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Donald J. Trump and the rhetoric of *ressentiment*

Casey Ryan Kelly

Department of Communication Studies,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

Correspondence – Casey Ryan Kelly, Department of Communication Studies,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 361 Louise Pound Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588, USA;
ckelly11@unl.edu

Abstract

This essay contributes to and reframes the preliminary scholarly assessments of President Donald J. Trump’s appeals to rage, malice, and revenge by sketching the rhetorical dimensions of an underlying emotional-moral framework in which victimization, resentment, and revenge are inverted civic virtues. I elaborate on the concept of *ressentiment* (re-sentiment), a condition in which a subject is addled by rage and envy yet remains impotent, subjugated and unable to act on or adequately express frustration. Though anger and resentment capture part of Trump’s affective register, I suggest that *ressentiment* accounts for the unique intersection where powerful sentiments and self-serving morality are coupled with feelings of powerlessness and ruminations on past injuries. Thus, shifting focus from the rhetoric of *resentment* to that of *ressentiment* explains how Trump is able to sustain the affective charge of animus without forfeiting the moral high ground of victimhood to his audience’s “oppressors” – Democrats, the press, criminals, immigrants, foreign adversaries, welfare recipients, the Me Too movement, “globalists,” and racial Others.

Keywords: Donald Trump, victimhood, *ressentiment*, resentment, emotion

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At a June 27 2017 rally in Youngstown, OH, President Donald J. Trump delivered a message to his supporters about, among other things, the state of US Immigrant and Customs Enforcement (ICE) efforts to combat criminal gangs who have illegally entered the country. In this address, Trump assured his audience that the state has, in their name, taken revenge on the nation's enemies. He boasted:

We have tough people. Our people are tougher than their people. Our people are tougher and stronger and meaner and smarter than the gangs. One by one we are finding the illegal gang members, drug dealers, thieves, robbers, criminals and killers. And we are sending them the hell back home where they came from. And once they are gone, we will never let them back in. Believe me. The predators and criminal aliens who poison our communities with drugs and prey on innocent young people, these beautiful, beautiful, innocent young people will, will find no safe haven anywhere in our country. And you've seen the stories about some of these animals. They don't want to use guns, because it's too fast and it's not painful enough. So they'll take a young, beautiful girl, 16, 15, and others and they slice them and dice them with a knife because they want them to go through excruciating pain before they die. And these are the animals that we've been protecting for so long.¹

In this passage we can observe familiar oscillations between toughness and vulnerability that are characteristic of Trump's political style. On the one hand, the nation is great on account of its spectacular capacity to revisit and inflict pain on others. Indeed, Trump's newly hardened America is "mean" and "tough." The nation is no longer complacent to be victimized by uncivilized "animals" and "predators." Trump takes credit for liberating besieged communities across the nation and making America safe from drugs and criminal violence.

On the other hand, the nation is also personified as a vulnerable adolescent girl who has been subjected to senseless torture by a cruel and implicitly racialized foreign enemy. In contrast to the nation's cold demeanor and newly developed musculature stands a competing national icon of innocence, passivity, and vulnerable femininity who, when contrasted against the brutality of foreign Others, reinforces a paradoxical sentiment that the citizenry is at once powerful and agentless. Although this message seems incoherent, what unifies tropes of toughness and vulnerability is an underlying presumption of a moral

order that is validated by the perpetual existence of a hostile external world. As such, Trump offers his audience an emotional-moral framework in which feelings and affects such as anger, rage, malice, and revenge are never at rest and no one act of vengeance can dissipate the nation's desire for more. The message sustains an affective charge by addressing intractable enemies with vague and ill-conceived objectives. The audience is caught in the perpetual liminality between defeat and triumph. By positioning his audience as powerless yet invulnerable, Trump can continue to go back to a renewable reserve of anger and bitterness to warrant cruelty against an ever-growing list of national enemies.

This essay contributes to and reframes the preliminary scholarly assessments of Trump's appeals to rage, malice, and revenge by sketching the rhetorical dimensions of an underlying emotional-moral framework in which victimization, resentment, and revenge are civic virtues. Rhetorical scholars who have examined Trump's speeches, rallies, and tweets have found a number of recurring patterns that unhinge his supporters from taken-for-granted political conventions and unburdens them from civic virtue. For instance, Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson argue that Trump's rhetoric can best be understood as an extension of fears about the decentering of white masculinity, the vitriolic norms of social networking, and the decline of professional journalism.² Political appeals to white rage are not new, but they suggest that Trump's style, or manner of delivery, is particularly well-suited to a warped media culture that encourages simplicity, impulsivity, cruelty, and narcissism. Although Trump routinely lies and contradicts himself, Paul Johnson has argued that Trump's incoherent vacillations between strength and victimhood enable his white audiences to disavow hegemonic whiteness and align themselves with a marginalized, politically-exiled subjectivity.³ Trump, he argues, reframes his audiences' generalized sense of human vulnerability as if it were the experience of structural racial oppression. Marginalization in the form of reverse discrimination and unfair treatment frees his supporters of any kind of debt or civic obligation to a seemingly cruel and hostile polity.

Likewise, Robert E. Terrill has argued that Trump unburdens his supporters of all social obligations that might otherwise constrain the pursuit of their self-interest.⁴ Chief among these obligations are empathy, equality, and other democratic virtues which demand that

citizens acknowledge the burdensome legacy of racism that continues to preclude a truly democratic public culture. Joshua Gunn adds that Trump's political style is perverse, meaning that he is aware of these social conventions but he violates them anyway.⁵ His constant disavowals, his reliance on *paralepsis* and *occultatio*, his transgressions, his denial of consensus reality, are all underwritten by a perverse form of enjoyment that frees his supporters from legal, rhetorical, and psychic strictures.

Other rhetorical scholars have attended to the political and emotional environment that created the conditions for Trump's civic transgressions. Mary E. Stuckey suggests that Trump's hyperboles and disavowals are effective because they speak to a highly-charged "affective environment" in which political rhetoric is "unmoored from its institutional routines."⁶ Trump's rhetoric is "aimed at the viscera," meaning that institutionalized conventions and common virtues have lost their symbolic efficiency on account of the electorate's oscillating disillusionment with public institutions.⁷ Thought of this way, Trump's rhetoric is not unique to this moment; yet his extraordinary transgressiveness makes visible and helps scholars account for the textual and contextual shifts that might animate his supporters. Indeed, Trump mobilizes affects and emotions to match, if not supersede, the tenor of his ideological directives. Scholars such as Kendall R. Phillips, Marina Levina, and Kumarini Silva take a slightly different approach by specifically addressing the subject of Trump's expressions of cruelty, observing how the changing affective structures in American life have shifted so as to accommodate hatred and rage as acceptable expressions of the political.⁸ Consider how the transformations in media, including the narrowcasting and fabrication of political information alongside the vitriol of talk radio, social media platforms, and reality television have created a welcoming environment for discourses underwritten by divisiveness and cruelty.⁹ Denise M. Bostdorff takes on the subject of anger directly, arguing similarly that while Trump does not offer coherent arguments he does provide an intelligible *emotional* framework for his supporters that is both attuned to these shifts in the affective environment as well as the ways his audience is to remain in a state of perpetual anger.¹⁰

