinions~~. ~~Reduced options,~~ usually ~~in arise in~~ overly expedient forms such as “like” buttons, emojis, and other reaction shortcuts that ~~all but~~ eliminate nuance and complexity:

“In other words, the focus is not on learning, sustained inquiry, dialectical exchange, or psychosocial support. Rather, Facebook encourages users to take a stance and to categorize others based on their stances, a priority that can, again, contribute to political polarization and discord.”<sup>51</sup>

As the radical incompleteness of ~~these above paragraphs’ surface scratching~~ examples hopefully reveals, new materialist rhetorics and rhetorical ecologies are complex, open, and interdisciplinary frameworks, ~~that S,~~ similar to applications of Sweeney and Salek, ~~these frameworks~~ illustrate the multiplicity of ~~possible old and new~~ rhetorical approaches, ~~both old and new,~~ that can ~~be brought to bear upon~~ examining ~~ations of~~ tribalism, especially ~~the its~~ forms of tribalism that signal (and produce) ~~the existence of~~ a polemic public sphere. I can easily imagine ~~for example,~~ media critics exploring ~~—within~~ the ~~relatively~~ recent rise of podcasts and short-form video reels ~~—audio and video assemblages that contribute to the polemic public sphere.~~ Such investigations might involve analyzing ~~in them~~ the expression and maintenance of civic, corporate, social, and ideological identifications that ~~work to~~ unite and divide ~~in the ways outlined above~~. Additionally, such investigations might necessitate new materialist analyses of specific assemblages ~~as a way to better~~ understand the ecologies within which they ~~are~~ produced, distributed, consumed, and transformed. ~~Do and~~ doing so would potentially open up ~~further more~~ spaces, moments, and modalities for future analysis. ~~And, of course, all~~ such analyses might help us ~~to~~ see the opposite as it exists. ~~These analyses might,~~ revealing ~~those~~ rhetorical moments in which the polemic public sphere is challenged, complicated, or otherwise undermined; ~~and~~ moments that work against antagonistic epistemologies and identifications; ~~and~~ moments that ~~might~~ contain seeds and samples of better practices in civil society.

~~Given that~~ ~~Because~~ a framework grounded in rhetorical tribalism and the polemic public sphere facilitates a range of possible approaches and can be applied (and ~~of course~~ expanded) across ~~a various~~ ~~ety of~~ sites, any illustration is ~~necessarily~~ partial at best. With that in mind, I turn ~~now~~ to my final section, wherein I ~~attempt to~~ offer a limited example of this framework’s application. I look to a specific media event ~~in order to~~ highlight the dual presence of rhetorical tribalism and the polemic public sphere and ~~in order to~~ see how ~~this at same~~ event’s rhetorics can ~~sometimes counter such a presence, can sometimes~~ undo and complicate in-groups and out-

<sup>50</sup> Kevin Brock, *Rhetorical Code Studies: Discovering Arguments in and around Code*, Sweetland Digital Rhetoric Collaborative (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 68.

<sup>51</sup> Sano-Franchini, “Designing Outrage, Programming Discord: A Critical Interface Analysis of Facebook as a Campaign Technology,” *Technical Communication (Washington)* 65, no. 4 (2018): 387–410.

groups as they are labeled by and composed in rhetorical action. ~~I offer this analysis is neither a granular nor comprehensive analysis; rather, it is a brief, broad application, broadly applied, of the my framework that I have been sketching in this article. I, intending it to be both an illustration of that framework as well as an opening for others to take this framework further and deeper, from their own specific vantage points as rhetoricians, should they find the framework or the event to be of especial interest.~~ The media event I refer to is the recent ~~ly held 2024~~ national convention hosted by the ~~RNC epublican National Committee~~ in July 2024, a four-day meeting ~~functioning~~ to finalize the ~~party's third~~ nomination of Trump ~~(for a third time) as the party's leader~~ for the upcoming national election. While ~~this event~~ might seem ~~to have~~ a pragmatic, ~~instrumentalist~~ function, the convention's greater rhetorical purpose is ~~an epideictic one; an opportunity~~ to praise the Republican party and its nominee, ~~and to critique the opposing party and its nominee, and to strengthening in the process~~ partisan affiliation.

