

Make America Hate Again: Donald Trump and the Birther Conspiracy

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ABSTRACT

One of the most publicized and commonly embraced political conspiracies has been the “birther movement.” The conspiracy, which gained traction amid the 2008 Presidential election, alleged that Barack Obama was ineligible for the Presidency on grounds he was not born in the United States. Though the movement was continuously debunked by a myriad of people, birthers remarkably managed to keep the conspiracy alive and relevant, due in large part to Donald Trump. Analysis of birther rhetoric, and specifically Donald Trump’s use of it to continually undermine Barack Obama, provides a particularly robust understanding of the rhetorical forms that facilitate the resiliency of conspiracy. In this essay, we combine Richard Hofstadter’s concept of the *paranoid style* with generic approaches to conspiracy to unpack the ways birther rhetoric functions—both formally and stylistically—to advance a rhetoric of white supremacy. Furthermore, we analyze Donald Trump’s role as conspiracy advocate and the specific rhetorical strategies he employs to use the birther controversy for his political advantage.

Keywords: Barack Obama, birther movement, white supremacy, hate speech

INTRODUCTION

In March of 2011, appearing on “The View” Donald Trump asked, “Why doesn’t he show his birth certificate?” (ABC, 2011, 5:45). Trump was referring to then President Barack Obama and the “birther” conspiracy theory that claimed Obama was born outside of the United States and was therefore ineligible to be President. Over the next five years Trump would assume the position of conspiracy advocate for the birther movement and raise questions about Obama’s identity and legitimacy. Despite unequivocal proof that Obama was born in the United States, Trump jumped “from fifth place to a virtual tie for first” early in 2012 among his Republican counterparts vying for the nomination (Parker & Eder, 2016, para. 10)

helped, in part, by the persistence of his commitment to the birther conspiracy.

Among others, Jesse Jackson described Trump's birther rhetoric as "coded and covert rhetoric for stirring up racial fears" (Parker & Eder, 2016, para. 15) and several mainstream media commentators have noted the parallels between Trump's rhetoric and the "Southern strategy" embraced by Nixon, Goldwater, Reagan and other Republicans to attract white, conservative voters (Beinart, 2016; Devega, 2016; Jones, 2016). Understanding how the birther movement represents the latest incarnation of the Southern strategy is essential to understanding its historic significance and its continuation of a history of racist appeals. Edge (2010) notes how the "Southern Strategy 2.0" uses "Obama's racial identity and politics to challenge whether he is 'American' enough to lead the nation" (p. 426). Hughey (2012) similarly recognizes that to simply dismiss Birthers obfuscates the "contemporary, normative, and widespread logic of white supremacy" (p. 174). The embrace of birtherism reveals the degree to which Obama's presidency was unsettling to "the white right-wing political imagination" (Devega, 2016, para. 8). Parlett (2014) recognizes how "for some, the event of his election is the end of racial injustice and for others the source of its modern manifestations" (p. 4). This essay, while recognizing the centrality of white supremacist logic, furthers the conversation through focusing on how specific strategies deployed expose the overall structure of conspiracy.

Analysis of birther rhetoric, and specifically Donald Trump's use of it in an effort to undermine Barack Obama, provides a particularly robust understanding of the rhetorical forms that facilitate the resiliency of conspiracy. As such, we employ a generic approach to unpack the ways birther rhetoric functions—both formally and stylistically—to advance a rhetoric of white supremacy. To accomplish this, we first provide the history relevant to the movement as it relates to Donald Trump. Second, we outline a generic approach to conspiracy rhetoric that highlights "the problem of evil" as the internal dynamic that holds the genre together (Creps, 1980). Finally, we discuss the formal and stylistic quality of the major themes of Trump's birther rhetoric and discuss the consequences of his rhetoric.