Trump, as Bostdorff notes, nonetheless faces a series of rhetorical challenges, two of which are of central concern to this essay. First, Trump and his supporters have to reconcile their electoral victories

with their claims of political exile. Second, anger “can be exhausting and, once anger dissipates among the majority who are not dedicated true believers, the thirst for revenge can dissipate, too.”¹¹ This essay addresses these two obstacles by reframing how Trump transforms short-lived yet intense emotions such as anger, along with paradoxical investments in the concept of white victimhood, into nearly inexhaustible rhetorical resources. Taken together, I argue that Trump’s claims of victimhood and anger-laden calls for revenge seek out what philosopher Max Scheler called “the man [*sic*] of *ressentiment*,” or an audience who is seething with righteous anger and envy yet also suffering from the impotence to act or adequately express frustration.¹²

Though anger and resentment capture part of Trump’s affective register, this essay suggests that the concept *ressentiment* accounts for the unique intersection where powerful sentiments and self-serving morality are coupled with feelings of powerlessness and ruminations on past injuries. Whereas *resentment* can be characterized as bitter indignation that one has been treated unfairly, *ressentiment* is a “self-poisoning of the mind” in which a subject is consumed by emotions and affects such as “revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite.”¹³ Although both are reactive impulses, emotions are often formed against definite objects and can be satiated by specific ideologically guided actions. Indeed, one of Trump’s challenges is sustaining the affective charge of revenge without dissipating the felt need for vengeance. Here, it is the impulse underlying the desire to detract or seek revenge that matters. Thus, I argue that resentment functions as a generative force—providing a link between emotions, ideology, and collective identity—that sustains the affective charge of detraction and revenge. My goal is to reframe Trump’s constant detractions, disavowals, and impulse to revel in pain as parts of a broader emotional-moral framework that seeks to constantly regenerate the felt intensities that underwrite demands for revenge and lamentations of victimhood.

Ressentiment: an emotional-moral framework

When Donald J. Trump accepted the Republican nomination for president, he hailed an audience of angry yet noble sufferers—the forgotten, the downtrodden, the discarded, and the subjugated. He declared with fiery incredulity:

Every day I wake up determined to deliver for the people I have met all across this nation that have been neglected, ignored, and abandoned. I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country. People who work hard but no longer have a voice. I AM YOUR VOICE!¹⁴

Foregoing optimism and praise of the American character, Trump's RNC address portrayed America as an apocalyptic wasteland strewn with the wreckage of abandoned factories and corroding infrastructure—held hostage and humiliated by a foreign occupying army of criminal gangs, illegal immigrants, and foreign competitors. Though doom is more typical of non-incumbent candidates, political commentator Paul Begala playfully referenced President Reagan's 1984 campaign advertisement "Morning in America" to characterize Trump's darker take as "midnight in America."¹⁵ Of course, these themes are familiar to those who study populist rhetoric, for its many manifestations consistently feature a virtuous people facing off against "fat cats" and powerbrokers.¹⁶ Yet, in Trump's rhetoric, "the people" are substantially narrowed to a very particular cultural figure who might consider themselves aggrieved, grudge-holding, treated unfairly, powerless, and humiliated by economic misfortune and other global forces outside of their control.

As Johnson, Ott and Dickinson, and Terrill have illustrated, Trump's demagoguery targets white Americans who feel anxious and victimized by their impending displacement as the nation's demographic majority. But we can discern other characteristics about Trump's imagined audience as well, or to use Edwin Black's words, that which he "would have his real auditor become."¹⁷ Simply put: Trump's imagined audience is angry. They are angry because they suffer. They suffer because they are powerless. They are powerless because they are virtuous. The country, they are told, has been unfairly taken from them. It is not simply that Trump intones resentment and rage but that he invites his audience to see themselves as powerless and incapable of adequately expressing their own frustrations. It is the suturing together of powerful feelings with a morally righteous subject position of weakness that constitutes the political subject of *ressentiment*. With either power or ability to articulate their own desires, Trump demands to be his supporter's surrogate: "I AM YOUR VOICE!"

Although each concept summons common sentiments, there are important analytical distinctions between *ressentiment* and *resentment* that help explain how Trump turns animus into a nearly inexhaustible resource. While *ressentiment* is often the province of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and trauma studies, *resentment* is a term familiar to rhetoricians on account of its relationship with pathos. In his genealogy of the concept, Jeremy Engels argues that resentment retains a dual character in U.S. democratic culture, representing misdirected enmity and hatred, on the one hand, and righteous indignation in the pursuit of social justice, on the other.¹⁸ Engels traces rhetoric's uneasy relationship with the concept starting from antiquity. He finds that Aristotle found resentment to be an ungovernable emotion—an undeniably negative civic feeling.¹⁹ Indeed, Isocrates feared that democratic resentment would sow violence and discontent amongst the poor and might precipitate violence against the wealthy elites.²⁰ Engels contends that “the philosophers of the classical period conceptualized resentment as a bitter, eruptive, undignified force that has to be contained.”²¹ Yet, at their best, democracies are supposed to temper, manage, and channel the vicissitudes of resentment into passionate advocacy for the common good. Explaining the present forces of enmity, he avers that “much of the resentment felt today is the product of widespread feelings of powerlessness in the populous, along with the general sentiment that citizens are victims to forces and changes beyond their control.”²² Although I agree with this argument, I would add that the way Trump addresses his electorate places stress on the elasticity of democratic norms to effectively manage resentment toward existing political institutions. He does so not by channeling resentment alone but instead by suturing such sentiments to a moral framework and an identity formation in which suffering and revenge are inverted democratic virtues. And though resentment is the by-product of feelings of powerlessness, Trump's unique take on victimhood requires the persistence of a hostile external world to validate his claims to marginality—even as he continually boasts about his victories. Indeed, as I have argued, the therapeutic function of white victimization rhetoric also belies any material standard by which claims of racial and economic injustice are to be adjudicated.²³

Ressentiment, then, 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. If being a victim is the price of entry to his political ethos, then Trump must continually ruminate on his injuries, invent new tormentors and resurrect old ones, pursue ill-conceived policy goals, and perpetually defer the resolution of their collective grievances. The suffering of his electorate takes precedence above all other considerations of justice. The thirst for revenge never dissipates. Thus, shifting focus from the rhetoric of *resentment* to that of *ressentiment*, I argue, explains how Trump is able to sustain the charge of animus without forfeiting the moral high ground of victimhood to his audience's "oppressors"—Democrats, the press, criminals, immigrants, foreign adversaries, welfare recipients, the #MeToo movement, "globalists," and racial Others. He can, therefore, exercise power on behalf of his electorate without giving up his claim to the moral and emotional indignation of the weak.