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## Making and (Occasionally) Unmaking the Polemic Public Sphere at the RNC

The RNC was held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, ~~from from~~ July 15<sup>th</sup> to July ~~through the~~ 18, 2024<sup>th</sup>. Each of its four days was characterized by a different theme ~~and each reflected ive of~~ the slogan most identifiable with ~~former P~~resident Trump and ~~with~~ Trumpism: ~~namely~~ “Make America Great Again,” or “MAGA.” ~~—This~~ slogan ~~that did n’t~~ originate with Trump but has become, for the present political generation, an indelible marker of a sociopolitical movement that heralds Trump as its inextricable leader. Each ~~day~~ of the RNC’s ~~days were~~ ~~explicitly~~ marked by an ~~update and an~~ allusive variation on MAGA: “Make America Wealthy Once Again,” “Make America Safe Once Again,” “Make America Strong Once Again,” and “Make America Great Once Again.” Such titles serve not just as an indication of each day’s focus but also as an identity marker and framing device. ~~These titles, one~~ implicating the participants as members of a movement that was once considered an extreme, combative, and overly polemical branch of the GOP. ~~It is thus hardly surprising that~~ Unsurprisingly, the rhetoric dominating much of the ~~mainstream~~ RNC oscillated between praise of Trump and ridicule, invective, and outright scorn directed at his then-opponent, Joe Biden, ~~who (Readers will recall that Biden did n’t~~ ~~step down and open the nomination to Kamala Harris until shortly after the RNC.)~~

For ~~just one~~ example, consider the opening of Congresswoman Elise Stefanik’s speech, S ~~in which~~ she critiqued the “feckless and failed Joe Biden,” characterizing key features of his presidential term not as elements of an argument open to debate nor as a series of evaluative claims supported by data, but instead as a litany of “crisis after crisis”:

From the Biden border, the most wide open border in our nation’s history, to Bidenflation, the highest rate of inflation in my lifetime, devastating hardworking families with skyrocketing prices for groceries, gas, and utilities, to Biden’s violent crime crisis, fueled by Democrats, pro-criminal, sanctuary cities, and defund the police policies, like we have seen in my home state of New York. All while corrupt Democrat prosecutors and judges wage illegal and unconstitutional lawfare against President Trump in an effort to do Joe Biden’s political bidding.<sup>52</sup>

Stefanik’s use of sweeping claims, ~~her uses of~~ adjectives like “corrupt” and “pro-criminal,” ~~of~~ neologisms like “Bidenflation” and the ~~relatively~~ recent “lawfare,” and ~~of~~ the possessive “Biden’s” to frame complex social challenges as his are all rhetorical moves, ~~to be sure. T~~ But ~~these y are not the kinds of~~ rhetorical moves ~~that don’t~~ belong to civil discourse ~~or, to~~ the public sphere imagined implicitly in classical rhetoric or explicitly by Habermas (or even by ~~these critical of his work his critics~~). ~~These rhetorical moves~~ belong instead to that dimension of the public sphere marked by what Angenot, ~~referenced earlier~~, calls polemic’s “mere antagonism of ideologies.”

Such antagonism ~~calls into being~~ establishes distinctions between “us” and “them” ~~in ways~~ that align with Patricia Roberts-Miller’s conception of *demagoguery* ~~—a conception that which~~ also draws on Burkean notions of unity and division ~~such as, on~~ in-group allegiances and out-group scapegoating.<sup>53</sup> ~~—~~ Roberts-Miller might indeed frame Stefanik’s discourse at the RNC as

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<sup>52</sup> Hugh Allen, “Elise Stefanik Republican National Convention,” Rev, accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/elise-stefanik-speaks-at-rnc-2024-night-two>.