TRUMP THE BIRTHER

The birther conspiracy first emerged following Barack Obama's infamous 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention, when Andy Martin, a fringe political candidate, alleged "Obama is a Muslim who has concealed his religion" (Parlett, 2014, p. 4). Although quickly disproven, the "othering process" had begun. Mark Penn, chief strategist of Hillary

Clinton's 2008 campaign write that Obama's connection to "basic American values and culture are at best limited" (Penn Strategy Memo in Green, 2008, p. 3), suggesting that the Clinton campaign should capitalize on his multicultural background. Although Clinton refused to embrace this strategy, various leaked emails between her staffers are often cited as how the birther narrative "formally began" (Warner & Neville-Shepard, 2014, p. 4). From the onset, the birther conspiracy was grounded in difference¹

During the 2008 campaign, as social media amplified the birther conspiracy, Obama was compelled to release a birth certificate to quash the growing rumors which included that "he was born in Kenya. . . His middle name is not 'Hussein' but 'Muhammad'. . . [and] that his mother did not want to name him after his father, and his birth certificate says 'Barry'" (Geraghty, 2008, para. 7&9). Obama posted the certificate on his *Fight the Smears* webpage. *FactCheck.org*, *Politifact*, and the director of Hawaii State Department of Health all confirmed its authenticity.

Still the lies persisted. By summer of 2009, a Pew survey found that 81% respondents nationwide had heard at least something about "some people who claim that Barack Obama was not born in the US and therefore not eligible to be president" (Bowman & Rugg, 2013, p. 35). The resilience of birtherism, in many ways, is the result of its embrace by Donald Trump who was the first birther with "the ability to get the theory into the mainstream" (Stelter, 2011, para. 10). Beginning in the spring of 2011 as he contemplated challenging Obama, Trump used the birther issue to gain the attention of the media and mobilize white voters. On the "Today Show" he admitted he had "real doubts" about the legitimacy of the birth certificate (McGraw, 2011, para. 1), and on *CNN* characterized the questions about Obama's place of birth as a "strange situation" (*CNN*, April 10, 2011). In a *New York Times* editorial response to Gail Collins, he opined "there's at least a good chance that Barack Hussein Obama has made mincemeat out of our great and cherished Constitution" (Trump, April 8, 2011, para. 6)! He also appeared on *The View*, MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, *The Laura Ingraham Show*, and of course, *Fox News*—all between mid-March and the end of April 2011. Dan Pfeiffer, then White House communications director, described the Trump birther campaign as "basically a message blocker that was preventing us from talking about the issues we needed to talk about because the press was chasing Donald Trump around for the next crazy thing he was going to say" (Parker & Eder, 2016, para. 35). Yet, Trump's birther campaign showed no sign of letting up. So, that spring, Obama released the long form of his birth certificate making a statement in which he hoped its release would stop the nation from being "distracted by side-shows and carnival barkers" (Oliphant, April 27, 2011, para. 4). Two Gallup polls, conducted the week before and the week after the release of the

long form birth certificate, indicated that the percentage of people who thought Obama was “definitely born in the United States” went up by only 9%—from 38 to 47% (Morales, 2011, para. 1). Although the release of the form did seem to convince some, “13% of all Americans and nearly one in four Republicans continued to say he was definitely or probably born in another country” (Morales, 2011, para. 1). As conspiracy scholar Joe Uscinski remarked, “it is strange to have a president who tries to use conspiracy theories as much as Trump does” (Scarola, 2017, para. 7). But, as noted by Dean Debnam, President of Public Policy Polling, “Donald Trump’s supporters lap up every conspiracy theory he pushes out there” (Public Policy Polling, May 10, 2016, para. 11). While mainstream coverage of the issue dropped off, the issue itself had enough coherence to be activated easily by the “carnival barkers” and the sideshow continued.

Donald Trump seemed to be among those who were not yet convinced as he questioned the validity of the certificate insinuating that Obama’s citizenship was illegitimate. Within the mainstream media he was usually more non-committal about the topic – “just wondering,” or noting that “people are saying.” On his Twitter feed however, he would re-tweet accusations and also tweet URLs to “news” sources that were continuing to “investigate” Obama’s citizenship. He even went so far as to post a video on YouTube offering Obama, “the least transparent President in the history of this country,” 5 million dollars for the charity of his choice for turning over his college and passport records and applications. Here, Trump promised, “It will end the question, and indeed the anger of many Americans” (Trump, October 24, 2012, 1:22). President Obama ignored Trump and went on to win reelection. Although the issue did not disappear over the next couple of years, Trump did withdraw to Twitter and maintained his “we can’t know” stance in more mainstream interviews.