A rhetoric of *ressentiment* engenders both moral and affective attachments that invite subjects to ruminate on their wounds—real or perceived. The wound, in turn, becomes the source of the subject's political identity. Friedrich Nietzsche argues *ressentiment* is an emotional-moral framework in which the virtues of good and evil are reversed. Where one is incapable of living up to a commonly agreed upon system of morality, *ressentiment* manifests in a reactive and inverted sense of virtue where one's incapacity to act leads them to detract and devalue common virtues that are otherwise praiseworthy. For those afflicted, he writes, the wretched alone are the good; the suffering, deprived, sick, ugly alone are pious, alone are blessed by God, blessedness is for them alone – and you the powerful and noble are on the contrary the evil, the cruel, the lustful, the insatiable, the godless of all eternity.²⁵

Although Nietzsche problematically characterizes *ressentiment* in terms of "slave morality," this essay approaches *ressentiment* as a perversion of morality that leads subjects to mistakenly slander the common good as if their failure to embody such virtues represented structural oppression and thus justified their disavowal of civic responsibility.²⁶

Scheler elaborates by using the Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes to explain how *ressentiment* inverts common virtue.²⁷ The fox, unable to reach the sweet grapes, attempts to save face by declaring them sour. In other words, when denied a desired social good or

unable to perform a high civic virtue, the subject of resentment detracts and devalues those goods rather than acknowledge their conventionally accepted value. Resentment arises if emotions are powerful but must be suppressed because they are coupled with the feeling that one is unable to act them out. This subject “tends to see injurious intentions in all kinds of perfectly innocent actions and remarks of others. Great touchiness is indeed frequently a symptom of a vengeful character.”²⁸ Put another way, “injury is experienced as destiny.”²⁹ Resentment is a peculiar affect because specific acts “cause no satisfaction—they merely cause discontent, for they destroy the growing pleasure afforded by invective and negation.”³⁰ Even where vengeance is fully achieved, enemies are effectively dispatched, and material power relations are reversed, resentment nonetheless engenders a fundamental lack that remains a well spring of hatred and envy. Moreover, their fantasies of power must be kept at a distance if they are to sustain the valorization and enjoyment of their invective.³¹

In this framework, past injuries become central to the subject’s identity in the present. Where personal and collective identity hinge on the existence of hostile external world, a rhetoric of resentment seeks to cultivate investment and attachment to one’s own subjugation. For instance, Trump’s campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” presumes an injury that must be overcome by restoring the subject to an imagined yet indeterminate time in which they were putatively whole. Thus, the identity constituted through the rhetoric of resentment is *melancholic* in that it continually revisits past injuries without adequately mourning them. According to Freud, the melancholic subject cannot move forward because they compulsively re-experience the past as if it were happening in the present.³² Accordingly, Trump invites his audience to both ruminate on past injuries and idealize an indeterminate time when they were un-fragmented subjects. But, as Barbara A. Biesecker argues, melancholia stages “the loss of an impossible object, ideal, or relation that the subject never had.”³³ The temporal relation engendered by “again” is a conduit to an object that the subject never possessed and, thus, is a constitutive fantasy of the nation’s “greatness.” For this reason, Trump’s rhetoric evokes trauma; but this is a trauma that also concerns an object *never lost*, or those privileges neither revoked nor renounced by his white audience.³⁴ Trump, however, levels all experiences of white vulnerability as traumatic, particularly in his hyperbolic characterization of daily violence in America.

Working from the French translation of resentment (*ressentir*), I wish to draw attention to the role of *ressentiment* in cultural politics of melancholia.³⁵ Here we might characterize *ressentiment* as a pattern of feeling in which a subject continually re-experiences a memory of a past or imagined sentiment, an injury or open psychic wound. Søren Kierkegaard surmised that “just as air in a sealed space becomes poisonous, so the imprisonment of reflection develops a culpable *ressentiment* if it is not ventilated by action or incident of any kind.”³⁶ *Ressentiment* is an impediment to moving forward because it directs the subject’s gaze backwards, tethering the self to ruminations of past injuries. Wendy Brown suggests that such ruminations forge identities that make the past necessarily unredeemable.³⁷ For Sarah Ahmed, the fetishization of wounds has the tendency to excise past injuries from history and fold them into the psyche.³⁸ Complicating matters further, white victimhood rhetoric is largely unconcerned with adjudicating the structural nature of injustice. The long-standing effort to paint white Americans, white men in particular, as victims erases the material distinction between real structural inequality and indignation that arises from felt intensities.³⁹

The insight offered by a concept such as *ressentiment* is that it captures the confluence between emotions, affects, morality, and identity that seem to have reached a crescendo at the outset of the Trump presidency. The nascent rhetorical scholarship on Trump would benefit from theoretical consonance between public shared emotions and modes of moral judgment that are co-constituted in contemporary rhetoric of the presidency. I characterize *ressentiment* as a phenomenon caught up in the entanglements between emotions, ideology, and affiliation. Indeed, though Aristotle suggests that the tendency of anger is toward action (revenge), when it is enveloped by moral framework of victimhood, anger is instead committed to the audience’s disempowerment. A rhetorical theory of *ressentiment* accounts for the parsimony between Trump’s ideological discourse and emotional entailments—helping characterize the paradoxical but mutually reinforcing relationship between virtue and victimhood.

Although this essay, in part, concerns the singular rhetorical peculiarities of the early Trump presidency, I suggest that we are witnessing a much more significant transformation in modes of political address that account for the culture of spectatorship to which Trump seems attuned. His indulgence in cruelty, revenge, and victimhood are

in sync with the melodramatic norms of reality television and the vitriolic media ecology of social networking. As Ott and Dickinson argue, Trump's manner of address, particularly his appeals to white rage, are well-suited to mediums that engender impulsivity, simplicity, narcissism, and incivility.⁴⁰ As I illustrate in the following section, Trump's rallies carry the warped sense of civic virtue cultivated by reality television and social networks into the office of the presidency. Trump addresses an electorate already accustomed to such perverse norms. But resentment is not only a timely theory, it is also one that addresses the perennial concerns of rhetorical theorists that traces back to Plato's critique of rhetoric as merely a speaker's knack for creating pleasing appearances, capitalizing on mercurial emotions, and playing demagogue with neither expert knowledge of nor concern for truth. Thus, I conclude that resentment offers rhetorical theory an account of how dominant groups contain progressive expansions of public morality by debasing the very concept of civic virtue itself.

The man of resentment

In what follows, I analyze the agonistic drama that unfolds in Trump's address to his supporters, attending to the way he repeatedly chains out fantasies of persecution that ennoble both him and his audience. I note throughout a series of value inversions, haphazard and poorly-planned objectives, and undefeatable enemies that render Trump and his supporters virtuous sufferers, entitled to their revenge. Yet, I conclude that this underlying psychological structure of resentment ultimately disempowers his audience by extorting from them a perpetual deferral of agency to one man: Trump, their surrogate. President Trump's post-election rallies are spectacular, emotionally-charged events. Large amphitheaters and jubilant crowds recreate the atmosphere of a rock concert, a wrestling match, or music festival. Enthusiastic supporters don all manner of Trump-themed merchandise and clothing items, including the now iconic "Make American Great Again" red trucker-style hats. The presence of the press and cameras conveys the sense that these are singular newsworthy events. Introduced by theme music, Trump takes the stage. A carefully curated audience is arranged behind the president to enable the cameras to capture audience member's emotional reactions to Trump's transgressive comments.