<sup>53</sup> P. Roberts-Miller, *Rhetoric and Demagoguery* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2019), <https://books.google.com/books?id=3PgYtAEACAAJ>.

an example of demagoguery. ~~H~~; however, I ~~would emphasize~~ believe that it is demagoguery is but one example among a wider array of contributive possibilities ~~—t~~. That is, rhetorics of the polemic public sphere might often function in service of demagoguery ~~but not as demagoguery itself, but they are not one and the same~~. Demagoguery, Roberts-Miller argues in critiquing prior scholarship ~~on the subject~~, can be ~~supported~~ ~~erived~~ by technocratic and/or rational-critical discourses and is ~~n~~'et the exclusive domain of modes such as populist invective.<sup>54</sup> The function of invective is ~~n~~'et inherently or necessarily to scapegoat so much as it ~~'is~~ to affectively denigrate “the other.”—In ~~the case of~~ Stefanik’s speech, Joe Biden and Democrats are “~~the other~~at other.” They ~~'are~~ similarly constructed in Republican Senator Rick Scott’s RNC speech, in which he claims that “we have to fight every day to stop the radical Democrats from absolutely destroying our great country. They will lose. We will win.”<sup>55</sup> In Kari Lake’s speech at the RNC, ~~the~~ “~~the~~ other” includes migrants, ~~who are~~ deemed “criminals” ~~who that~~ are “pouring into our country illegally” as part of the “Biden invasion.”<sup>56</sup> Such characterizations are ~~n~~'et merely exaggerating ~~ons providing emphasis~~ for effect. ~~As~~ antagonisms rather than agonisms, ~~these characterizations~~ foreclose openings to nuance, compromise, or dialogue.—As such, they actively sediment dislike and division, hallmarks of the polemic public sphere.

Perhaps ironically, one of the few speeches at the RNC to potentially undermine and challenge the ubiquity of the polemic public sphere came from Trump himself. ~~After: on the heels of having surviv~~ing an assassination attempt only a few days earlier, Trump was allegedly eager to “tone down the rhetoric” and invite a ~~less polarizing~~ public discourse ~~less polarizing than has become the norm~~. ~~On his speech~~ on the convention’s final day, he offered these remarks ~~early in his speeches early on~~:

The discord and division in our society must be healed. We must heal it quickly. As Americans, we are bound together by a single fate and a shared destiny. We rise together. Or we fall apart. I am running to be president for all of America, not half of America, because there is no victory in winning for half of America. [. . .] In an age when our politics too often divide us, now is the time to remember that we are all fellow citizens—we are one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.<sup>57</sup>

In ~~this~~ passage ~~above~~, Trump ~~is~~ explicitly countering ~~ing the sorts of~~ rhetoric that constitutes the polemic public sphere. In place of insult, mockery, invective, or ridicule, ~~there is a~~ he calls for unity; “us and them” are no longer separated but have instead been replaced by “we,” a construction that extends beyond the RNC to all of America. ~~As~~ political journalist Zachary Basu writes ~~of the speech~~, “It was a marked departure from dark rally speeches in which Trump has warned of an ‘enemy from within’ and ‘vermin’ living on U.S. soil who pose more of a threat than foreign adversaries.”<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Roberts-Miller, 9-10.

<sup>55</sup> “Rick Scott Republican National Convention | Rev,” accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/rick-scott-speaks-at-mc-2024-night-two>.

<sup>56</sup> Hugh Allen, “Kari Lake Republican National Convention,” Rev, accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/kari-lake-speaks-at-rnc-2024-night-two>.

<sup>57</sup> Hugh Allen, “Donld Trump Republican National Convention,” Rev, accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-speaks-at-2024-republican-national-convention>.

<sup>58</sup> Zachary Basu, “Trump Tramples Unity Theme in Two-Act Convention Speech,” Axios, July 19, 2024, <https://www.axios.com/2024/07/19/trump-convention-speech-unity-biden>.