Trump’s “I don’t know” stance morphed into a “I don’t talk about that anymore” in the summer of 2015 once he became a Republican candidate in the Presidential election. Unsurprisingly, he was often asked—under the guise of retrospection—if he was “still on that issue” or if “he regretted bringing it up.” Trump consistently dismissed the topic although in September of 2015, he tweeted, “Just remember, the birther movement was started by Hillary Clinton in 2008. She was all in!” (Trump, September 22, 2015). Trump finally stopped publicly avoiding the question in September of 2016 when, at the end of a rally from the lobby of his newest Washington hotel, where he paraded pro-Trump military heroes in front of the waiting media, he admitted that “President Barack Obama was born in the United States, period” (Reilly, 2016, para. 26). Despite the fact he only engaged the racist cornerstone of his campaign in 40 words, he “could not resist in indulging in another falsehood,” yet again blaming Hillary Clinton

for birtherism (Barbaro, 2016, para. 19). Never mind that Trump was able to capitalize on the dog whistles and racist undertones of birtherism to his political advantage.

GENERIC APPROACH TO CONSPIRACY

Rhetorical scholars have long been interested in the perversion of logic that is expressed through the contortions of conspiracy. Along with scholars from other disciplines, Goodnight and Poulakous (1981) concluded that conspiracy theories had moved from “ideological extremes to the mainstream of political life” (p. 299). Since then, many scholars have sought to understand conspiracy theories, looking at why some gain traction in the public sphere and others do not. Most relevant to the current analysis are those who examine conspiracy discourse in light of genre (Dorsey, 2002; Goldzwig, 2012; Kelley-Romano, 2008; Soukup, 2002; Stewart, 2002). A generic approach is useful to identify the form and style of conspiracy arguments and to allow critics to expose the “internal dynamic” that holds the genre together and promotes its recurrence (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). Additionally, a generic approach identifies specific strategies employed and articulates the underlying strategic logic of disempowering, paranoid rhetoric providing a language to challenge, and counter, conspiracy discourse.

Conspiracy rhetoric is characterized by specific formal and stylistic elements held together by an internal dynamic. These two aspects of the genre—form and style—are combined to have what Burke (1968) calls “qualitative progression” or the creation of an after-the-fact feeling of rightness. Creps (1980) described the form broadly as comprised of a “deductive/causal substantive form” (p. 207). Within that form, Hofstadter (1965) notes a “curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events” (p. 37). More specifically, Zarefsky (1984) labeled conspiracy arguments as “self-sealing,” noting they confirm the thing they question. The formal strategies of association, webbing, equivocation, and semantic switching create and maintain the conspiracy narrative.

Broadly, the strategies of association and webbing create the boundaries of the conspiracy space. Association, the simultaneous consideration of seemingly unrelated pieces of “evidence” (Young, Launer, & Austin 1990, p. 95), allows for an expansive narrative. Examples, statistics, and authoritative evidence that on the surface seem to be entirely unrelated, are able to be explained within the conspiracy frame as evidence. This associative logic coupled with what seems like multiple examples and evidence, compliments the hyperbolic, dramatic style. Similarly, the deductive, associative nature of conspiracy allows for “webbing” or the connection of separate arguments which are then combined to make the larger narrative

more complex. Webbing is similar to Kristeva's (1980) concept of an "intertextual" reference and functions in many of the same ways in that both provide knowledge and compliment the reader/user. Webbing, and associative logic, are able to establish several "strands" of a conspiracy and then re-activate those that have gone dormant when advantageous. The strands of conspiracy are strengthened through more specific rhetorical strategies like equivocation, semantic switching, and leading questions.

Stylistically, conspiracy rhetoric is dense and hyperbolic. Hofstadter (1965) described "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy" as indicative of the "paranoid style" (p. 3). Likewise, Creps (1980) summarizes the style as "massively documented/dramatic" (p. 207). Rhetorically, the use of repetition, qualifiers, adjectives, and vivid language all serve as cues to the presence of conspiracy rhetoric.

The mere presence of one, or even many, of these formal and stylistic elements does not automatically indicate a conspiracy. This constellation of formal stylistic elements is held together by an internal dynamic. Creps (1980) identified the internal dynamic that "motivates and sustains the genre" as "explaining the cause of evil . . . and thereby shifting the blame and guilt away from the community" (p. iv). Relatedly, Hofstadter recognized that the recurring nature of conspiracy movements "involve ultimate schemes of values that bring fundamental fears and hatreds . . . into political action" (p. 39). Therefore, understanding the narrative, and accompanying values that lie under the recurrent formal and stylistic elements of the conspiracy, can expose the internal dynamic underlying, uniting, and sustaining the discourse.