Despite the celebration, the president's rallies are also oddly ambivalent events. On the one hand, they are epideictic occasions in which Trump recounts his many victories and accolades while also praising the virtues of his supporters—namely their loyalty. On the other, Trump also ruminates on the ways he and his supporters have been treated unfairly, warns of potential victimization around every turn, searches out antagonisms and roadblocks, re-litigates old feuds, holds grudges, invents powerful enemies, and fantasizes about committing acts of cruelty. Though his rallies generate an extraordinary amount of text, the themes throughout seldom vary. Examining a selection of post-election rallies helps illustrate how Trump is able to continually addle his audience into understanding themselves as at once powerful and victimized. It is at his rallies where Trump commiserates with his loyal supporters and delivers to them an understanding of their subject position as embattled. His proclamations of victory are subdued by undertones of both personal and collective frustration.

Trump's pain, or the sufferer-in-chief

Although he regularly observes the suffering of his forgotten electorate, according to Trump no one suffers more than he. Even when responding to national tragedies or crises, Trump is quick to remind his supporters of his martyrdom. For instance, following a statement addressing assassination attempts against highly-visible Democrats, Trump used the occasion to point out that no one is more maligned than himself. Speaking at the White House to attendees at Turning Point USA's Young Black Leadership Summit, Trump concluded his official remarks with a series of off-the-cuff and out-of-place statements that are characteristic of his political free verse.⁴¹ Most strikingly, he told the group, "[w]e all get attacked ... Who gets attacked more than me? ... I can do the greatest thing for our country, and on the networks, it will play bad."⁴² This short aside illustrates how Trump uses public controversies and moments of national grieving as occasions to reflect on the ways in which he has been wronged. Defying the collective demands of the epideictic, Trump's frequently centers *himself* above the occasion. He monopolizes grief—turning himself into a synecdoche for the elisions and perceived insults faced by his supporters. He also levels and equivocates slights by the media and his political opponents with the systematic discrimination faced by women, people

of color, and GLTBQ communities. His use of the pronoun “we” could mean a sense in which attacks are a part of our universal vulnerability, or it could infer a particularity that he believes he shares with his African American audience. In either case, victimhood is robbed of its material referents and reduced to a therapeutic discourse used to articulate and refract white suffering through the prism of identity politics. Finally, Trump presents himself as somewhat agentless in relation to his most frequently referenced enemy: the news media, or in his words, the “fake news.” He asserts that despite his nation-saving agenda, the press will never give him his fair due. They are a relentless and omnipotent entity that continues to victimize both him and his supporters. Trump articulates his struggle as both commensurate with other forms of structural inequality and unending because his enemies are bent on portraying him in a negative light.

Trump often searches out the suffering of others with whom he can analogize his own victimization—maligned figures such as Joe Arpaio, Admiral Ronny Jackson, and Brett Kavanaugh to name a few. In reference to the aggressive public vetting of Admiral Jackson for the head of the Department of Veterans Affairs, Trump opined, One of the saddest things I’ve seen is when Jon Tester and what he did to a great, great man, Admiral Ronnie Jackson. Admiral Jackson was subjected to horrible lies and smears. Now, I’m, you know, a victim of that, too, but I’m sort of getting used to it.⁴³

At a rally in Mississippi, Trump devoted a significant amount of time to the parallels between his own struggles and the so-called false accusations of sexual assault leveled against then Supreme Court Nominee Justice Brett Kavanaugh. He implored, think of your son. Think of your husband. Think – I’ve had many false accusations. I’ve had it all the – I’ve had so many – and when I say it didn’t happen, nobody believes me. But it’s me. It’s my job description.⁴⁴

After establishing the similarity between the way both were treated by the press and Democrats, Trump goes on to describe Kavanaugh as an innocent victim and his accuser Professor Christine Blasely Ford as a suspect. He remarked, “This woman had no clue what was going on. No clue. And yet she made the most horrible charges against a number one in his class at Yale, perfect human being, great father, great husband. This is a great person.”⁴⁵ For Trump, the injustices that elevate to his attention frequently involve accomplished or privileged people, such as himself, who have been unfairly treated.

Trump expresses empathy with individuals such as Jackson and Kavanaugh because they are fallen public figures whose innocence and powerlessness he believes reflect his own. He suggests that he knows, too, what it is like to be treated unfairly. He asks the audience to think of him the way they would other important men in their lives: their sons, brothers, fathers, and now president. Imagine, he implores, what it is like to be him— not what it is like to be a victim of sexual assault. But for Trump, precarity and unfair treatment do not reference experiences of structural oppression but instead moments when the entitlements and privileges of a “great man” and a “perfect human being” are put at risk by entering the public eye. This explains how and why Trump diverts attention from the claims of the aggrieved to focus on the suffering of the accused. If, as Isocrates warned, the outside world is afflicting with animus toward the elite, then those at the top have the most to fear.⁴⁶ Since he invites his audience to consider the position of the accuser as a subject always-already infused with resentment, he casts doubt on *their* claims to victimhood. It is no coincidence that the only public apology he has ever issued was to Justice Kavanaugh: “On behalf of our nation, I want to apologize to Brett and the entire Kavanaugh family for the terrible pain and suffering you have been forced to endure.”⁴⁷ For Trump, only the claims of the accused carry weight. In this way, Trump helps himself and his supporters corner the market on innocence.

It is important to note that he concludes each of these examples with a common lament that these false attacks are ultimately his cross to bear. In other words, Trump relates to these cases not only because they were his nominees but, by his own estimation, they have been cast as scapegoats by the left. To counter their unrelenting assault on his administration, Trump identifies himself as a martyr, a strong and valiant character who will bear the load for others. Observing how the press used to adore him, he claims, [t]hey used to treat me so good too, until I ran for office. I used to get the greatest publicity. A friend of mine said, “You know, you used to be the king of getting great publicity. What happened?” I said, “Well, I have some views that they’re opposed to for a lot of bad reasons.”⁴⁸

Not surprisingly, Trump reads bad press as an expression of self-interested political cynicism. Elsewhere he noted, “On the way over here, I saw a liberal pundit. He was filled with anger. And he was attacking me and our great administration. We have great people. I’ll

tell you, the White House is really working good.”⁴⁹ His response to criticism is often incredulous. He expresses surprise and dismay that the press would deny and detract from the good work he believes is being done by his administration. Here lies a remarkable similarity between bad press coverage and his empathy with the accused: that much like allegations of wrongdoing, criticism of his administration is itself a denial of due process. Hence, he often adopts a perpetrator’s perspective on social justice.