Nevertheless, in that same ~~RNC~~ speech, Trump ~~does~~ eventually returns to polemic, labeling Nancy Pelosi “Crazy Nancy” and saying this of President Biden:

“If you took the 10 worst presidents in the history of the United States. Think of it. The 10 worst. Added them up, they will not have done the damage that Biden has done.”<sup>59</sup>

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Beyond such individualized caricatures, Trump also claims, “I am going to protect Social Security and Medicare. Democrats are going to destroy Social Security and Medicare”—a binary articulation ~~functioning as that~~ dismisses ~~and sets himself against of~~ the entire Democratic party, ~~against which he sets himself~~.<sup>60</sup> As the MAGA figurehead, he ~~thereby~~ re-articulates a tribalist orientation, reinforcing the discord and division that he earlier claims must be healed. (This ~~shift in rhetorical~~ shift is not lost on Basu, who notes in his analysis, “The ‘new’ Donald Trump soothed and silenced the nation for 28 minutes last night. Then the old Trump returned and bellowed, barked and bored America for 64 minutes more.”<sup>61</sup>) ~~Thus,~~ although Trump’s speech provides at least a small measure of “unity” as a professed goal in both content and discursive form, ~~it is his speech to more a considerably degree more reflective of reflects~~ the antagonistic polemics evident across much of the RNC. ~~Worth exploring further relative to the RNC It might be worth exploring the ways in which how such the RNC’s moments of~~ antagonism ~~are is~~ inevitably cropped and publicly recirculated, ~~sometimes by critical journalists in mainstream media outlets such as Basu writing for Axios above and, and still other times by individuals on social media platforms, where MAGA discourses are remixed, commented upon, and often “liked,” especially by those who identify with the movement. Applying Brock’s notion of rhetorical code studies, analysts could investigate the digital ecologies within which the four days of RNC speeches gain a much longer and wider lifespan, what which~~ scholars Amy Kimme Hea and Elise Hurley call “rhetorical reach.”<sup>62</sup>

~~Such~~ further explorations are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article, though they ~~are~~ certainly ~~aren’t~~ outside its purview. ~~I am~~ intentionally cutting short analyses that could ~~stretch much further in investigating~~ how the RNC reflects and reinforces rhetorical tribalism through repeated invocations of discourses belonging to the polemic public sphere. ~~These discourses, which~~ occur neither purely nor absolutely but consistently enough to establish normativity and ~~cultivate~~ a communal ethos of “us” (~~good~~) versus “them (~~bad~~).” Comparative analyses of major speeches at the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC) held just a month later could ~~take us even help us~~ further ~~in understanding~~ the potential dialectic ~~at work~~ between the two parties’ competing versions of epideictic rhetoric. ~~Without taxing the reader with further analyses that I simply do not have room for here, I will note that I have~~ been surprised to find the DNC’s speeches ~~much~~ more often ~~functioning to~~ mitigate rhetorical tribalism and ~~to~~ counter rather than embrace the polemic public sphere. Former President Obama, for example, argues in his speech:

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<sup>59</sup> Allen, “Donld Trump Republican National Convention.”

<sup>60</sup> Allen.

<sup>61</sup> Basu, “Trump Tramples Unity Theme in Two-Act Convention Speech.”

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Verzosa Hurley and Amy C. Kimme Hea, “The Rhetoric of Reach: Preparing Students for Technical Communication in the Age of Social Media,” *Technical Communication Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2014): 55–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2014.850854>.



“To make progress on the things we care about, the things that really affect people’s lives, we need to remember that we’ve all got our blind spots and contradictions and prejudices; and that if we want to win over those who aren’t yet ready to support our candidate, we need to listen to their concerns—and maybe learn something in the process.”<sup>63</sup>

Hillary and Bill Clinton make a similar case in their speeches, perhaps having learned a lesson from the backlash Hillary received in 2016 when she referred to half of Trump’s followers *with the insulting phrase as a* “basket of deplorables.”<sup>64</sup> As Bill Clinton implores his audience:

“I urge you to talk to all your neighbors. I urge you to meet people where they are. I urge you not to demean them, but not to pretend you don’t disagree with them if you do. Treat them with respect, just the way you’d like them to treat you.”<sup>65</sup>