The final aspect of conspiracy rhetoric relevant to the current analysis is the role of the individual who embraces and advances these theories. Called a "spokesman of the paranoid" by Hofstadter (1965), and a "conspiracy advocate" by Creps (1980), this individual assumes a leading role in the defense of "whole systems of human values" (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 29). As a champion of a threatened way of life, "he has all the evidence he needs, he is not a receiver, he is a transmitter" (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 38). The advocate claims "superior knowledge or abilities" and claims to be "persecuted" (Creps, 1980, pp. 208-209). Because of the construction of this ethos, the conspiracy advocate is able to assume a certain amount of resilience when faced with contradictions or challenges.²

Several popular sources have recognized the general similarities between the rhetoric of Donald Trump and the paranoid style (Dubose, 2016; Lynch, 2016; McCutcheon, 2015). Lynch and McCutcheon both quoted Hofstadter's opening line that "American politics has often been an arena for angry minds" as prescient of Donald Trump (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 1). Close textual analysis of the birther controversy and Trump's use of

specific strategies can further identify the means and functions of conspiracy rhetoric. For this analysis, we began by searching print and electronic sources for the combination of “Trump” and “birther.” From this, we were able to assemble a timeline including over sixty statements, interviews, editorials, and tweets authored by Trump between March 2011 (his appearance on “The View” to address the rumor that he may run against Obama in 2012) and October 2016 (one month after he gave a statement in which he “ended” the controversy). When possible, we went back to the full broadcast/statement and examined the birther rhetoric within the larger context. Unless otherwise indicated, all video transcription was our own.

TRUMP AS CONSPIRACY ADVOCATE

Donald Trump’s role as a conspiracy advocate of the birther conspiracy is not a difficult argument to make. He literally is “manning the barricades of civilization” (Hofstadter, 1965, p. 30) through his immigration policy and continued efforts to build a wall between Mexico and the United States. Stylistically, he is dramatic, and uses what he calls “truthful hyperbole” or “an innocent form of exaggeration” (Price, 2017, para. 12).

Trump firmly established himself as the birther conspiracy advocate by seeming to be a reluctant, but essential, participant in the birther cause. Speaking about Obama early on, Trump stated, “I assumed he was born here” (*Fox News*, April 15, 2011, para. 7). But, after bringing up the issue “just routinely,” he claimed, “all of a sudden a lot of facts are emerging” (*Fox News*, March 28, 2011). The self-promotion necessary to advance himself as central to the conspiracy seemed almost second nature for Trump. For example, following the release of the long form, he reported being “really honored, frankly” for playing “such a big role” in “something that nobody else has been able to accomplish” (*C-Span*, April 27, 2011, 00:18). He often remarked that he had “people” who were studying, researching, and reporting back to him. He claimed to be privy to information and evidence that validated his suspicions, but conveniently, couldn’t really talk about it. On *MSNBC*’s “Morning Joe” (April of 2011) he alluded to a tape “that’s going to be produced fairly soon” and that “somebody is coming out with a book in two weeks” (8:12). Consistent with the conspiracy advocate and the paranoid spokesperson, Trump demonstrated that he had access to information, and is part of the larger network working to expose the conspiracy, find the truth, and protect what is good.

The fact Trump considered himself central to the conspiracy was reinforced throughout his successful Presidential campaign when he refused to answer the question as to whether or not he believed Obama was a legitimate president. When asked, Trump told Chris Matthews, “I don’t answer it

because you know what? If I do answer it, that's all people want to talk about" (Campbell, 2015, para. 7). Trump positioned himself as the one who controls the conversation not by design, but because of some self-proclaimed intuitive ability to ask the important questions.

At the same time, Trump's defense of the birthers and his characterization of his continued interest in the issue as the will of the people also strengthened him as the conspiracy advocate. On *CNN* in April of 2011, he remarked, "it's a very sad thing because the people, the birthers, they got labeled . . . so negatively, and even the word 'birther' is a negative word" (*CNN*, April 15, 2011, transcript). *Additionally*, in 2014, *three years* after the release of the long form, at a National Press Club luncheon, Trump reported, "I walk down the street and they're saying 'please don't give up, please don't give up'" ("National Press Club," May 27, 2014, p. 15). Trump assumed the role of man of the people, doing for them what no one else could.