Despite the purported unfairness of his opponents’ criticism, Trump offers to take the blows for supporters. Trump routinely posits that he can withstand an extraordinary amount of abuse. Calling himself and his supporters “warriors” he suggests that warriors can take abuse: There’s another warrior in the room. These are warriors. Look, the abuse they take, *the abuse we all take*, if you’re not a warrior, you just go home, go to the corner, put your thumb in your mouth and say, “Mommy, take me home.”⁵⁰

Illustrated here, Trump often characterizes his masculinity in abject terms. Put differently, he embodies a form of masculinity that is valorized for its capacity to suffer.⁵¹ Warriors *enjoy* their suffering because it is a mark of virtue and stoic pride, as opposed to the emasculated man who sucks his thumb and cries to his mother. According to Trump, only he can save his supporters through a noble sacrifice. In his RNC address he portrayed himself as a benevolent protector, motivated not by his own political interests but “so that the powerful can no longer beat up on people that cannot defend themselves.”⁵² In defense of his statement addressing the violence at Charlottesville in 2017, he asserted that “[t]he media can attack me. But where I draw the line is when they attack you, which is what they do. When they attack the decency of our supporters.”⁵³ In addition to the overt disavowal of responsibility for the racist violence on display at the Unite the Right rally, Trump represented himself as a benevolent protector of the virtuous citizenry against the bad faith of their opponents. In short, he inscribed martyrdom onto the “ ” of the presidency.

Embracing the cultural logics of white male sacrifice enables Trump to address his audience as traumatized subjects who can be redeemed and made whole again through ritual victim age. Indeed, Kenneth Burke’s description of cycles of guilt, victim age, sacrifice, and redemption would suggest that Trump’s rhetoric symbolically excises evil and imperfection via ritual purification.⁵⁴ More specifically, we

might also understand how this rhetorical choice foregrounds the white male body in pain as the exemplar citizen-subject. Thus, the staging of Trump's pain, to use Claire Sisco King's words, constitutes a "restaging traumatic loss so that catastrophe may be refigured as redemption, renewal, and rebirth."⁵⁵ In other words, Trump reconfigures suffering and victimhood as exemplars of virtuous leadership and the performance of which entitles he and his supporters to something more grandiose than their present circumstances.

A fitting example of this sacrificial logic is in how Trump addresses the #MeToo movement. In his remarks about false allegations, he expressed righteous indignation about what he considers to be a superlative inversion of due process. For him, the catastrophe is that virtuous subjects might be stripped of their privileges and social entitlements. The accusations against Kavanaugh, a "perfect human being," he argues, "violates every notion of fairness, decency, and due process."⁵⁶ When discussing Kavanaugh at his rallies, he often employs terms that prompt the audience to think of him as vulnerable, weak, and feminized. Kavanaugh's victimhood is both exemplified and amplified by the collateral damage inflicted on his wife and daughter. For instance, Trump claims that "a man's life is in tatters. A man's life is shattered. His wife is shattered. His daughters, who are beautiful, incredible young kids—they destroy people. They want to destroy people. These are really evil people."⁵⁷ Kavanaugh and his family are traumatic subjects *par excellence*; "perfect" and "beautiful" people "shattered," "tattered," and "destroyed" by the left. Discussing Kavanaugh in relation to feminine figures such as his wife and daughters exaggerates his innocence and precarity while also making out Blasey Ford and the press to be the real predators. He goes on to argue that:

Guilty until proven innocent. That's very dangerous for our country. And I have it myself all the time. But for me, it's like a part of the job description. Let it happen to me. Shouldn't happen to him. Shouldn't happen to him.⁵⁸

Such statements are illustrative of how Trump establishes his quasi-religious moral character. In one sense, he suggests that his primary virtue is sacrifice. Yet, this statement also exemplifies Trump's inversion of the collective good.

In Trump's rhetoric, it is *his* pain and *his* struggles that ultimately matter. It is for this reason that Trump's rhetoric is primarily concerned with a self-serving conception of justice. He is preoccupied with the vulnerability of privileged people who have much to lose, not, for instance, the virtues of precarious communities victimized by sexual assault and harassment, domestic abuse, mass incarceration, police brutality, or discrimination by the judicial system. Second, despite all the institutional and financial advantages at his call, Trump suggests that he is as much a victim of false accusations and unfair treatment as anyone else, regardless of material circumstances. In this case, being accused of wrongdoing is commensurate with being *victimized by* wrongdoing. Finally, he offers himself up as a sacrifice on behalf of his beleaguered supporters. This pattern of victimization and sacrifice invites his audience to identify as survivors of cultural trauma who are redeemed through Trump's martyrdom. Of course, the biggest victim in any national tragedy is himself. But Trump presents his own suffering as unique and unable to be fully relayed to his supporters. When addressing criticisms of his immigration policy, he notes:

And think of it in terms of immigration. And you may love it, or you may say, isn't that terrible. Okay? And if you say isn't that terrible, who cares? Because the way they treat me – that's peanuts compared to the way they treat me. Okay?⁵⁹

This lament suggests that Trump's woes extend well beyond what is visible to his supporters. Fortunately for them, Trump assures, he has an extraordinary capacity to withstand pain.

If resentment is characterized by feelings of powerlessness and ineffability, then no one act of redemption can dissipate powerful emotions such as hate and envy. Indeed, Trump's sacrifice is unending because his victimhood is predicated on the relentlessness of an undefeatable foe. As the above examples illustrate, Trump suggests that no matter what he does the enemy attacks. This represents the ambivalence of resentment: one must continually re-experience humiliations over and over again to build a reservoir of anger. Although Trump boasts about his victories, he must constantly unsettle his audience's sense of contentment. He must present himself as hamstrung, foiled and powerless so that resentment may transform

into a wellspring of intense frustration directed at Trump's opponents.

Trump is able to maintain his electorate's political exile by constructing an array of evasive and cunning foes. Despite a conservative majority in all three branches of government during the first two years of his presidency, Trump consistently represents himself and his supporters as a fragile and tenuous minority. The power of his enemies is unseen, conspiratorial, and elusive. For instance, he argues that "they're the old and corrupt, globalist, ruling class that squandered trillions of dollars on foreign adventures."⁶⁰ In another excerpt, Trump exclaims that "Today's Democrat Party is held hostage by left-wing haters, angry mobs, deep state radicals, establishment cronies, and their fake news allies. Our biggest obstacle and their greatest ally actually is the media."⁶¹ In one of his more explicit nods to right-wing conspiracy theories, Trump references the threat of "Unelected deep-state operatives who defy the voters to push their own secret agendas [who] are truly a threat to democracy itself."⁶² In another passage worth quoting at length, he claims:

But it's all fragile. The Democrats will open our borders to deadly drugs and ruthless gangs ... Radical Democrats want to tear down our laws, tear down our institutions in pursuit of power, demolish our prosperity in the name of socialism and probably worse ... and abolish our borders in the service of globalism. There is nothing Democrats aren't willing to do, and you're seeing it day by day, and you've seen it more the last week than you've ever seen it before. And no one – just think of this. No one under any circumstances is allowed to speak up if you're on this side of the equation. But guess what? We're speaking up like nobody has ever spoken up before. They want to get the power that they so desperately crave that was taken away from them. All of the Democrats know and all they really know how to do is obstruct, resist, demolish, destroy and delay.⁶³