Of course, such calls by DNC speakers do *n’et* sound much different from the more inclusive portion of Trump’s speech *cited above*. These *such* rhetorical moves can be understood as part of a political strategy *one rooted in efforts that attempts* to construct a particular ethos of inclusivity. *But However*, it might not matter whether *it these rhetorical moves comes* from political expediency or *from* some nobler communitarian impulse; the rhetoric still does its epistemic work. *And should* If the DNC’s rhetoric stands up to further *and deeper* scrutiny *and* *validates* my initial impressions, it might serve as an effective model *for going forward, one that avoids—or even negates—* rhetorical tribalism. *At the same time, this rhetoric may* promulgate *ing* an alternative that *helps to unmake* the polemic public sphere and *provides open up spaces for* more possible *ities of* dialogues with others whose identities and ideologies differ from one’s own.

## Conclusion

As I noted at the *start-beginning* of this article and tried to demonstrate in the previous section, I *am not attempting to offering* a granular analysis of any specific rhetorical phenomenon nor a comprehensive critical-theoretical framework. Such work lies ahead. *This-My work* is instead *primarily* an introductory, definition-based essay *painted in broad strokes as a way that* articulates the yoked constructs of rhetorical tribalism and the polemic public sphere. I *have* drawn intentionally on vernacular uses of each phrase’s key terms *and*, *and in so doing I have* attempted to establish operational definitions attuned to the circulation of discourses in the public sphere *itself*. Readers who see the potential value in this initial foray might wish to *build upon this essay to* illustrate, elaborate upon, *and/or* complicate *and enrich* these articulated constructs *because*, *for they are an effort to* name and direct part of our collective work to *address* the varied instantiations of a large-scale rhetorical situation *with which we all need to contend*; *the US’s* crisis of democracy *in the United States*.

<sup>63</sup> TIME Staff, “Barack Obama’s Speech at 2024 DNC: Full Transcript,” TIME, August 21, 2024, <https://time.com/7013313/barack-obama-2024-dnc-speech-full-transcript/>.

<sup>64</sup> “Clinton Expresses Regret for Saying ‘Half’ of Trump Supporters Are ‘Deplorables’ | CNN Politics,” accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/09/politics/hillary-clinton-donald-trump-basket-of-deplorables/index.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Hugh Allen, “Bill Clinton Democratic National Convention 2024,” Rev, accessed October 12, 2024, <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/bill-clinton-speaks-at-2024-democratic-national-convention>.

Worth noting here is that ~~this article is not~~ Additionally, the my framework ~~that I hope to have inaugurated in~~ that I hope to have inaugurated in just for critical analyses of already-circulating rhetorics; ~~in addition to practices of reception,~~ it can and should be applied to production ~~practices of production~~. After all, the discipline of rhetoric has always consisted of studies ~~in both how to~~ seeking to understand the rhetorics to which we are subjected and how to engage ethically and effectively in the creation and circulation of public rhetorics. Most of this journal's contributing authors (and much of its readership, I suspect) are also pedagogues teaching writing, speech communication, and/or media arts. We can teach our students and ourselves to look critically at rhetorical tribalism and ~~the ways in which~~ how it signals and produces particular dimensions of the public sphere. ~~At the same time, we~~ At the same time, we should also think through the ways that such a framework can enable us and our students to *create* rhetorics that challenge the polemic public sphere, ~~that~~ that undo tribalist identifications and epistemologies, ~~and that help to~~ and that help to mitigate the hyper-polarization observed and rightly critiqued by so many academics and journalists alike. ~~If we are able to do so, we~~ If we are able to do so, we may be equipping the next generation of active participants in the public sphere to ~~set us on a new course, to~~ set us on a new return us to a democratic context in which dialogue, broadly conceived, ~~functions less in service of~~ doesn't sustain~~ing~~ and deepen~~ing~~ divisions and ~~more in service of~~ instead foster~~ing~~ identifications that value and bridge our differences. Given the seeming ubiquity of rhetorical tribalism and the apparent expanse of the polemic public sphere, fertile grounds exist for ~~much~~ much important work of this nature. Given the current fragile state of the United States as a democracy ~~at the present moment~~, such work is already overdue.