Trump constructed himself as essential to exposing the conspiracy, as the hero within a larger struggle for justice and truth. He initially exposed the issue and also put an end to it, ultimately noting, "I finished it. I finished it." In a written statement released by his campaign, he also blamed the Clinton campaign for first raising the issue in her "very nasty, failed 2008 campaign" yet "as usual, however, Hillary Clinton was too weak to get an answer" (Van Dyke, 2016, para 1). Never, within birtherism, was Donald J. Trump wrong, ineffective, or anything less than righteous.

FORMS OF CONSPIRACY ARGUMENT

Donald Trump's deployment of birther rhetoric demonstrates the interconnectedness of formal and stylistic elements in constructing conspiracy. Identification of the multiple claims and lines of arguments that Trump was able to associate with birther rhetoric illustrates the depth of this conspiracy and its grounding in white supremacy. Trump extended the attack Obama's identity by encouraging the association of additional information as evidence. From the release of the long form birth certificate in April of 2011 through the fall of 2015 Trump mostly stopped talking about the issue on mainstream news outlets; instead he used Twitter to continue to destabilize the validity of the birth certificate(s) and while also provocatively connecting Obama's birthplace with other issues in an effort to undermine Obama's legitimacy. For example, six months after the release of the long form, Trump stated to Greta Van Susteren, "I'm not and have never been a major believer. All of a sudden after years and years it was produced out of nowhere. Some people have serious, serious doubts as to its validity" (*Fox News*, October 25, 2011, 01:03). Trump used his characteristically hyper-

bolic style in describing the suddenness of the certificate's emergence dramatically "out of nowhere" to challenge its authenticity.

A major formal characteristic that sustains conspiracy rhetoric, and the birther narrative, is webbing. Webbing is a strategy that functions to distract, and shift the focus from one thing to another while giving the appearance of strengthening the original charges with additional evidence. The birther conspiracy was particularly resilient because of the many different lines of argumentation deployed. Trump attacked Obama's identity on several fronts. Much of the early conspiracy rhetoric generated by Trump revolved around the false dichotomy that "either he wasn't born in the country . . . or there's something on the birth certificate that he doesn't want people to see" (*Fox News*, April 15, 2011, para. 8). Additionally, in 2012, he alleged that Obama changed his name from "Barry Soweto[sic]. Weird." (Trump, March 12, 2012); and wondered, "Why does Barack Obama's ring have an Arabic inscription" (Trump, October 11, 2012)? In each case, Obama was guilty of something that was grounded in his foreignness.

Trump also used webbing to spread doubts about Obama's true identity sufficient enough to produce setbacks. When Obama released his long form birth certificate, Trump necessarily had to stop asking for it. But, by bringing up new topics and accusations, Trump continued the webbing of the birther claims. Almost immediately, he began calling for the release of Obama's school records. Playing on longstanding racist ideologies regarding Black intelligence, and discourses surrounding affirmative action, Trump noted that Obama was a "terrible student" (*C-Span* April 27, 2011) arguing that his attendance at Columbia and Harvard didn't add up. Later, he explicitly stated his suspicion when he posited that Obama "was perhaps born in this country but said he was born in Kenya. Because if you say you were born in Kenya you got aid, and you got into colleges" ("National Press Club," May 27, 2014, p. 15). Trump used multiple issues to extend the breadth of the conspiracy, each rooted in the otherness, and undeservingness, of Obama. In raising issues about ability and access, Trump drew on the major premise of the conspiracy which was that Obama's otherness precluded him from being able to legitimately attain success.

A major strategy that Trump used to expand the scope of Obama's legitimacy is equivocation. In an interview with Wolf Blitzer, he used equivocation to redefine the birther position when he stated, "he's [Mitt Romney] entitled to his opinion and I think that's wonderful. I don't happen to share that opinion. And that's wonderful, also" (*CNN*, May 29, 2012). Equivocation, a well-known logical fallacy, is the use of multiple meanings of a word to deliberately switch the direction of an argument and conceal the truth. While Trump does not toggle between meanings of a specific word central to the issue, he does something even more dangerous in that he

redefines Mitt Romney's evidence based conclusion about Obama's birth as an opinion. He then equivocates in that in he describes both his own opinion and Romney's as equally "wonderful" constructing them as equally valid. Equivocation functions to not only obfuscate and confuse the subject but also allows Trump to avoid the truth, and remain safely in the realm of opinion.