These examples illuminate the characteristics of Trump's undefeatable foe. First, the Democrats and the press are part of a "ruling class" that extracts wealth from his supporters to bolster a corrupt regime of power. Although Trump rarely misses an opportunity to brag about his affluence, he relates to class not as if it were one's position within a spectrum of wealth stratification but rather as a style or point of

identification. This allows Trump to tout his successes while simultaneously lambasting his “elite” tormentors. For instance, when discussing his superior intelligence and educational background relative to the press, Trump vaunts “I have a better education than they do from a much better school, but—the elite. They’re the elite. They’re the elite.”⁶⁴ He inverts terms such as “ruling class” and “elite” to reference not self-proclaimed billionaires such as himself but instead an abstract group of invisible power brokers allied with the media and hell bent on promoting “globalist” interests. Constant victories aside, he encourages his audience to not underestimate the power of the enemy. Instead of belittling the weakness of the minority party, he suggests that their networks of power are global in scope. References to “globalism” suggest a vast international conspiracy to make the United States subject to world government.⁶⁵

Second, these enemies are addled by irrational hatred, anger, and radicalism. Hence, they will not be hamstrung by existing institutions and the rule of law. He draws on terms such as “deep state radicals” and “obstructionists” to construct his electorate as virtuous outsiders who, being uncorrupted by the system, must remain vigilant against a camouflaged yet powerful adversary. This helps reconcile his audience’s outsider identity and keep alive an enemy at which he can continually direct their anger. Finally, he suggests that he and his virtuous supporters have been silenced by the opposition. An indirect reference to the lightning rod of “political correctness,” Trump contends that these enemies lack civic virtue because they do not respect the basic tenets of free speech, the rule of law, and democratic decision-making. In this way, Trump effectively projects onto his adversaries the very attributes the press has characterized his own administration. Moreover, he effectively disavows his own power and status while crafting an adversary worthy of his audience’s ire.

Trump’s revenge, or the avenger-in-chief

Trump claims to feel his audience’s pain. In his inaugural address, he envisioned America as a nation under siege by foreign enemies, citizens robbed of their dignity, and mothers and children suffering needlessly. His address was geared toward those who saw themselves as downtrodden, forgotten, and hopeless:

Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities, rusted-out factories, scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation, an education system flush with cash, but, which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge, and the crime, and the gangs, and the drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now. We are one nation and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams and their success will be our success. We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny.⁶⁶

Here, the nation is unified by shared traumas. His description of “American carnage” imports the pain of others into the nation’s “glorious destiny.” Trump not only speaks to the felt pain of his audience, he socializes and circulates these negative affects into public life. The particular and visceral pain of an unemployed coal miner, then, can become the vicarious sympathy pain of his more-well-off electorate. He appropriates the pain of the most vulnerable among his electorate to justify policies that will likely result in their further impoverishment. This is pain detached from particular bodies, rendered an abstract idea that on its own can generate great anger amongst a more universal audience. Here, Trump channels that suffering into an imagined political community. Many in Trump’s electorate may not be the forgotten; nonetheless, they are entitled to the indignation that accompanies the injuries of others.

As I note earlier, several scholars have addressed Trump’s victimized audience. Indeed, the above example is illustrative of Trump’s efforts to address Americans as oppressed and mistreated—not by structural racism, gender inequality, or class exploitation—but by foreign Others: immigrants, MS-13, China, “globalists,” and Islamic terrorists. To elaborate instead on his rhetoric of resentment, I wish to pause on the place of revenge and retributive justice in Trump’s emotional-moral framework. Put another way, how do fantasies of revenge both sustain the charge of anger while also rendering his audience mute and powerless? At the 2018 Conservative Political Action Conference, Trump stated plainly his approach to justice. Simply put, “[p]eople that treat us badly, we treat them much worse than they could ever imagine. That’s the way it has to be. That’s the way it has to be.”⁶⁷ At his rallies, Trump typically meanders through a list of enemies—old and new—and chains out fantasies of retribution. But the

revenge he calls for need not serve a particular end. Revisiting cruelty on others is its own reward. This circular moral reasoning of cruelty for cruelty's sake never dissipates the animus that generates the felt need for revenge. Revenge does not solve anything and it does not need to. Revenge appeals work by acclimating audiences to violence and relieving them of any guilt associated with enjoying or participating in acts of cruelty.

In some cases, Trump's endorsement of retribution is overt. This is particularly true when he addresses protestors at his rallies. At a 2016 rally in Las Vegas, he responded to a protestor being removed by asking, "Do you know what they used to do to guys like that when they're in a place like this? They'd be carried out on a stretcher, folks." To the crowd's delight, he later added "I'd like to punch him in the face, I tell ya."⁶⁸ When a protestor at another event yelled "Black Lives Matter" he pined nostalgically that, you know, in the old days – which isn't so long ago – when we were less politically correct, that kind of stuff wouldn't have happened. Today we have to be so nice, so nice, we always have to be so nice.⁶⁹

At another rally he urged his audience to "knock the crap out of him ... I promise you, I will pay your legal fees."⁷⁰ The problem of dissent, he surmised, was that there were no consequences for protestors because "no one wants to hurt each other anymore."⁷¹ In one sense, Trump clearly transgresses taboos against the open endorsement of political violence in a democratic culture. He carves out a zone of exception for his supporters that relieves them of their legal and civic obligations. Under exception, slights and injuries—even ones of little consequence—can and should be met with an equal if not disproportionate measure of retributive violence. Read through the concept of resentment, such statements also illustrate the inner workings of a reactive morality, formed in the negative that is so hollow that its animosity can never be satisfied. In other words, this articulation of revenge is neither efficacious nor proportional. Revenge is simply morally correct: cruelty is for its own sake. Writing for *The Atlantic*, Adam Serwer argued that what Trump's cruelty does achieve is the binding together of his electorate in the collective enjoyment of others suffering. He writes that "it is not just that the perpetrators of this cruelty enjoy it; it is that they enjoy it with one another. Their shared laughter at the suffering of others is an adhesive that binds them to one another, and to Trump."⁷² Indeed, the crowd responds

with cathartic laughter as Trump releases them from the burdens of empathy and cultivates affective bonds based on the shared enjoyment of other people's pain. The function of cruelty, then, is less instrumental than it is constitutive.

It is not simply that Trump demands retribution for injuries committed against him and his electorate—to be sure, he does—but that he contorts revenge into a civic virtue. Thus, Trump inverts the Quintilian virtues of the “good [person] speaking well” by elevating the *wronged person claiming their right to revenge*. He heralds violence over pacifism; enmity over respect; competition over cooperation; hyperbole over truth; and bad faith over good will. Indeed, as Scheller warns, the man of resentment ... wreaks vengeance on the idea whose test he cannot stand by pulling it down to the level of his factual condition. Thus his awareness of sin and nothingness explodes the beautiful structure of the world of values, debasing the idea for the sake of an illusory cure.⁷³

As such, in Trump's upturn of democratic virtue, the nation is great not for its compassion but its extraordinary capacity to inflict pain on its enemies. Particularly when discussing immigration, Trump touts his administration's use of violence against criminal gangs. He observes that “We are dismantling and destroying the bloodthirsty criminal gangs, and well, I will just tell you in, we're not doing it in a politically correct fashion. We're doing it rough. Our guys are rougher than their guys.”⁷⁴ Here, Trump extends the concept of political correctness beyond the constraints of appropriate and inclusive language to include formal prohibitions against the use of excessive force and violations of due process. “Doing it rough,” as it were, means “destroying” the nation's enemies by dispensing with burdensome rules governing the fair treatment of immigrants and criminal suspects.

Whereas previous Republican presidents praised American exceptionalism (problematically so) as a beacon of hope to the rest of the world, Trump's America is exceptional because it is above the law, tougher and rougher than any potential rival. But he did not stop there. Trump continued by telling an anecdote in which he asked a general to describe for him the toughness of ICE. He recalled, I asked one of our great generals, “how tough are our people? How tough are they?” He said, “sir, you don't want to know about it.” Then I saw one guy come out, a customs officer who is a monster. I said, “so general,

you think I could take that guy in a fight?” He said, “Mr. President, sir I don’t even want to think about it.” I said “you’re right, actually.”⁷⁵

For Trump, it is this unimaginable capacity to inflict pain that is the nation’s greatest asset. His calls for revenge are also constructed in terms associated with physical toil and domination. For example, he emphasized law enforcement’s enhanced ability to use excessive force: ICE, we call ICE, and they go into those towns, and they grab those guys by the neck and they throw them into those paddy wagons. They couldn’t care less. And you don’t want to do it. And you don’t want to do it.⁷⁶

Elsewhere he bragged that we are *throwing* MS-13 the hell out of “here so fast” and that “General Kelly’s great people ... come in and grab the thugs and throw them the hell out.”⁷⁷ These tales of excessive force enable his audience to imagine having power over foreign Others, or to render the nation’s enemies helpless and physically submissive to a more dominant and masculine power. He praises neither restraint nor respect for life but rather our monstrous capability to exceed the cruelty of others.

Perhaps the most palpable revenge fantasies involve Trump’s electoral opponent Hillary Clinton. At his rallies, mere mention of “crooked Hillary” prompts reflexive jeers and chants of the slogan “Lock Her Up!” In yet another inversion of democratic norms, Trump has routinely called for the jailing of his political opponent: “Hillary Clinton has to go to jail. She has to go to jail.”⁷⁸ During a presidential debate he claimed, “If I win, I am going to instruct my attorney general to get a special prosecutor to look into your situation. There has never been so many lies, deception—there has never been anything like it.”⁷⁹ Elsewhere he noted that his supporters demand it, “When I go out and speak, the people of this country are furious. In my opinion, the people who have been long-term workers at the FBI are furious.”⁸⁰ Read in light of Trump’s masculinized calls for meanness and toughness as virtues, the call to “lock her up” constitutes a particularly lurid fantasy of feminine submission. The demand envisions Clinton as a domineering shrew rendered helpless and vulnerable to the physical coercion of a resurgent masculine public. Indeed, Trump is fond of recalling the pleasure of besting his female opponent. At one rally he recalls, “That felt good. Pretty recently. Okay. Now I have the privilege of going against crooked Hillary Clinton. So I beat, I beat crooked

Hillary.”⁸¹ The thought of beating or jailing Clinton channels feelings of outrage into a concrete fantasy of control over a superlatively evil and cunning opponent.

But, with resentment, emotions are ultimately suppressed and fantasies of revenge are perpetually deferred. Indeed, in Scheler’s words, Trump’s rhetoric “cannot escape the tormenting conflict between desire and impotence.”⁸² Much like MS-13 or China, Clinton constitutes an impassable obstacle, an undefeatable foe whose presence confirms the existence of a hostile external world. Hence, Trump paradoxically suggests that he is also powerless to defeat her. Noting how the media ignores his pleas to investigate her crimes, he explains “You can have the biggest story about Hillary Clinton—I mean, look at what she’s getting away with. But let’s see if she gets away with it. Let’s see.”⁸³ Although he has asserted elsewhere that he would imprison Hillary, here he oddly suggests a more passive wait-and-see approach. But he explains that it is his power that ironically prevents him from delivering the final blow:

The saddest thing is, because I’m the president of the United States, I am not supposed to be involved in the Justice Department. I am not supposed to be involved in the FBI ... I’m not supposed to be doing the kind of things that I would love to be doing and I’m very frustrated by it.⁸⁴

Trump’s calls for retribution against Clinton are powerful because they can never be fully satisfied. In one sense, jailing Clinton would dissipate the enjoyment of calling for her to be jailed. As Scheler reminds us, such criticism “does not want to cure the evil: the evil is merely a pretext for criticism.”⁸⁵ Moreover, Trump’s inability to carry out his audience’s desire for revenge helps aggregate frustration and indignation so as to keep anger in constant circulation. Resentment arises when emotions are powerful but must be suppressed because they cannot be acted upon. In this case, Trump cultivates hostile emotions that give rise to the desire for vengeance but without providing his audience with a sense of resolution or power to act on their felt intensities. Yet, this is exactly the point: the felt need for vengeance never dissipates and the list of hostile enemies and tormentors grows without end.

The age of resentment

This essay argues that a theory of resentment illustrates how the contemporary rhetoric of white victimhood has cultivated an affective political environment wherein rage is a renewable rhetorical resource. President Trump's appeals to suffering and revenge reach beyond the politics of resentment, which can be both mercurial and fleeting, to a politics of resentment that hails a subject addled by feelings of anger and powerlessness. Resentment represents an emotional-moral framework that sustains an audience's desire for vengeance but also an investment in their own marginalization. Although Trump attempts to cultivate resentment, this does mean that he is ineffective in achieving policy victories or selling his agenda to his electorate. In fact, quite the opposite. Invective, negation, and detraction are powerful tropes that enable their user to undermine taken-for-granted virtues and create new and self-serving standards of moral judgment. Indeed, while a theory of resentment explains that perverse appeal of Trump's rhetoric, the motives of Trump supporters seem to confound the press.⁸⁶ Perplexed by his transgressive behavior, their incredulous response to his perversity continues to be "this is not normal!" To a certain extent, they are correct. Trump has not only unhinged his supporters from civil obligation, he has inverted the very concept of civic virtue itself. It should come as no surprise, then, that when Trump decries his victimhood and calls for vengeance against his enemies that his supporters remain enthusiastic.

As Gunn has suggested, rhetoricians should attend to the structures of enjoyment that maintain the affective charge of Trump's refusal to obey civic conventions.⁸⁷ Along these lines, I have argued that resentment illustrates some additional registers that help explain how Trump is able to maintain his audience's claim to marginality while sustaining their anger at the very elite institutions he occupies. Moreover, resentment explains the rhetorical work of Trump's embrace of the profane, the taboo, and the unvirtuous. Reading Trump's rhetoric through the theory of resentment explains the rhetorical implications of when prolonged frustration, envy, and vengeance meet powerful sentiments of victimhood and powerlessness. Resentment keeps its audience's attention and hatred focused on an external world that is hostile to their interests and values.