Trump also used the strategy of association to promote the inclusion and consideration of disparate events as part of the larger conspiracy. For example Trump tweeted: "How amazing, the State Health Director who verified copies of Obama's 'birth certificate' died in plane crash today. All others lived" (Trump, December 12, 2013). Here, Trump prompted followers to associate something sinister behind Loretta Fuddy's accidental death. And by adding "all others lived," Trump dramatically indicated the strength and the precision of the sinister forces behind the cover-up.

A related rhetorical strategy employed by Trump that also used associative logic was his use of leading questions. Often, he "wondered" things like, "Why doesn't he show his birth certificate?" (*The View*, March 23, 2011, 05:45). These leading questions were a primary way that Donald Trump extended the web of the birther conspiracy. Over the four years after the long form birth certificate was released, he wondered "how does a bad student go to Columbia and then to Harvard?" (Oliphant, April 27, 2011, para. 11); "wonder[ed] what the answer is on @BarackObama's college application to the question: place of birth?" (Trump, July 17, 2012); wondered why Hawaii revised a statute to "allow an HI resident who doesn't have to be US citizen to procure an official Hawaii birth certificate?" (Trump, July 18, 2012); "Is there something 'foreign' about them [college applications]?" (Trump, September 11, 2012); and "Was it a birth certificate?" (*ABC*, August 11, 201, 02:49). With these questions, Trump legitimizes racist logic through weaponizing Obama's imagined otherness as part of a narrative of illegitimacy.

An additional conspiracy strategy Trump used dexterously was semantic switching. Semantic switching was evident in his dismissal of Obama's "certificate of live birth" as "of very little significance" compared to a "birth certificate" (Trump, April 8, 2011). When interviewed by Sean Hannity, Trump noted that "despite what certain liberal press says, that's not a birth certificate, it's a big, big step lower" (*Fox News*, April 15, 2011, para. 7). Stylistically, he exaggerated the difference between the two types of documents by repeating the word "big" and at the same time managed to cast additional suspicion on the "liberal media." His definitive redefinition of a certificate of live birth destabilizes Obama's legitimate documentation.

Semantic switching was also evident when Trump pounced on qualifiers used by interviewers as evidence of doubt. For example, in a 2013 inter-

view with Jonathan Karl of *ABC*, when asked if he still doubts Obama's place of birth, Trump responded, "I'm saying I don't know. Nobody knows. And you don't know either Jonathan" to which Karl responded sarcastically, "I'm pretty sure that. . ." at which point Trump cut him off triumphantly and exclaimed, "Ah ha! Pretty . . . Pretty . . ." as Karl corrected, "totally, without question, born in the United States." Trump continued to talk over Karl, "excuse me, Jonathan you said you're pretty convinced, so let's see what happens . . . but it's not my issue right now" (*ABC News*, August 11, 2013, 02:59). Trump, without correction or interruption from Karl, effectively stifled Karl's attempt at correction and moved the conversation.

Trump often appealed to the will - or feelings - of the nondescript "people" as justification for continued skepticism and investigation. For example, in a *New York Times* response to Gail Collins' editorial about his birther allegations, Trump wrote, "There is a very large segment of our society who believe that Barack Obama, indeed, was not born in the United States" (Trump, April 8, 2011, para. 2). This line, indeed, was the first line of refutation in the piece, evidencing the importance of popular opinion for Trump. This "appeal to the people" is grounded in the assumption that if enough people believe it, it must be true—or at the very least, there must be something to it. Consistent with the paranoid style, it promoted a general feeling of distrust and paranoia and positioned Trump as the conspiracy advocate willing to uncover the truth. As such, six months after the release of the long form birth certificate, and after a long period of silence on the issue, Trump remarked to Greta Van Susteren, "some people have serious, serious, doubts as to its validity. And I frankly want to get onto much more important subjects. Even though that's an important one. . ." (*Fox News*, October 25, 2011, 01:03). By citing the will of the people, Trump kept the issue, and himself, in the media spotlight while positioning himself as doing the righteous work of the people. Simultaneously, he presented himself as having already moved on, constructing an ethos that was attractive to both birthers and those voters generally dissatisfied with the status quo.

THE INTERNAL DYNAMIC OF BIRTHER RHETORIC

Grounded in a logic of white supremacy, the birther conspiracy demonstrates how unsubstantiated claims about citizenship and Obama's true identity sought to destabilize the legitimacy the Obama presidency. Hughey (2012) recognizes "the sustained conflation of citizenship with an ideal or 'hegemonic' form of white racial identity" (p.163). Likewise, this identification of the birther movement strategies reveals the entrenchment of white supremacist logic that unites the varied claims. The presence, and persis-

tence, of birther rhetoric indicates a perceived assault on white supremacy. Many of the accusations function to reinforce the authority and power of the subject position of White Americans. The specific claims are extrapolated from assumptions about Obama's Americanness, religion, and abilities, developed by Trump.

First, Trump mobilized the theme that Obama was not born in the United States, and, thus, he was not appropriately American. In a lively birther discussion on "The View," Whoopi Goldberg remarked that "No one has ever asked George Bush, or said to George Bush. . ." Trump, in a very telling way, talked over her and said, "I guarantee you—and I'm not fan of George Bush—but George Bush was born in this country" (*ABC*, March 23, 2011, 7:06). Obama is not afforded the same assumption of citizenship as any previous President because he is not White. Trump's tone of voice reinforced with certainty that Bush's American identity need not be questioned.

Trump's white supremacist rhetoric was also buttressed by hypothesizing that Obama is Muslim. From the beginning, Trump posited that Obama may be reluctant to release the birth certificate because "maybe it says he's Muslim." In 2012, Trump tweeted the question, "Why does Barack Obama's ring have an arabic inscription? Who is this guy?" with a link to a *World Daily Net* article authored by Jerome Corsi alleging that Obama's ring—worn since before he met Michelle—is inscribed with "There is no God but Allah" (Trump, October 11, 2012). Although Trump claimed it "wouldn't bother me. I mean if it's that thing" (*Fox News*, April 15, 2011, para. 19), he continued to drop Muslim associations as accusations throughout the campaign. Underlying these accusations was the association that to be Muslim is diametrically opposed to what it means to be a good American.

Trump also promoted white supremacist ideologies by questioning Obama's intellectual abilities. Claiming that he had "terrible grades," Trump depicted Obama as someone who was dishonest and took advantage of the system in order to attend Columbia and Harvard. In May of 2014, Trump stated, "He was perhaps born in this country but said he was born in Kenya. Because if you say you were born in Kenya you got aid, and you got into colleges" (National Press Club, May 27, 2014, p. 15). He also cited the quality of Obama's first book as evidence he did not write it.³ In an interview with Sean Hannity, Trump claimed, "He wrote a book that was better than Ernest Hemingway, but his second book was written by an average person" (*Fox News*, April 15, 2011, para. 24). In each of these instances Trump positioned Obama as incapable of doing what a true/White American could do. According to Trump, Obama was incapable of getting into

college on his own, incapable of writing the book that got him elected, and in both instances, was dishonest.

One of the major themes that ran through Trump's rhetoric, which is vital to the sustainability of conspiracy, was that the liberal media was protecting Obama. In a *New York Times* editorial, Trump wrote "for some reason, the press protects President Obama beyond anything or anyone I have ever seen" (Trump, 2011, para. 5). In an extended interview with Sean Hannity, he noted that when he talks about the birther issue, "some reporters you could see are visibly angry at me for even bringing it up." He goes on to note that it is in the best interest of their career if they exposed Obama's "scam," yet they remain quiet (*Fox News*, April 15, 2011). Here again, Trump left much of the reasoning to be filled in by the viewer. By providing this rationale, he made the implicit argument that the media was not uncovering the scam despite the fact doing so would advance their career and provide financial gain. Therefore, the rationale for remaining silent must be powerful and important. Furthermore, the emotional reaction of the media to the raising of the topic served as a sign that Trump, and the birthers, were onto something. Thematically, consistent with conspiracy, Trump constructed the media as a powerful conspiring force protecting an evil sufficient to bring about the destruction of White America.

Trump's birther rhetoric against Obama highlights the way fundamental American values function to perpetuate and promote white supremacy and serve as the internal dynamic that unites multiple fronts of attack. To *not* be American, Christian, or White is to be a threat, and as this analysis demonstrates, enthymematic accusations are sufficient to draw on the power of the myth of white supremacy. Dubose (2016), writing during the election, noted Obama's characterization as "foreign-born Muslim pretender to the American presidency" was exactly the enemy Hofstadter warned against (para. 16). Likewise, Edge (2010) recognized the continuation of the Southern Strategy in positioning Obama as "a noncitizen trying to usurp power" during the 2008 election (p. 428). Conspiracy rhetoric broadly, and Trump's rhetoric specifically, prompted believers to frame the world as an epic battle of good versus evil—of American versus other—with Obama's otherness squarely at the center.