Though his rhetoric of suffering and revenge successfully aggregates anger to legitimize his actions and cultivate support, this essay suggests that he ultimately renders his audience powerless. First, in adopting the role of suffering martyr, Trump becomes a transcendent figure whose sacrifice offers his audience an illusory sense of redemption and wholeness. Yet, the emotional-moral framework he offers permits no one act to erase the desire for vengeance. Moreover, there was never a time in which his predominantly white supporters were ever whole. Although he offers to suffer in the name of his electorate, his suffering is ultimately self-empowerment. He socializes and circulates the pain of others so that it is accessible and useable to his affluent electorate. It becomes *his* pain and *his* struggles that take precedence over all else, and by his estimation no one suffers more than he.

Second, hailed as perpetually slighted and ignored, Trump locates in his audience their virtue as passive marginalized subjects. He emphasizes how they are forgotten, demoralized, attacked, and dispossessed of their birth rights. It is for these reasons that they are entitled to their revenge. Although Trump continually erects new barriers to achieving their goals and locates new enemies to blame for their circumstances, this does not prevent his supporters from pursuing victory by their own means. Ressentiment cultivates political powerlessness but does not preclude individual acts of vengeance. The 2018 attempted bombings directed at prominent Democrats is a case-in-point. Trump-supporter Cesar Sayoc allegedly sent improvised explosive devices to a group of enemies frequently referenced by Trump at his rallies, including Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, Eric Holder, and George Soros.⁸⁸ As Engels notes, the constant sowing of discontent has dangerous consequences. It can test the ability of democratic culture to channel resentment into the productive indignation toward inequality. Ressentiment encourages individuals to divest from the civic good and ennoble their own suffering, however mundane or contrived. Ressentiment prevents subjects from moving forward because their gaze is cast backward toward re-experiencing an injury. Trump directs his audience's anger toward settling old scores, litigating past wrongs, and resurrecting new enemies. In the case of Trump's audience, the collective injury is those social and economic changes that have supposedly displaced white America. He creates a political community forged through and invested in its own marginalization.

Trump's appeals to victimhood and revenge exemplifies how resentment acts as an anti-democratic and anti-progressive force. Resentment is the animating political force of this precarious political moment and will ultimately test the elasticity of democratic culture to contain and channel the forces of resentment.

Finally, this essay suggests that the rhetoric of resentment is a unique defense mechanism that undermines civic virtue to stifle the continued expansion of public morality to include historically marginalized groups. The present age of resentment gives new resonance to Celeste Condit's 1987 essay "Crafting Virtue," in which she made a compelling case for a *rhetorical* concept of public morality that is perpetually crafted through collective deliberation rather than private and unchanging universals.⁸⁹ Condit explained that where a private sense of morality cannot account for the need for progress, public morality recognizes human capacity to transform exclusionary moral codes thought to be timeless and objective. Condit avers that if morality were simply a private concern, the collective moral order would never have been forced to account for either the humanity of people of color or the violence carried out in its name. In short, such a perverse moral order would be impervious to change because it would, by definition, already be perfect. As resentment nests itself into public life its effect is to interrupt, if not reverse, the continued evolution of public morality. Resentment does so by inverting the civic good so as to privilege negative emotions such as jealousy and envy that tear at the fabric of moral systems designed to protect against the selfish maximization of self-interest. As Condit argued, to the extent that dominant elites control the means of communication and the public vocabulary, they can represent *singular* partisan interests as universal or moral ones. They can thereby evade the modifications, compromises, and larger goods wrought through agonistic competition between values and interests. Dominant elites thus hijack the moral potential for partisan ends.⁹⁰

A theory of resentment not only corroborates how public morality is seized for private gain but also illustrates how civic virtue itself might be simply rendered undesirable by those who are incapable or unwilling to live by its dictates.

Resentment stands against the improvement of public morality and those who it enraptures are relieved of their moral duties to others. Resentment names the debasement of public morality that is

the very ethical foundation of rhetorical practice. It represents rhetoric as its most demeaning caricature: self-serving, emotionally overwrought, and unconcerned with truth or ethics. Ressentiment offers rhetorical theory a diagnostic for the moral and emotional defilement of the public that from time-to-time imperils democracies. Where resentment is a discrete and short-lived phenomenon which democracy is sometimes equipped to address, resentment bespeaks the perverse emotional and moral attachment to superficial injuries that democratic institutions cannot remedy. Ressentiment, then, makes sense of how dominant groups reign in progressive forces that might challenge their status by evacuating civic virtue of meaning and replacing it with a self-serving imitation of the good.

It is important to note that though Trump's voice is the shrillest, he is neither aberration nor originator. Ressentiment is a cultural *malaise*, a feature of public life in which the affective charge of rage and envy underwrites participation in the polity more so than empathy and virtue. Thus, journalist Jeremy Peters has observed a number of political candidates who have begun to mimic Trump's style.⁹¹ For instance, West Virginia Senate candidate Don Blankenship aggressively touted calls to jail Trump's political opponents. Georgia gubernatorial candidate Michael Williams drove a self-dubbed "deportation bus" around the state while Governor Brian Kemp ran an ad in which he bragged that he owned a truck "in case I need to round up criminal illegals and take them home myself."⁹² In the 2018 midterm elections, some Republican candidates capitalized on a deep reservoir of public anger and animosity by calling for violent mass deportations, glorifying violence and toughness, mocking and insulting political opponents, and demanding unflinching loyalty to the president.⁹³ These mimicries illustrate that while Trump is a powerful articulator, the rhetoric of resentment has become an effective conduit for anyone wishing to channel alienation into political projects premised on cruelty, revenge, and noble suffering. In this age of resentment it is easier to debase civic virtue, blame racial Others, fantasize about violence and revenge, and wallow in self-pity than it is to live up to the lofty democratic ideals to which the nation nominally aspires.

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25. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 17.
26. For Nietzsche, slave morality denotes a system of morality in which the weak or enslaved detract from the values embodied by the master and lacking in slave. This inversion explains, for instance, Christian gospels in which the poor and weak are blessed and the powerful are evil. Such an argument could have racist implications where it is used to denigrate the morality of those who suffered under slavery. My argument is quite different, as I suggest that resentment is more appropriately located in the contemporary politics of white victimhood in which those who mistakenly believe they are subjugated reject and detract from civic virtue precisely at the moment it is invoked to attain justice for those who have been materially and structurally excluded. In this case, Trump's rhetoric appropriates the position of the weak to disavow civic responsibility in general and racial obligation in particular.
27. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 46.
28. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 27.
29. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 28.
30. Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 29.
31. Similarly Matheson argues the right-wing fantasy of sovereign citizens taking up arms against the government is a powerful example in which enjoyment (*jouissance*) is predicated on maintaining a comfortable distance for the object of fantasy. See Calum Matheson, "'What Does Obama Want of Me?' Anxiety and Jade Helm 15," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 102, no. 2 (2016): 138, [doi:10.1080/00335630.2016.1155127](https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2016.1155127).
32. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Volume XIV (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964), 243–58.

33. Barbara A. Biesecker, "No Time for Mourning: The Rhetorical Production of the Melancholic Citizen-Subject in the War on Terror," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 40, no. 1 (2007): 152, doi:10.1353/par.2007.0009.
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