CONCLUSION

Although Trump allegedly ended the controversy in September of 2016 with both a press conference and a public statement, he continued to intimate conspiracy and impugn the character of former President Barack Obama. Just a month later, he invited Obama's half-brother, a Trump supporter and birther, to his final debate against Hillary Clinton. Additionally,

in October, he used air quotes around the word “President” when talking about President Obama. Yet, Trump’s embrace of birtherism and his constant questioning of President Obama’s legitimacy as president and citizenship isn’t simply a rhetorical or campaign strategy leveraging longstanding racism. It is a window into his worldview and his policy profile. Current legislation regarding sanctuary cities requiring the questioning of detainees as to their immigration status, as well as a flurry of legislation to safeguard presidential eligibility are the logical policy consequences of birther rhetoric.

Over the last five years, mainstream media coverage of Trump’s embrace of birtherism has consistently highlighted how he “avoided the topic as a candidate” (Parker & Eder, 2016; Rappeport, 2016). While Trump did avoid making direct accusations on mainstream news programs during this time and his statements were more non-committal, this analysis shows that he continued the webbing of the birther conspiracy through Twitter consistently between 2011 and 2016.

Contributing to the staying power of the birther conspiracy was the ethos of the conspiracy advocate—Donald Trump. Constructed as a champion of the people, the advocate symbolically gives voice to those who feel disenfranchised because of racial identity politics. Conspiracy discourse is an attempt by an advocate to rhetorically address the problem of evil. Devega (2016) notes that Trump sits at the “intersection of white racism. . . , nativism, a sense of white victimhood, and grievance mongering in the form of conspiracy theories. . .” (para. 9). The popularity of Trump’s use of birther rhetoric can be read as an indication of a perceived increase in the power of the left and a threat to white supremacy. Perception, however, is not reality. Conspiracy rhetoric, then, is a symptom, not the problem itself.

The dramatic, and hyperbolic style of conspiracy theory works in concert with Trump’s approach to saturate the news cycle, all the while tapping into general attitudes of distrust and increased political polarization. It also played on longstanding anti-Black racism. Through the birther conspiracy, Trump questioned Obama’s citizenship, religion, intellectual capacity, and character. Because of its associative and inferential form, this conspiracy was an effective vehicle for transporting white supremacist values. The birther narrative worked to refuse Obama a place of equal standing and cast him as a representation of that which threatens white supremacy.

Considering the difficulty in proving a negative, the ability to refute conspiracy claims definitively remains elusive. Analysis of conspiracy rhetoric that recognizes formal and stylistic similarities is important in locating conspiracies. At least equally important, however, is the unpacking of underlying values and ideologies that serve as the internal dynamic that holds together the webs of conspiracy arguments. Furthermore, attention to

the personalities that function as conspiracy advocates is essential. When asked if he thought he went overboard on the “whole birther stuff” Trump responded “I don’t think I went overboard. Actually, I think it made me very popular, if you want to know the truth, OK? So I do think I know what I’m doing.” (ABC, August 11, 2013, 2:30). Recognition of the strategies and style of conspiracy discourse allows critics - and citizens - to expose the dynamic, rhetorical means of extending oppressive discourse.

NOTES

1. The othering of Obama and the examination of the racialized fears he activates has been examined by several scholars. Most relevant to the current analysis, Flores and Sims (2016) note how both proponents and opponents of Obama “invoke similar logics of race, ground[ed] notions of strangeness and familiarity” that result in a “zero-sum logic of racism that precludes complex conversation” (206). Likewise, Stevens and King-Meadows (2017) recognize the New Yorker cover “Politics of Fear” drew on several themes common to the Birther conspiracy and “highlighted White anxiety about race and power” (88).

2. Although outside the scope of the current analysis, Mehlretter Drury’s (2014) identification of “rogue ethos” in contemporary conservative political culture is certainly relevant to, and resonant of, conspiracy rhetoric.

3. Trump actually alleged several times that it was Bill Ayers who wrote Obama’s first book. For example, in an extended interview with Sean Hannity Trump said, “Bill Ayers came out and said he did write the book. Barack Obama wouldn’t be president and you know, I wrote many best sellers and also number one best sellers including the *Art of the Deal*, I know something about writing.”

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